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Reading Althusser

Articles in the section that follows were edited by Lea Kuhar

Banu Bargu* and William S. Lewis**

Disjecta Membra: Althusser's Aesthetics Reconsidered

Introduction¹

When it came to the arts, Louis Althusser considered himself “uncultivated” and, by multiple measures, it can be argued that neither art nor aesthetic theory played a significant role in his philosophy.² Gauges include the paucity of publications in this domain and the comparatively minuscule number of words he devoted to writing about art. In addition, when artistic production is mentioned in his major works, art is always one among a list of practices: political, economic, ideological, scientific, philosophical, each of which is elaborated upon in much more detail. An index of interest is also provided by the art-related contents of Althusser’s library, which, apart from Hegel’s and Tolstoy’s aesthetics, consist exclusively of Marxist works (Bogdanov, Brecht, Casanova) alongside a few art books of the most banal sort.³ For their part, after a very typical childhood drama of being forced to learn violin, his biographies make no mention of the positive influence of music, dance, theater, painting, cinema, or sculpture on his intellectual or personal development.⁴

With two exceptions, a fragmentary chapter on artistic production in *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers* (1976–78) and an anti-humanist polemic directed at André Daspre (1966), the motivations for Althusser to reflect upon, and write about art

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¹ The authors would like to acknowledge their debt to Massimiliano Tomba and Ivo Eichorn for help with sources; Stefano Pippa, Jordanco Jovanoski, Dave Mesing, and Joseph Serrano, for their valuable comments; and to Olivier Corpet, without whom much of Althusser’s work would have remained inaccessible.

² Louis Althusser, *Lettres à Franca: 1961–1973*, ed. François Matheron and Yann Moulier Boutang, Édition posthume d’oeuvres de Louis Althusser 6, Stock IMEC, Paris 1998, p. 181, p. 284, p. 799.

³ IMEC, “Louis Althusser (1918–1990), Bibliothèque Personnelle : Monographies”, *Institut Mémoires de l’Édition Contemporaine*, March 2018.

⁴ Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts Forever: A Memoir*, ed. Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier-Boutang, trans. Richard Veasey, New Press, New York 1995, p. 59, p. 296, p. 394.

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and aesthetic theory were exogenous. Friendships with fellow-traveler Giorgio Fanti, the critic Pierre Gaudibert, and the gallerist Inna Salomon brought him into contact with contemporary visual art and motivated critiques of the painters Lucio Fanti (Giorgio's son), Leonardo Cremonini, and Roberto Álvarez Ríos.⁵ For example, it is clear that Althusser's interest in establishing a relationship with Álvarez Ríos' brother Renato, a Cuban cultural attaché, and, thereby, with revolutionary Cuba was a primary impetus for his 1962 piece on the surrealist painter and, further, that Gaudibert provided the connection.⁶

Another, even more consequential example: a year and a half prior to meeting "the Cuban," Gaudibert had introduced Althusser to Leonardo Cremonini and to the painter's partner, Giovanna Madonia.⁷ This encounter provided the impetus for Althusser to engage with the arts in a deeper manner than he had ever before. Charmed with the French philosopher, Madonia invited Althusser to visit her family compound near Ravenna. There, in an idyllic setting and amidst an extended intellectually and artistically cultivated family, he met Franca Madonia, a childhood friend of Giovanna's, who had married one of Giovanna's brothers. A passionate dramatist, intellectual, and student of philosophy, "Franca" was to become Althusser's friend, lover, and passionate interlocutor.⁸ Barring Álvarez Ríos and Lam, the majority of his aesthetic writings grew directly out of his relationship with Franca and to the Madonia family. These writings include the essay on Cremonini but, also, the most detailed textual developments of his aesthetic theory: "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht (1962)" and "On Brecht and Marx (1968)." These dramaturgical works owe their genesis and elaboration to the epistolary and amicale links established among Althusser,

⁵ Louis Althusser, "Sur Lucio Fanti (mars 1977)", in *Écrits philosophiques et politiques, Tome II*, François Matheron (ed.), Stock IMEC, Paris 1995, pp. 591–96; Louis Althusser, "Entretien avec Giorgio Fanti", April 1980, Fonds Althusser 20ALT/46/36, Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine; Althusser, *Lettres à Franca*, p. 261, p. 274; Harry Bellet, "Pierre Gaudibert, écrivain et critique d'art", *Le Monde.fr*, (January 23, 2006); Yann Moulier-Boutang, "L'interdit Biographique et l'autorisation de l'oeuvre," *Futur Antérieur/L'Harmattan*. Numéro Spécial : Lire Althusser aujourd'hui (avril 1997); Bécquer Seguín, "Mute Cries: Louis Althusser Between Roberto Álvarez Ríos and Wifredo Lam", *ARTMargins* 6 (2/2017), p. 93; Sarah Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory: Figurations*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2010, p. 100.

⁶ Althusser, *Lettres à Franca*, pp. 261–62, p. 374.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. vii, p. 374.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. vi–xi.

the Madonias, Pierre Gaudibert, and the theater critic Bernardo Dort.⁹ There are also at least two transcriptions of relatively informal talks that Althusser gave on literary history and art, both dating from approximately the same time. One, “A Conversation on Literary History,” is, as G.M. Goshgarian has put it, “more exactly, a monologue of over ten thousand words,” interrupted only in three places by an unknown interlocutor.¹⁰ Even though Althusser dates the transcription to 1965, Goshgarian notes that it might date from 1963. Second, more or less contemporaneous is the transcription of a talk delivered at the invitation of Il Teatro Minimo in Forli in the fall of 1963, published in the arts supplement of a provincial Italian newspaper.¹¹

Despite Althusser's interest in the arts and aesthetic theory being externally motivated, temporally limited, and at the margins of his philosophical output, there are important reasons to engage with the scattered pieces of art criticism and aesthetic theory authored or directly influenced by Althusser. First, these reflections are worth our interest because they help us understand and flesh out Althusser's political and philosophical project. This apprehension includes his method of symptomatic reading, whose development Althusser attributed to his “initiation by Cremonini into the visual world of painting and its discourses.”¹² As his anti-humanism was largely a reaction to the grandiose claims about art and culture made by those competing for intellectual influence within the French Communist Party, familiarity with his rival aesthetic theory is likewise essential for understanding this intervention and what it says about science, subjectivity, and history. Further, delving into Althusser's aesthetics also helps to make sense of the relations between productive practices: economic, political, ideological, political and scientific, which are as crucial to his thought as they are obscure and contradictory. For example, particular ideologies are often presented by Althusser as totalizing and insurmountable. If they are able to be overcome, it is only by the challenge of a rival ideology based on a different class and the struggle between classes. An essential support of (proletarian)

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⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–42, pp. 50–51, pp. 181–2, p. 200, p. 384.

¹⁰ G.M. Goshgarian, “Note on the Text”, in Louis Althusser, *History and Imperialism*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK and Medford MA 2020, p. xii.

¹¹ Louis Althusser, “Perché il teatro : Conferenza dibattito promossa dal ‘Teatro Minimo’ di Forli del Professore Louis Althusser”, *La Provincia di Forli* (January 8, 1964), sec. Supplemento al. n/ 1.

¹² Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory*, p. 50.

class struggle is scientific analysis, correct political intervention based on this analysis, and the fortune of a good conjuncture. How the necessary ideological transformation for revolutionary practice happens at the level of the individual subject and how it is communicated to others remain cloudy. In its similarities to and differences from ideological and scientific practices, artistic practice may suggest solutions to these mysteries.

In addition to helping us understand parts of his overall project and its development, Althusser's aesthetic theory is itself a powerful and original contribution to Marxist aesthetics.¹³ Implicitly Kantian in its twin emphases on the (relative) autonomy of the work of art and on the power of art to transform subjective experience, it bears significant resemblances to Adorno's aesthetics.¹⁴ Despite this, it is unsympathetic to the liberatory thrust of Frankfurt school aesthetics as well as to its characteristic Hegelianism.¹⁵ Another part of its originality is that Althusser's aesthetic theory departs from Lenin and Brecht rather than from German Idealism. Like the Russian revolutionary and Berlin playwright, Althusser sought neither to reduce art to ideology nor to exaggerate art or the artist's role in socio-economic transformation. Instead, he attempted to develop a materialist theory of art which would explain both the specificity of aesthetic production as part of the cultural "level" in a social formation – irreducible to other levels – and its potential role in the development of a revolutionary consciousness.¹⁶ In the meantime, he developed an original approach to aesthetics that is worth thinking with. Considering the foundational role Althusser has played for cultural studies, critical, and poststructuralist theory, especially with this theory of ideology, as well as his centrality to postwar continental philosophy and Western Marxism, it is particularly surprising that his approach to art and literature has remained relatively underexplored.¹⁷ If part of this arises

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¹³ Warren Montag, *Louis Althusser*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire and New York 2003.

¹⁴ Murray W. Skees, "Kant, Adorno and the 'Work' of Art", *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 37 (8/2011), pp. 917–20.

¹⁵ We do not have the space here to develop how Althusser's approach compares to that of other Marxist thinkers, such as Lukács, Adorno and Benjamin. We note this as a future direction of research.

¹⁶ Louis Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, Monthly Review Press, New York 2001, p. 155.

¹⁷ Althusser's contributions to literary theory fare better than his writings on art. In this area, important works include Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1976, as well as various article-length studies: James Kavanagh,

because of the relative marginality of his aesthetic engagements in his oeuvre, this neglect is also a result of an underappreciation of his extant remarks on art as they relate to his contributions to Marxist theory.¹⁸

Althusser's writings on art point us to the idea that we need to take aesthetic practice seriously as a practice with its own specificity – one that has its own logics of determination, rituals of production, circulation, and consumption, one that commands effects that need to be theorized on their own terms. In other words, analyzing Althusser's position on art suggests that aesthetics constitutes a different register, one that does not fit easily into ideology or science. This difference is not meant to imply a complete autonomy. Althusser insisted that art produces ideological effects and is itself an arena that stages ideology.¹⁹ Further, he claimed that a scientific approach to art (meant in the sense of systematic knowledge) was possible as much as the dominant ideological approach.²⁰ The often repeated and strict distinction in Althusser's thought between ideology and science, a distinction that undergirds his famous thesis of the “epistemo-

“Marxism's Althusser: Towards a Politics of Literary Theory”, *diacritics* 12 (1982), Francis Mulhern, “Message in a Bottle: Althusser in Literary Studies”, in Gregory Elliott (ed.), *Althusser: A Critical Reader*, Blackwell, Cambridge 1994.

¹⁸ More recently, scholarship that considers Althusser's reflections on theater has made strides in connecting his aesthetic theory with his philosophical contributions, particularly on ideology and materialism: Banu Bargu, “In the Theater of Politics: Althusser's Aleatory Materialism and Aesthetics”, *Diacritics* 40 (3/2012), pp. 86–113; Banu Bargu, “Althusser's Materialist Theater: Ideology and Its Aporias”, *Differences* 26 (3/ 2015), pp. 81–106; Thomas Carmichael, “Structure and Conjuncture Literary Study and the Return to Althusser”, *E-Rea. Revue Électronique d'études Sur Le Monde Anglophone* (3/2005); Sean Carney, *Brecht and Critical Theory: Dialectics and Contemporary Aesthetics*, Routledge, Taylor and Francis, London and New York 2013, pp. 50–52; Alejandro Fielbaum, “Materialismo y distancia. Brecht en Althusser”, in *Actas del Coloquio Internacional Althusser hoy: estrategia y materialismo*, Marcelo Starcenbaum et al. (eds.), Universidad de la Plata, Santiago, Chile 2020, pp. 187–214; Mohammad Kowsar, “Althusser on Theatre”, *Theatre Journal* 35 (4/1983), pp. 461–74; Stefano Pippa, “A Heap of Splinters On the Floor”, *SoftPower* 7 (1/2020), pp. 125–44; Malcolm K. Read, “Towards a Notion of the Ideological Unconscious: Marx, Althusser, Juan Carlos Rodríguez”, (January 16, 2018); Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc. *De la théorie du théâtre à la scène de la théorie : réflexions sur « Le “Piccolo”, Bertolazzi et Brecht » d'Althusser, Le Moment philosophique des années 1960 en France*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 2011, pp. 255-72.

¹⁹ Louis Althusser, “Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract”, in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, Monthly Review Press, New York 2001, p. 165.

²⁰ Althusser, “A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre”, p. 154.

logical break”²¹ and a point that has attracted endless criticism, does indeed come under pressure when aesthetics is considered as a third register that is in relation to both ideology and science but reducible to neither. Althusser’s relatively understudied position on art also affords a perspective that enables challenging empiricist theories of representation (the discourse on art as a “mirror”), on the one hand, and an alternative strict separation between reality and knowledge (as adumbrated in *Reading Capital*), which veers back into idealism in the name of negating empiricism, on the other.

All these advantages recognized, it is also true that Althusser’s theory of art is contradictory, underdeveloped in places, and it needs to be situated more closely within his overall political philosophy. This paper attempts to provide a clear exposition of this theory while still calling attention to its tensions and shortcomings. In particular, Althusser’s penchant for pure philosophical concepts supportive of a Marxist science of artistic production was in full force when the greater part of his aesthetic theory was produced. Ultimately, the clear separations Althusser delineated among artistic, ideological, and scientific practices were unsuitable to the description of artistic practice he sought to highlight and to understand. While he had a chance to revise his metaphilosophy, theory of history, and philosophy of science, Althusser never returned seriously to his aesthetic work with a self-critical eye. One can, as this essay does, abstract a core insight from his aesthetic theory and one can trace its development away from Marxist-Leninist reflection theory. This core insight is that the transformative effect of art on a subject’s ideology is the result of a perceptible dislocation between ideology and the real and that this subjective outcome results from a parallel displacement visible in the work of art. On either side of this core, things remain fuzzy. On one side, one is left with contradictory statements about the qualities of the artist and of the art work necessary to this transformation. On the other, one has discordant claims about what the subjective outcome of art is and whether it transforms ideology, knowledge, or politics. This essay does not attempt to resolve these antagonisms. Rather, by calling attention to them, it attempts to give an accurate picture of the development of Althusser’s aesthetics

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²¹ Balibar maintains that the “epistemological break” is “the philosophical object of Althusser, that which distinguishes his philosophy.” Étienne Balibar, “Althusser’s Object”, trans. Margaret Cohen and Bruce Robbins, *Social Text* 39 (July 1, 1994), pp. 157–58.

and to show how the tension between 'pure' and 'impure' concepts evident in his broader philosophy also characterize his theory of art.

Authentic Art

Even though Althusser recognized the complexity of the relationship between art and ideology, he nonetheless retained a rather unrefined and common distinction between "real art" or "authentic art" and art that is "of an average or mediocre level."²² He dedicated most of his scant remarks on the subject to the former kind, the art of great artists. He had little to say about the latter, which probably appeared to him as merely the mechanism of reproducing ideology.²³

The kind of high literature, which came out of the hands of a Tolstoy, Balzac or Solzhenitsyn, and not the mass-marketed low-brow novel, in his opinion, qualified as "authentic" and could lay claim to the complex relationship with ideology that Althusser wanted to amplify. Similarly, it was only exceptional forms of theater (Brecht, Bertolazzi, Beckett), painting (Álvarez Ríos, Cremonini, Fanti, Lam), and film (for example, Alain Resnais's *Muriel*²⁴) that qualified as genuine art, based on their "decentering effects, that is, their subversion of humanist ideology."²⁵ If most art is simply the uncritical reproduction of ideology, according to Montag interpreting Althusser, "the other art, genuine art, begins with ideology ... only to define itself against it. Indeed, its meaning and purpose derive from the distance it places between itself and ideology."²⁶

This strict distinction between two kinds of art finds strong expression in Althusser's early writings on the matter. In his reflections on the first major exhibition of Álvarez Ríos in La Cour d'Ingres in Paris (1962), for example, there is an obvious exaltation of the great artist, when he refers to the "masters" of surrealism (Lam, Ernst, and Matta). Further, it permeates the way he writes of the "profoundness" of Álvarez Ríos's painting and casts the young Cuban, in a

²² Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", pp. 221–22.

²³ Louis Althusser, *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers*, trans. G. M Goshgarian, Bloomsbury, New York, 2017, pp. 153–54.

²⁴ Althusser, *Lettres á Franca*, p. 571.

²⁵ Montag, *Louis Althusser*, p. 30.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

somewhat patronizing manner, as “that painter *who can be great*.”²⁷ Similarly, in his famous essay on “The ‘Piccolo Teatro’” (1962), Althusser refers to Piccolo Teatro’s performance of *El Nost Milan*, a play by Bertolazzi, directed by Strehler for a critical Parisian audience, as “extraordinary” and consistently praises it, along with Brecht’s *Mother Courage* and *Galileo*, as distinct from classical theater.²⁸ In “A Conversation on Literary History,” Althusser points out that “it’s not in everyone’s power to produce a cultural object.”²⁹ In fact, contemplating how literary history takes for granted existing works that are already given cultural recognition, he ponders what a counter-history, based on “literary miscarriages” that go without any notice, might look like. “No one knows the thousands and tens of thousands of young ladies who, now, write novels every day,” Althusser writes. “Their boyfriends know them and they can render service to their boyfriends. As authors, however, they don’t exist.”³⁰ In the mainstream hierarchy of aesthetic recognition, which Althusser unquestioningly adopts with a gendered contempt toward the ordinary that is difficult to hide, literary history is bound up with an “ideology of the aesthetic” that considers the work of art as something sacred.³¹ Althusser critically notes this as a starting point of a Marxist approach, but, at least in the early 1960s, remains captive to it in his exaltation of great art. Great art, in this approach, is where aesthetics meets philosophy. The problem of separating art into two camps is, as Warren Montag has forcefully put it, that it actually functions to erase the specificity of art: “in one case it lapses into ideology and in the other it disappears into the practice of philosophy.”³²

However, according to Montag, this approach begins to shift, or is at least strained, due to the influence of Pierre Macherey. Early on in his letter to André Daspre, Althusser approvingly cites Macherey’s essay “Lenin as a critic of Tolstoy” (1965) as adumbrating the relationship between art and ideology, inviting Daspre to “read [it] carefully”³³ in response to the questions Daspre has

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²⁷ Louis Althusser, “A Young Cuban Painter Before Surrealism: Álvarez Ríos (1962)”, *ARTMargins* 6 (2/2017), p. 112.

²⁸ Althusser, “The ‘Piccolo Teatro’: Bertolazzi and Brecht. Notes on a Materialist Theatre”, in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, Verso, London and New York 1969, p. 131.

²⁹ Louis Althusser, “A Conversation on Literary History”, in *History and Imperialism*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK and Medford, MA 2020, p. 14.

³⁰ Althusser, “A Conversation on Literary History”, p. 15.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³² Montag, *Louis Althusser*, p. 38.

³³ Althusser, “A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre”, p. 222.

raised in his prior letter to Althusser which occasioned his response.³⁴ Montag writes: "Macherey's arguments are incompatible with many of Althusser's previous statements. While he has taken certain concepts and terms from Althusser (and has thus appeared to many readers to have simply extended or continued Althusser's theoretical approach), he has in fact given them a new and different meaning."³⁵ For example, Macherey calls into question the big distinction between ordinary and exceptional art, views *all* art to be in a complex relation with ideology, moves away from the great artist's "talent" toward the process of artistic production, and locates the aesthetic effect less in politics than in relation to the field of knowledge.³⁶

Pace Montag, and despite our agreement with him regarding the important influence of Macherey on Althusser's ideas (as we will discuss below), Althusser never gives up on the distinction between exceptional and ordinary art, which largely guides his interest in specific artists and authors and dominates his interpretations of their work. This is the case when he first begins to write about art; it continues to hold during the mid-60s when he is at the height of his intellectual productivity now marked by a specifically Althusserian stamp; and it remains the case in the late 70s when he pens his last occasional pieces on art. For example, when Althusser analyzes Cremonini's work, especially the figures of the human with the deformation of their faces, only to conclude that his painting is "profoundly anti-humanist, and materialist,"³⁷ he likens Cremonini to "great revolutionary thinkers, theoreticians and politicians, great materialist thinkers." He locates Cremonini's works in their path and as a "great artist" attributes him an understanding, a knowledge, of the ideological impact of his own work comparable to the awareness of revolutionary philosophers and politicians of the impact of their own political positions.³⁸ Wilfredo Lam, whom Althusser had earlier referenced in his Álvarez Ríos essay as one of the "masters" of surrealism,³⁹ is praised, fifteen years later, for "paint[ing] at the limits,

³⁴ First published as André Daspre and Louis Althusser, "Deux Lettres Sur La Connaissance de l'art", *La Nouvelle Critique* 175 (avril 1966), pp. 136–50.

³⁵ Montag, *Louis Althusser*, p. 39.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.

³⁷ Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract", p. 239.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

³⁹ Althusser, "A Young Cuban Painter Before Surrealism: Álvarez Ríos", p. 110.

just as a few others have thought at the limits.”⁴⁰ The “great” artists are only matched in their greatness by “great” revolutionary and materialist thinkers, who give us, each in their own way, knowledge of the world, an account of the laws by which human beings are governed such that they remain unfree, despite the ideologies that paint them as “free.”

However, Montag is absolutely right to underscore how a more sophisticated appreciation of art’s complex relation to ideology emerges in Althusser’s later writings, in large part due to the influence of Macherey and because of Althusser’s own intellectual trajectory, with his changing philosophical positions reflecting on his assessments on art and vice versa. It is possible to trace the shift in Althusser beginning with his letter to Daspre (1966), as well as in “Cremonini” (1966), “On Brecht and Marx” (1968), and eventually on his late writings on the painters Fanti and Lam (1977). While in the response to Daspre, Althusser still retains the distinction between the two forms of art, he recognizes that even authentic art is not immune to the humanist ideology that permeates art itself. At the same time, however, real art could at least offer an “allusion to reality,” the reality of the ideology “from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes,”⁴¹ in the form of an internal distance, thereby introducing a possible site for generating a critical or oppositional consciousness. Thus, Althusser finds that works of art bear a “privileged relation” to ideology, with the specific function of making it visible, by “establishing a distance from it.”⁴²

As Thomas Albrecht has noted, Althusser’s privileging of “authentic” art as having a critical relationship with ideology, with potentially transformative effects, has been “routinely criticized by the Marxist literary critics who followed Althusser, in particular by British Marxists writing in the late 1970s and

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⁴⁰ Louis Althusser, “‘Lam (1977)’”, trans. Alberto Toscano, *ARTMargins* 6 (2/2017), p. 113. Althusser’s text, solicited by Lam himself, was for the catalogue of a retrospective on Lam’s work at the Nanterre Maison de la Culture in April 1978. Althusser sent his text to Lam, but it was not published because the retrospective was cancelled. Althusser’s text resurfaced in 1982 as part of the catalogue of a posthumous exhibition of Lam’s work.

⁴¹ Althusser, “A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre”, p. 222.

⁴² Althusser, “Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract”, pp. 241–2.

early 1980s, as *unreflected formalism*.⁴³ This interpretation, which has done much to discredit Althusser's overarching approach to aesthetics, comes out of Althusser's emphasis on the "specificity of art" in distinguishing its relationship with ideology from the relationship of science with ideology. According to Albrecht, the critique of Althusser's formalism takes issue with his ascription of the specificity of art to the formal attributes of the artwork, misunderstanding what Althusser's actual distinction entails. For Albrecht, this specificity concerns less an attribute of the artwork itself than the effect of the artwork, i.e., in giving a perception of ideology rather than a conceptual knowledge of it, which is what science does).⁴⁴ However, most interpreters stop short of offering what this "perception" of ideology entails and analyzing the mechanisms of its production. Further, this aspect of aesthetics is often obscured by the designation of literature, as well as other forms of art, as "ideological forms."⁴⁵

If even great art is precarious to the effects of ideology, all the more is the thinking about art. For Althusser, art criticism that does not take into account the processes of artistic production and that cannot develop a knowledge of the "aesthetic effect" would remain particularly prone to the distortions of humanism.⁴⁶ Avoiding a naive humanism in art criticism meant building on Marxist principles in order to propose alternative concepts to analyze artistic production and its effects. In effect, this was a call for a "science" of art – one that could accurately theorize and gauge its aesthetic effects. Particularly important was to avoid the language of "creation," which glorified the artist at the expense of artistic practice and the mechanisms by which authentic art produces effects.

⁴³ Thomas Albrecht, "Donner à Voir l'idéologie: Althusser and Aesthetic Ideology", *Bulletin de La Société Américaine de Philosophie de Langue Française* 14 (2/2004), p. 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 9–14. Examples of critiques that focus on Althusser's formalism include: Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, Verso, London 1982, pp. 82–86; Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism*, Methuen, New York 1979, pp. 120–149, among others.

⁴⁵ Albrecht's interpretation is confirmed by the position taken by Pierre Macherey and Etienne Balibar in an interview (1978), where they caution against confusing form with formalism: "the historical materialist concept does not refer to 'form' in opposition to 'content,' but to the objective coherence of an ideological formation." However, by characterizing literature as an "ideological form," they also collapse aesthetics into other forms of ideology, thereby obscuring the specificity of the aesthetic form. Pierre Macherey and Étienne Balibar, "Literature as an Ideological Form: Some Marxist Propositions", trans. John Whitehead Mcleod and Ann Wordsworth, *Oxford Literary Review* 3 (1/1978), p. 5.

⁴⁶ For an overview of different approaches to art criticism, see Aleš Erjavec, "Art and Criticism", *Filozofski Vestnik* 40 (3/2019), pp. 147–160.

The conception of the artist or author as creator renders the artwork the result of a miraculous, even theological process, an inexplicable act of bringing into being. Such a perspective idealizes the subjectivity of the author/artist as having the ability to actualize themselves in their work as the outcome of a process that resists theorization.⁴⁷ For Althusser, this orientation in art criticism is reflected in the coupling of an aesthetics of creation and an aesthetics of consumption, revolving around the subjectivity of the artist qua the creator and the recipient qua the consumer of art and the view that art itself as an object created and consumed. Such an approach reproduced a subject-object dualism (between the artist and the work of art and between the consumer and the work of art), which had to be left behind for a truly materialist appreciation of aesthetics. The latter could only be achieved by criticism that could bring out the knowledge specific to art – the “type of critique and knowledge it inaugurates with respect to the ideology it makes us see.”⁴⁸

Challenging the Ideology/Art/Science Trinary

If art’s difference from ideology does not reside in its formal qualities, what then is the specificity of the authentic work of art and how does it differ from science, which also enjoys a privileged relation with reality? From ideology, the difference is slight.⁴⁹ With science, however, the differences are larger and revelatory of how art “works.” To identify art’s specificity then, we have to understand it in its similarities to and difference from both ideology and science. One of the clearest definitions of ideology Althusser provides is in *Philosophy for Non-philosophers* (1976). Abstracted from the habits, embodiments, and institutions of which it is equally composed, he labels ideology: “ideas endowed with a capacity for social action.”⁵⁰ Putting this definition into motion as one form of cognitive reproduction, ideological practice is further specified “as the transformation of existing ideology under the impact [*sous l’effet*] of the direct action of another ideology, distinct from the first.”⁵¹ A generic example of this transformation would be that of existing beliefs about the individual and their

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⁴⁷ Louis Althusser, “Letter to the Central Committee of the PCF, 18 March 1966”, *Historical Materialism* 15 (2/2007), pp. 163–65.

⁴⁸ Althusser, “Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract”, p. 241.

⁴⁹ Althusser, “A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre”, p. 152.

⁵⁰ Althusser, *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers*, p. 112.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

inalienable right to the products of their labor. This illusion is distinct from, and potentially replaced by, the competing communist notion that value, being socially produced, should be socially shared. Both dominant and the oppositional ideologies are realized and communicated with “gestures, modes of behavior, feelings, words and ... other element[s] of other practices.”⁵² Though never “pure” and always constructed out of and in relationship to other worldviews—especially the one in dominance, a discrete ideology bears the mark of the social class whose associations it supports. It also always stands in tension with the ideologies of competing classes. Further, specific ideologies are inseparable from institutions, which form part of their material support.⁵³ In “Cremonini,” Althusser, citing Establet, cuts to the chase and simply states that ideology is what the Marxist tradition calls “culture.”⁵⁴

Is not art, then, as a fraction of culture, just a part of ideology? In the main and as mentioned above, Althusser agrees with this reduction. Most art serves only to reproduce existing ideologies and the substance of even “great art” is almost entirely ideological. In terms of its objective content, art can be said to consist predominantly of existing ideologies as these are expressed through the transformation of existing material (“words, sounds, colors, *etc.*”⁵⁵) into new assemblages recognizable as art. Like its content, art’s form is dictated almost entirely by existing ideological conventions. In addition, it is this conventionality which allows its audience’s identification or “misrecognition” of themselves in the illusion produced by the artist.⁵⁶

If its production, form, and consumption “take place” in ideology, what, then, is the specificity of art? Althusser follows Aristotle and the greater part of the “western” philosophical tradition in stating that art provides pleasure to its viewer.⁵⁷ In terms of art’s specificity, is art therefore distinguished from ideology

⁵² Louis Althusser, “Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses”, in *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings, 1966–67*, François Matheron (ed.), Verso, London and New York 2003, p. 51.

⁵³ Althusser, *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers*, pp. 112–15.

⁵⁴ Althusser, “Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract”, p. 165.

⁵⁵ Althusser, “Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses”, p. 50.

⁵⁶ Étienne Balibar, “Althusser’s Dramaturgy and the Critique of Ideology”, *Differences* 26 (3/2015), pp. 8–9.

⁵⁷ Warren Montag and Louis Althusser, “On Brecht and Marx (1968)”, in *Louis Althusser*, trans. Max Statkiewicz, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire and New York 2003, pp. 146–47.

by the pleasant affect it induces? No, Althusser avers implicitly in many pieces and explicitly in the “Reply to Daspre” that authentic art is distinguished not by its ability to provide pleasure but by its “aesthetic content.” As noted above, this content or, better put, the relation among the ideological and aesthetic content of a work and the ideology of those who regard it evokes an “aesthetic effect” in its spectators.⁵⁸ It is this effect and the ability of the artwork to summon it that distinguishes authentic art from average art. Albrecht thus correctly contends that there is no identifiable formal element inherent in the artwork necessary to this effect.⁵⁹ Althusser makes this clear with examples: avant-garde works are arrayed alongside classics as possibly—but not necessarily—productive of aesthetic effects. For example, where Ionesco’s absurdist iconoclasm fails to achieve an aesthetic effect, Brecht’s beer hall melodramas and Balzac’s realist taxonomies succeed.⁶⁰ More proof: among the instances of authentic art Althusser surveys, one finds no common formal element (such as self-referentiality, complexity, symmetry, spontaneity, temporal abstraction, discontinuity, polyphony, unreliable narration, conceptuality, meter, novelty, *etc.*) capable of formally distinguishing authentic from average art. The quality of “greatness” too is insufficient. As Althusser cheekily confides in a 1962 letter to Franca Madonia, Racine’s linguistic innovations transform “mediocre contents, ... the ‘pulp romances’ of his day” into works to be revered. This formal transformation, however, is also that which allows his theater to play “a mystificatory role.”⁶¹ For Althusser, as for any Marxist shaped by *The German Ideology*, “mystification” is synonymous with “ideological.”⁶² Therefore, greatness may be an element of authentic art but, as with any formal element, is not that which distinguishes it from the mediocre.

If neither greatness nor any formal aspect differentiates authentic from average art, then what more can we say about this relation? As mentioned above, average art serves merely to reproduce existing ideologies—and this is part of their pleasure- or to flirt with their disruption before restoring the accord between artistic

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⁵⁸ Althusser almost always appeals to the visual register in his analyses but there is no reason that this critique should not equally apply to works of art that are heard, felt, or tasted.

⁵⁹ Althusser, “A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre”, p. 154.

⁶⁰ Althusser, “Perché il teatro : Conferenza dibattito promossa dal ‘Teatro Minimo’ di Forlì del Professore Louis Althusser”, p. 10.

⁶¹ Althusser, *Lettres à Franca*, p. 294.

⁶² Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Allen Lane, Penguin Press, London 1969, p. 74; Montag and Althusser, “On Brecht and Marx (1968)”, p. 140.

representations of the world and the subject's ideological representation of the same. Authentic art, by way of contrast, manages to open up a space within the artwork and in the mind of the spectator. This "void" is the space between the mystified world the audience inhabits (and which equally provides the form and content of the artwork) and the "real" world. "Allusion" made, the real is perceived or felt in the consciousness of the spectator.⁶³ Following Brecht, the internal distance taken is sometimes referred to as the "aesthetic effect."⁶⁴ Notwithstanding its inspiration, this occurrence is offered in counter-distinction to the "alienation effect," which Althusser identifies as a body of theatrical techniques conducive to these psychological effects but not sufficient to their production.⁶⁵ He also signals something about its production by referring to its work variously as distanti-ation, void, uncanny, non-space, rupture, break, or displacement.⁶⁶

To rehearse: the difference between authentic art and average art is that the former, while mostly or entirely formed by its creator's ideological beliefs, manages—in an unspecified way—to interrupt the ideology of its spectators. This interruption is a perception, feeling, or view of the distance between the real, material processes that produce ideology and ideological beliefs about these processes. The space displayed can equally be evident in the work and that discernible in the viewer's own consciousness.⁶⁷ Of course, art in its production is so closely related to ideological production as to be nearly indistinguishable from it. Therefore, it may be better understood as a species of ideological production, rather than a different kind. Nonetheless, it is its identity in terms of object and process but difference in terms of its reception that permits art to have an "aesthetic effect," that is, to change existing ideologies.

Affected by the glimpse of the material real to which authentic art "alludes," a spectator's self-satisfied consciousness is troubled. This disturbance, Althusser

⁶³ Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", p. 66.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 154; Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading "Capital"*, NLB, London 1970, p. 66.

⁶⁵ Montag and Althusser, "On Brecht and Marx (1968)", pp. 142–44. For a detailed analysis of how Althusser modifies the Brechtian method of "distanciation," see Bargu, "In the Theater of Politics", 98–102.

⁶⁶ Montag and Althusser, p. 142, p. 144; Althusser, "'Lam (1977)'" , p. 114; Louis Althusser, "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht (1962)", p. 142; Althusser, "A Young Cuban Painter Before Surrealism: Álvarez Ríos (1962)".

⁶⁷ Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", p. 153.

contends, has the potential to modify the spectator's political consciousness and, with this modification, to initiate a new political agenda. Despite this allusion to the real and its potential associated change of consciousness, Althusser says outright in the "Reply to Daspre" that authentic art is insufficient on its own to achieve political change. For this to happen, he adds, one needs to be able to "define the means" of political change.⁶⁸ As is well-known, the only practice Althusser specifies as capable of identifying the causal means to political transformation is science and science does so by producing true or correct knowledge of its object, the real.⁶⁹

Based on this summary, it is clear that science, art, and ideology resemble one another inasmuch as each is a social, material, and intellectual practice actually and potentially constitutive of one's lived relation to the world. Ideological beliefs about the world, a psychological constant, can be variously affected by the intellectual influence of art and science. Average art, for instance, reinforces ideological beliefs and provides an objective example of these beliefs' reproduction. Authentic art, on the contrary, interrupts ideology. Allowing one to glimpse the world demystified, it transforms and re-orders the subject's web of existing beliefs. Inasmuch as it is successful in this effort, art may motivate political action focused on changing the world in accordance with this new orientation. But there are no guarantees.

Science, too, transforms ideology and it also does so in relation to the real. However, instead of being a felt or perceived relation, this change is conceptual: ideology is replaced with knowledge or knowledge is reordered. Althusser's take on the relationship among science, ideology, the real, and truth has been much discussed and will only be rehearsed here in order to draw the distinctions between it, art and ideology.⁷⁰ The concise story is that scientists begin

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⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Pierre Macherey, "Althusser and the Concept of the Spontaneous Philosophy of Scientists", trans. Robin Mackay, *Parrhesia* 6 (2009), p. 16.

⁷⁰ Andrea Cavazzini, *Scienze, epistemologia, società: la lezione di Louis Althusser : Venezia, 29-30-31 ottobre 2008 : atti del convegno*, Mimesis, Milano 2009; Isabelle Garo, "The Impossible Break: Ideology in Movement between Philosophy and Politics", in *Encountering Althusser: Politics and Materialism in Contemporary Radical Thought*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York 2013, pp. 277–80; William S. Lewis, "Knowledge versus 'Knowledge': Louis Althusser on the Autonomy of Science and Philosophy from Ideology", *Rethinking Marxism* 17 (3/2005), pp. 455–470; Macherey, "Althusser and the Concept of the Spontane-

with ideological or “metaphysical” notions about the world. Then, through scientific practice which includes engagement with the material real, metaphysical notions are transformed into true, scientific conceptions of real objects, their causes, and relations.

This essay will not get too into the subtleties of scientific production and how Althusser's ideas about truth and scientific practice changed over the course of his career.⁷¹ One revision though is crucial to challenging the ideology-art-science trichotomy. This is Althusser's abandonment of the division characteristic of his classic work between science and ideology. By the late 1960s, Althusser did not think that philosophy or any other intellectual practice could separate science and ideology in terms of their relationship to truth and reality. Whereas before he had argued that philosophy could parse them, he now contended that the difference between the two could only be known by their employment. Scientific knowledge, once acted upon, leads to correct results, while ideology based strategy results in mistakes. Importantly, as with art and ideology, scientific knowledge and ideological beliefs became formally indistinguishable and their difference only able to be grasped by their effects.⁷² In the case of authentic art, this effect is psychological and agential, disturbing the spectator's easy conscience and possibly motivating inquiry or action into reality and its transformation.

As François Matheron has eloquently shown, Althusser's philosophy vacillates between “pure” concepts and “impure” ones.⁷³ As in the above example, this is evidenced in his thought's diachronic development. However, this inconstancy also occurs in discrete texts where a lucid, analytic definition of a concept is provided and distinguished from other concepts before its clarity and distinc-

ous Philosophy of Scientists”; Maria Cecilia Padilla and Facundo Roberto Bey, “La Ciencia Es Ciencia de La Ideología En Louis Althusser”, *Desafíos*, 28 (1/2016), pp. 371–98; Geoff Pfeifer, “On Althusser on Science, Ideology, and the New, or Why We Should Continue to Read ‘Reading Capital’”, *Crisis & Critique*, Reading Capital and For Marx: 50 Years Later (2/2015) pp. 124–41.

⁷¹ William S. Lewis, “Althusser's Scientism and Aleatory Materialism”, *Décalages* 2 (1/2016), pp. 6–26.

⁷² Panagiotis Sotiris, *A Philosophy for Communism: Rethinking Althusser, A Philosophy for Communism*, Brill, Leiden 2020, pp. 232–39.

⁷³ François Matheron, “Louis Althusser, or the Impure Purity of the Concept”, *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, Brill, Leiden 2004, pp. 503–27.

tion from others is subtly (or not-so-subtly) undermined during the rest of its exposition. The power of Althusser's thought and its debility lie in this manner of exposition.

To take this discussion back to art, when Althusser focuses at one time on the producer of the art work, at another time on the art object, and at another time on the art object's reception, we can see this compulsion to identify, explicate, and separate in his aesthetic theory. This disjunction gives rise to the claim that the form of the artwork or the great artist is responsible for the distance taken within the mind of the spectator. We also see this drive for purity in Althusser's analysis of intellectual production. There, ideological, scientific, and artistic thoughts are neatly separated according to their objects and according to the effects that these thoughts have on a subject's activity. Both science and authentic art, he claims, interrupt ideology and therefore "the reproduction of a society's mode of production"⁷⁴ but they do so in different ways. Through scientific practice, the first has the effect of producing true or correct knowledge of the real useful to its transformation. Through genuine artistic practice, the second generates a perception of or feeling for the real which differs from the subject's previous attitude.

Alternately and as an example of a rigid analysis becoming more supple, maybe it is *knowledge* of the real that art produces? In "On Brecht" and in most other aesthetic texts, he states that art produces no knowledge of the real.⁷⁵ However, in "Cremonini," written in-between the two pieces on Brechtian theater, he says of the Italian's paintings that "we cannot 'recognize' ourselves (ideologically) in his pictures. And it is because we cannot 'recognize' ourselves in them that we can know ourselves in them, in the specific form provided by art." In the next paragraph he adds the line already quoted "when [art] exists as a work of art it produces as a work of art (by the type of critique and knowledge it inaugurates with respect to the ideology it makes us see) an ideological effect."⁷⁶ How to make sense of these contradictory statements? If one sticks to the crystalline concepts Althusser delineates or to what he predominately states about art's aesthetic effect, one cannot make sense of them. In many cases, art is said to

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⁷⁴ Montag and Althusser, "On Brecht and Marx (1968)", p. 146.

⁷⁵ Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", p. 146, pp. 152–53.

⁷⁶ Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract", p. 165.

affect perception or sentiment, not understanding. In one case, he states that it has a knowledge effect. If one does not want to dismiss the theory entirely, then one must notice the moments of impurity, the moments when Althusser muddies concepts and sends them in relation to one another. This is what he does in the second “Cremonini” quote. Here, the artistic work, painted by someone who may have no “lucid” knowledge of reality,⁷⁷ “inaugurates” knowledge. Sticking to its concept as outlined in most of the aesthetic pieces, art cannot reveal the real, it can only ever change sentiment or perception. With Cremonini, though, we see it functioning as critique and inaugurating knowledge, a function with which science and philosophy are exclusively charged.

Reading non-pedantically, the solution seems obvious: in changing the subject’s perception of the world, authentic art may not only inaugurate philosophical critique and suggest the need for political change, it may also inaugurate scientific inquiry necessary to that transformation. Althusser’s very impulse to clarity, his Spinozist formalism or rationalism,⁷⁸ often prevented him from acknowledging that productive practices are not totally distinct one from another. That they are intermixed, though, almost always slips through either via contradictions within texts, as self-conscious revision, or when the matter is stated more clearly in another text. The division between science and ideology, for instance, was subject to revision.⁷⁹ Moreover, in a text which adopts the language of Lacan and of psychoanalysis from 1966 and which replaces the various cognitive capacities Althusser usually associates with intellectual practice with the word “discourse,” the common effect of science, ideology, and art is clearly stated when Althusser writes:

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁷⁸ Knox Peden, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavaillès to Deleuze*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2014, pp. 149–90.

⁷⁹ Matheron quotes a revealing passage from a 1962 letter to Franca Madonia when Althusser was working on Machiavelli: “I even sketched a description of Machiavelli’s consciousness, his will to realism in contradiction with his ‘derealising’ situation (to have hit upon this word was the solution: thus giving the impression that there was something there to understand which I didn’t succeed in expressing in a conceptual, clear, exhaustive fashion, but saying at the same time that there was nevertheless something to sense and understand, identifying a presence that did not manage to grasp itself ...), and then, thinking about this formulation again, I was extraordinarily and ironically struck by the fact that, in the guise of the supposed consciousness of Machiavelli, I’d spoken about myself.” Matheron, “Louis Althusser, or the Impure Purity of the Concept”, p. 512.

If we compare the different existing forms of discourse—that is, the forms of unconscious discourse, ideological discourse, aesthetic discourse and scientific discourse—we can demonstrate the existence of *a common effect: every discourse produces a subjectivity-effect*. Every discourse has, as its necessary correlate, a subject, which is one of the effects, if not the major effect, of its functioning.⁸⁰

A problem with Althusser's aesthetic theory is that art is never put back together with science and ideology to show their overlappings and to trace their common effect on a subject's conscious and unconscious thought. *Prima facie*, one sees only inconsistency.⁸¹ This lack of accord makes it difficult for the reader to piece together how an artist—working with their own mystified consciousness and existing materials—can fabricate an artwork characterized by a tension between the real and the ideological. Seen in terms of the object and its reception, it is likewise an enigma how a work of art may inaugurate a knowledgeable critique of real situations. Nonetheless, by looking closely at the development of Althusser's aesthetics, we can see him wrestling with these self-caused obstacles and becoming more sophisticated in their resolution, albeit without ever resolving them and while often slipping back to his earlier formulations.⁸² A singular example of this, detailed in the next section, is Althusser's overcoming (with the help of Pierre Macherey) the limitations of Engels' and Lenin's aesthetics. In a way that is impossible if we consider only the elements of his aesthetics in their purity, we can also turn to his analysis of specific artists and their output for an understanding of how art works that is more subtle, philosophically tenable, and illustrative of his theory's originality. Unlike the rigid demarcation of artistic, scientific and theoretical practices just rehearsed, the critiques of Cremonini and Bertolazzi, Solzhenitsyn and Fanti, Álvarez Ríos and Lam provide examples of the ways in which artists fabricate works of art capable of inaugurating knowledgeable critiques of existing, concrete situations.

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⁸⁰ Althusser, "Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses", p. 48.

⁸¹ Indeed, even in "Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses" Althusser is inconsistent. In Note 2, subject-effects seem to be primarily attributed to ideological discourse. See Althusser, "Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses", p. 50.

⁸² In this slippage, comparison can be made to Althusser's mature judgement of Marx, continually struggling but ultimately unable to free himself from the Hegelian dialectic. Louis Althusser, "Marx in His Limits", in *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*, Verso, London and New York 2006, p. 42.

Elements of a Materialist Aesthetics

Despite Althusser's inconsistencies, slippages, and reliance on "impure" concepts, his writings on aesthetics do present us with original insights, both conceptually and in terms of the challenge they present to already existing formulations, especially within Marxism. However, it must be noted that the conceptual innovations Althusser made in approaching aesthetics and the ways in which he posed the problem of aesthetics, namely, in relation not only with the usual elements of art criticism (especially its focus on the artist and their creative expression) but with history, ideology, subjectivity, and the possibility of knowledge, have developed in conversation with the important work that Pierre Macherey carried out in the domain of literary analysis. When Althusser cites Macherey in his response to Daspre, he indicates that Macherey's article on Lenin's reading of Tolstoy is "only a beginning" but indicative of the "direction in which we are working."⁸³ Macherey's intervention thus stands as the result of a collective discussion of Althusser and his students/cothinkers, or at the very least, its results are endorsed by this collective "we."⁸⁴ In the same letter, Althusser promises further studies on this subject that are shortly forthcoming, a promise that never materializes except for Macherey's work on the subject.⁸⁵ As a result, it is important to turn to Macherey's work in order to identify the significant points of contact, convergence, and confluence for the specifically Althusserian approach to art and to trace Macherey's role in its development.⁸⁶

⁸³ Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", p. 222, our emphasis.

⁸⁴ Recognizing the collective nature of the intellectual and political work that Althusser and his students at the École Normale Supérieure carried out in the 1960s, Warren Montag writes that it "ought to be regarded as a collective body of work whose writers functioned more as scribes than as authors, recording ideas that had so thoroughly circulated between individuals that their originator could no longer be discovered." Warren Montag, *Louis Althusser*, p. 15.

⁸⁵ The exception is Macherey's book-length intervention, which was published later in the same year. See Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, Routledge, London 2006.

⁸⁶ According to Montag, Macherey's approach is profoundly shaped by Spinoza whose relevance for the field of aesthetics has not simply been neglected but, rather, necessarily "excluded." This implicit influence of what Montag provocatively names a "counter-aesthetics" may also be one of the sources of the "impurity" of Althusser's concepts, especially as the Spinozist thematics stood in tension with the influence of Kantian concepts in Althusser's thought. See Warren Montag, "Spinoza's Counter-Aesthetics", *Intellectual History Review* 30 (3/2020), pp. 411–427.

I. From Author as Creator to Author as Traveller

When we turn our attention to Macherey's essay on Lenin as a reader of Tolstoy, then, what do we find? Macherey's essay begins by noting the absence of a systematic Marxist theory of aesthetics and outlines only a brief lineage, which moves from the scant references in Marx and Engels (and Marx's book on Balzac that was never written) to Plekhanov and Lafargue's work. This is at least one of the reasons why, Macherey argues, Lenin's writings on Tolstoy, occasional pieces as they are, are so precious. These writings, spanning three years between 1908-1911 are pre-revolutionary but gestational in terms of delineating a "Leninist aesthetics" bound up with the question of "scientific socialism."⁸⁷ What makes Lenin's interpretation of Tolstoy crucial (in addition to the absence in the Marxist literature it fills) resides in its ability to think together the aesthetic and the political, and more specifically, to articulate their complex relationship.

For Macherey, and we can assume by extension for Althusser, the study of Lenin's writings on Tolstoy reveal in a rough sketch the specific elements necessary for an aesthetic theory that is Marxist. It should be noted that while the writings in question penned by Lenin, and Macherey's analysis of these writings, are devoted only to literature as a specific art-form, it is clear that for Macherey they represent insights that are applicable to other forms of artistic production. These elements comprise of: (1) the complex relation of the author/work to their historical period (and the contradictions of this period), (2) the relationship between the work of art and ideology (and thus, between that of ideology and the historical period in question), and finally (3) an explication and critical reworking of the metaphor of the "mirror," which Lenin deploys to express Tolstoy's relation to his age and its contradictions. In elaborating each of these elements, Macherey produces original concepts, concepts which inform, even if they are not explicitly discussed by, Althusser's reflections.

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One of the first tasks of Macherey's intervention is to emphasize the necessity to put the artwork in historical context. In so doing, however, he critically examines the assumption of an immediate, "spontaneous" relation between the work of literature and the lifetime of its author, on the one hand, and the time of its composition, on the other. Instead, Macherey argues that in analyzing

⁸⁷ Pierre Macherey, "Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy", in *A Theory of Literary Production*, pp. 118-19. First published in *La Pensée* 121 (1965).

the historicity of the work of art one must be able to delineate the appropriate time frame by analyzing the broader social and political transformations taking place (and are thus somehow expressed in the artwork). For Tolstoy, this is the period between 1861 and 1905, a time when feudalism is disintegrating and the development of capitalism is continuing apace, with huge social consequences for the peasants. The periodization is introduced by Lenin, earmarked on one end by the legal reforms that ended serfdom, if only *de jure*, and on the other end by the 1905 revolution. Lenin thereby casts this period of decline and dissolution of old Russia and the simultaneous emergence of a bourgeois order as the Tolstoyian age.

Macherey does not dispute this analysis but also notes that the author's relation to their age is still not straightforward. He writes: "Generally, the writer is behind the times, if only because he [sic] invariably speaks after the event. The more he is involved with the materially immediate, the more difficulty he experiences in writing."⁸⁸ Macherey thereby introduces a temporal lag in the author's production, complicating an easy periodization. Macherey further notes that "[s]ome writers are involved with the secondary or anachronistic tendencies of their time."⁸⁹ Thus, for a proper Marxist theory of literature (or any form of aesthetic production), while it is important to contextualize the artwork in a historical age based on the content of the work, it is also necessary to recognize that the work may appear out of its time, or coming after its own age, insofar as it expresses processes that are not synchronous with one another or which cannot be understood as having begun or ended in precise moments in time. Macherey's analysis, then, builds on Lenin and opens greater space for the multiple histories of different layers of a social formation and nonlinear and non-synchronous temporal elements that may coexist in the same historical age, all of which go into the making of the artwork's complex historicity.⁹⁰

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Macherey points out that this complex historicity (or the relationship between the author/artwork and their age) can best be understood as a result of the mediation that enters into this relationship. The specific ideology, which mediates

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ This approach is famously theorized in Althusser and Balibar, *Reading "Capital"*, pp. 103–10.

the author and their age and disrupts any semblance of a linear, direct or transparent relationship, is ideology. However, Macherey, following Lenin, is quick to problematize this mediating term. At issue is not a uniform and total ideology; instead, the ideology that mediates the author's relationship to history is one among multiple ideologies that make up the historical period, each authored by a specific class that is part of the social make-up in a particular conjuncture. Macherey writes: "a historical period does not spontaneously produce a single, monolithic ideology, but a series of ideologies determined by the total relation of forces; each ideology is shaped by the pressures upon the class which generates it."⁹¹ If Tolstoy is able to convey "a certain knowledge of his age,"⁹² albeit in a manner that is incomplete (incomplete because partial, i.e., mediated by the specific lens of a specific ideology), this is because he drew upon the viewpoint of the peasant. This viewpoint is inevitably incomplete and partial, but also more complicated than simply being a reflection of the author's class position vis-a-vis the social structure. Even though Tolstoy the man comes from an aristocratic family, Tolstoy the author expresses the experience of a different class – that of the *muzhik*. To account for the difference, Macherey puts forth the idea of the "social mobility" of an author; he uses the image of a "traveller" to express the author's ability to migrate away from their own class origins to a different class position, a movement that enables the author not to be bound by their own relationship to the social structure.⁹³ Tolstoy, then, is "the count with the heart of a *muzhik*" who, like others who produce artistic works of value, is a *traveller* within his own society, which grants him the ability to convey the contradictions of the age.

Althusser builds on this idea of the author as traveller within his own society, unbound by his class origins or even his own political positions, when he refuses to concede to Daspre that the author (in this case Balzac) must have changed his reactionary personal political positions in order to convey a critical sense of his present with his writing. For Daspre, Balzac's critical aesthetic effect can be understood as a function of Balzac's political views, not despite them. For Althusser, by contrast, it is precisely the strength of Balzac's own views, his commitment to his political ideology that allows him to create an "internal distance" from that ideology. Althusser writes of Balzac: "his peculiar, reactionary political

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⁹¹ Macherey, "Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy", p. 128.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

positions played a decisive part in the production of the content of his work."⁹⁴ This is because the content of an artwork is determined by so much more than simply a reflection of the author's class position or ideological commitments.

The idea that the (great) author/artist is marked by their ability to convey something about ideology that is ultimately irreducible to their subjectivity and ideological investments is taken to its logical conclusions with Althusser's comments on Cremonini's work. In praising Cremonini's radical anti-humanism, Althusser not only extensively comments on the painter's artistic trajectory and the artistic elements in his work that conform to this anti-humanist position, but he also draws attention to how the painter effectively erases himself from his own canvases. Cremonini refuses the temptations of self-recognition in his work, freeing his work from carrying the ideological stamp that marks it as his "creation." If both Macherey and Althusser want to move away from the dominant conception of author/artist as creator, Macherey's proposal of an author as traveller transforms in Althusser's hands to one that travels toward the erasure of the author/artist altogether. This erasure is not simply the author/artist's absence, it is a presence that takes the form of an anonymity, a desubjectivation, an absence, an ability to move from the author/artist as the subject of artistic creation to art as a labor of production of artistic works through which "the structure of the world," the "structural effects of the real relations which govern [subjects]" can be expressed.⁹⁵ Cremonini is "present in his painting in the form determined by the relations he paints," Althusser writes, "in the form of their *absence*, i.e. in particular, in the form of *his own absence*."⁹⁶ So, too, for Macherey, "the artist produces works, *in determinate conditions*; he does not work on himself but on that thing which escapes him in so many ways, and never belongs to him until after the event."⁹⁷ Does this reformulation not bring aesthetic production closer to scientific production?

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II. Breaking the Artwork as Mirror

For Macherey, the relation between the work of art and history is mediated by ideology. It is important to account for the artist's "gift" – the particular stamp

⁹⁴ Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", p. 224.

⁹⁵ Althusser, "Cremonini", p. 239.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁹⁷ Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, p. 77. Also see Montag, "Spinoza's Counter-Aesthetics", pp. 80–82.

that artist puts on the work, which prevents it from being reducible to the ideology contained within it.⁹⁸ Departing from Lenin, Macherey wants to distinguish the artistic work from being simply a tool of ideological dissemination, on the one hand, and a documentary of existing conditions, on the other. He argues that literary criticism and its specialized conceptual toolbox are necessary to bring out the knowledge inherent in the artwork. This knowledge is neither scientific, nor ideological. At the same time, it is intimately related with how ideology mediates between the work of art and its conjuncture.

An artist's work contains many contradictions: "both the contradictions of his age and the deficiencies involved in his partial or fragmentary view of those contradictions."⁹⁹ In Tolstoy's case, this entails both the contradictions of a "post-Reform, but pre-revolutionary era" in Russian society and the problem of understanding these contradictions through the mediation of a peasant ideology. As a result, while Tolstoy's work embodies the devastating consequences of capitalist development as it affected the landed aristocracy and the peasantry, it does not register either the development of the bourgeoisie or the proletariat.¹⁰⁰ This means that the historical period and its contradictions are not simply reflected in the artwork, as if the artwork held a mirror to its present, but are refracted by the selective or partial point of view afforded by the author's ideological prism. But even then it is problematic to assume that the artwork simply reflects a part in the whole as if it were mechanically reproducing a knowledge of that social reality.

This is where developing a Marxist kind of aesthetic-literary criticism, one that is different from and superior to "bourgeois criticism," runs into problems, problems posed, in fact, by the writings of the foundational figures. In both Engels and Lenin, there is a tendency to appreciate "socialist" or materialist artwork as one that reflects social life in its reality, offers an accurate portrait of social relations, disrupts illusions about reality.¹⁰¹ This approach is also reflected in Lenin's choice of appellation to characterize Tolstoy. More than once does Lenin call Tolstoy the "mirror" of the Russian revolution. However, this image

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⁹⁸ Macherey, "Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy", p. 129.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

¹⁰¹ Harold Osborne, "The Doctrine of Reflection in Soviet Aesthetics", *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 23 (3/1983), pp. 252–58.

creates problems for Macherey because it suggests that what an artwork does is to offer a “reflection” in the sense of a “reproduction or facsimile.”¹⁰² Already in Lenin, the metaphor of the “mirror” stands not for an immediate reflection of reality (as in an accurate depiction of the life-world of the peasants) but the reflection of broader truths about the revolution. According to Lenin, Tolstoy not only failed to understand the revolution but he also stood aloof to it. In precisely both counts, he reflects the Russian revolution like a mirror because his attitude was just like the actual participants of the revolution who failed to understand it – despite their participation in the events – and stood aloof from the “real historical tasks” presented to them by the unfolding of the events.¹⁰³

Lenin finds Tolstoy’s works to be laden with “glaring” contradictions: on the one hand is his ability to portray Russian life, his protest against its hypocrisies, his critique of the state, property, and the church, his unmasking of capitalist exploitation and its brutal consequences; on the other hand, his preaching of submission to the masses, his doctrine of nonresistance to evil by violence, his articulation of a more refined form of religion, his advocacy of abstention from politics, and his moralization of political conflict. But these contradictions, argues Lenin, are not accidental. Rather, they express the contradictory conditions of Russian life: on the one hand, the coming apart of the patriarchal countryside and the abolition of serfdom; on the other hand, the ambiguity regarding what order is taking shape in its place; on the one hand, the pent-up hatred of the peasantry, on the other hand, their despair in the absence of class consciousness and the politics of alliance and struggle with the proletarians that would follow from that consciousness. In other words, Lenin argues that Tolstoy’s contradictions express the contradictions of a peasant-bourgeois revolution, one that is utopian, even reactionary, but with socialistic and critical elements. Overall, Tolstoy holds a mirror, acts as a mirror, to the immaturity of the oppressed classes in terms of their revolutionary preparedness and resilience. In light of Lenin’s analysis, Macherey faces the difficult task of steering the metaphor of the mirror away from any connotations that the artwork presents an exact reproduction of reality or that what is reflected is the same as what the author saw in that reality. Wanting to avoid the temptations of a “*mechanical*

¹⁰² Macherey, “Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy”, p. 135.

¹⁰³ For Lenin’s articles on Tolstoy, see “Appendix” in Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, pp. 334–361.

analysis,”¹⁰⁴ and to emphasize the partial, selective quality of the artwork in reflecting its own historical era, Macherey contemplates alternative metaphors of a “distorting mirror,” a “broken mirror,” multiple mirrors, and a “blind” mirror (in certain areas).¹⁰⁵ None of these does the work. Instead Macherey has to do a lot of acrobatics to salvage the mirror metaphor (though unsuccessfully) and to reconcile the contradictions among Lenin’s changing positions across essays. Over and over, he comes back to the basic point: “the mirror is not a simple reflecting surface.”¹⁰⁶ Instead, he asserts, the image on the mirror is “deceptive.”¹⁰⁷

Exasperated, and exasperating, the effort to salvage the mirror metaphor keeps falling apart in the essay, leading Macherey to make two important interventions. First, he moves from the conception of “reflection,” a connotation of the mirror impossible to expunge, however much he tries, to the conception of “expression.” Rather than saying that Tolstoy’s work reflects his age, considering the contradictions in its context and within the artwork itself, as well as their complex relationship, Macherey finally opts to assert that it is *expressive* of its age, and the ideology through which it lives its age, meaning “an indirect figuration which arises from the deficiencies of the reproduction.”¹⁰⁸ And second, Macherey points out that there is an ineluctable distance between the ideology and the artwork that expresses it, a distance that makes it possible “to escape from the domain of spontaneous ideology, from the false consciousness of self, of history, and of time.”¹⁰⁹ Leaving aside the allusion to “false consciousness” as a slip of the pen, we can see how Macherey reformulates the problematic of art away from prior materialist concerns based on its relationship with history, with historically situated social conditions and their contradictions, toward a new basis in its relationship with ideology. What art makes visible in its “mirror,” if one can speak of a mirror at all, is ideology, its illusory nature, its “capturing” of subjects, its inevitable contradictions that ideology works so hard not to recognize as contradictions. Thus ideology is “not simply reflected by the mirror of the book; ideology is broken, and turned inside out.”¹¹⁰ Macherey suggests that

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¹⁰⁴ Macherey, “Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy”, p. 136.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 135, pp. 138–9, p. 143.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

this can be understood as “an internal displacement of ideology” – “this is not ideology contemplating itself, but the mirror-effect which exposes its insufficiency, revealing differences and discordances, or a significant incongruity.”¹¹¹

With these two interventions, we can see how Macherey thus formulates the core of what will constitute Althusser's approach to art: the expression of an internal distance of ideology from within ideology. Let us turn to Althusser. It will be recalled that in his response to Daspre, he defined art in the following terms: “What art makes us see, and therefore gives to us in the form of ‘seeing’, ‘perceiving’ and ‘feeling’ (which is not the form of knowing), is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes.” His definition of art as “alluding” to reality can now be better understood as a choice against the highly compromised metaphor of the mirror and its attendant problematic of “reflection,” which, thanks to Macherey, Althusser can avoid.¹¹²

And further, we find the idea of the displacement art enacts within ideology, when Althusser writes, acknowledging Macherey's work and building on it: “Balzac and Solzhenitsyn give us a ‘view’ of the ideology to which their work alludes and with which it is constantly fed, a view which presupposes a retreat, an internal distancing from the very ideology from which their novels emerged. They make us ‘perceive’ (but not know) in some sense from the inside, by an internal distance, the very ideology in which they are held.”¹¹³

When Althusser takes up the mirror, which he does in relation to some of Cremonini's paintings in which he experiments with mirrors, it is no longer deployed as a metaphor of how reality is reflected in the artwork but rather as an

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹¹² A decade later, rejecting a simplistic understanding that literature presents a reflection of the material reality of society, Macherey and Balibar situate it as the result of a material practice arising out of determinate social relations and intervene to distinguish the category of “reflection” in materialist analysis from an empiricist conception in which it is equated with “mirroring.” They argue: “The reflection, in dialectical materialism, is a ‘reflection without a mirror’; in the history of philosophy this is the only effective destruction of the empiricist ideology which calls the relation of thought to the real a specular (and therefore reversible) reflection.” Macherey and Balibar, “Literature as an Ideological Form”, p. 5.

¹¹³ Althusser, “A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre”, pp. 222–23.

opacity that separates a human from its own image. It is the mirror that “looks,” not the man or woman staring into it; it is the mirror that “sees” in a way that is indifferent to the particular man or woman staring.¹¹⁴ It is the mirror that refuses a story of genesis; it shows the relations between the objects and the human beings that they are in relation with but not their causes, only an “inexorable circle” of relations.¹¹⁵ This is why these mirrors need, or at least why Cremonini introduces, verticals that challenge and disrupt the circle of ideological recognition. These remarks echo Macherey’s final reworking of the mirror metaphor at the end of his essay on Lenin: “The mirror extends the world: but it also seizes, inflates and tears that world. In the mirror, the object is both completed and broken: *disjecta membra*. If the mirror constructs, it is in an inversion of the movement of genesis: rather than spreading it, it breaks. The images emerge from this laceration. Elucidated by these images, the world and its powers appear and disappear, disfigured at the very moment when they begin to take shape. Hence the childish fear of the mirror which is the fear of seeing *something else*, when it is always the same thing.”¹¹⁶ We name our work after Macherey’s powerful evocation of the image of the world in scattered fragments, broken by the peculiar “mirror” of literature, as it best encapsulates our effort of piecing together an Althusserian aesthetics from its remains – the scattered remains in the shadows of Althusser’s oeuvre. *Disjecta membra*: always fragmented, ever disseminating, both completing and breaking what Althusser is, complicating his legacy, and yet remaining distinctively Althusserian still.

The Internal Distances Taken

How do Althusser’s various marginal and occasional writings enable us to piece together his core insight, namely, that “materialist” art is distinguished by creating an “internal distance” within ideology? Here we mine his commentaries on different works to show how his theorization of that distance from the ideology that they grow from and stage came to life in relation to different ideological formations with which he was engaged theoretically and critically: humanism, Stalinism and official Soviet ideology, and imperialism. Each of his interventions in art focuses on selected artists/authors whose works enact that internal

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¹¹⁴ Althusser, “Cremonini”, pp. 234–35.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

¹¹⁶ Macherey, “Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy”, p. 150–51.

distance from one of these ideological formations. His deployment of examples, though differing in the depth of engagement, works to demonstrate how materialist art functions with respect to ideology.

I. Critique of humanism: Cremonini, Bertolazzi

Technically, “The Humanist Controversy” lasted only one year, from March of 1965 when *La Nouvelle Critique* published Althusser’s attack on “Real Humanism” to March of the next year when the French Communist Party adopted a “Resolution on Ideological and Cultural Problems.” This resolution supposedly settled the intraparty philosophical debate between humanism and anti-humanism in favor of the former.¹¹⁷ When one looks at Althusser’s whole career, it is clear, however, that this was just one skirmish in a long battle between the anti-humanist position in philosophy he sought to articulate and a moralizing tendency in art and philosophy which took many forms: liberal, bourgeois, existentialist, Catholic, Marxist, evolutionary, and personalist.¹¹⁸

The generic position of humanism is that there is something intrinsic and special about human beings which must be respected and encouraged. That which humanists identified as special varied: it could be that humans are free, creative, rights-bearing, altruistic, united in their existential situation, marked out by God for some purpose, or that they have a special and universal essence which they are in the process of realizing. In the early 1960s, after Stalinist “diamatics” had been rejected and when something like the last variant of humanism listed above became the French Communist Party’s official philosophy, Althusser mustered considerable philosophical resources in order to combat it.

Within the Party, the humanist position was represented by officials and intellectuals such as Roger Garaudy, Henri Lefebvre, and Louis Aragon. For good

¹¹⁷ William S. Lewis, “Editorial Introduction to Louis Althusser’s “Letter to the Central Committee of the PCF, 18 March, 1966.””, *Historical Materialism* 15 (2/2007), p. 133; Frédérique Matonti, *Intellectuels Communistes : Essai Sur l’obéissance Politique : “La Nouvelle Critique” (1967–1980)*, Editions la Découverte 2005, p. 71.

¹¹⁸ Louis Althusser, “The International of Decent Feelings”, in *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings*, François Matheron (ed.), G. M Goshgarian (trans.), Verso, London and New York 1997, pp. 21–35; Althusser, “Marx in His Limits”, p. 12; Althusser, *The Future Lasts Forever: A Memoir*, p. 179; Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, “Le mouvement personnaliste français des années 1930 et sa postérité”, *Politique et Sociétés* 17 (1-2/1998), pp. 219–37.

reasons, these thinkers rejected the Soviet thought that had guided the Party during the post-war period and they were trying to modernize by appealing to potential members and allies beyond the core to which the Party had been reduced. In place of orthodox Marxism-Leninism, these “thought leaders” adopted an explicitly Hegelian-Marxist philosophy. Seeking pedigree, they traced this philosophy to Marx’s writings prior to 1845 when the concept of human alienation and its dialectical development through history to a reunion of human beings with their full power and produce played central roles.¹¹⁹ Explicitly rejected by these Humanist Marxists was the “economist” thesis associated with Marxism-Leninism which held that the logic of production drives historical transformation. Also rejected was its corollary, which had it that all culture is determined by its relation to economic production. Though still alienated by capitalist exploitation and by its associated ideological superstructure, another common thread that united each of these thinkers was the belief that human beings can realize their full potential through voluntary acts of self-creation.

Who exactly was performing or leading these acts of self-realization and what they consisted of was not consistently identified by Party humanists: Garaudy argued that humanity, in its diversity, is in the process of realizing the human essence in different ways and that we can all learn from each other.¹²⁰ His was a kind of “new age” humanism *avant la lettre*. Aragon and Lefebvre endorsed political struggle but they also thought that the “creative activity” of a cultural avant-garde could transform socio-economic and political relations and thereby help to end humanity’s self estrangement.¹²¹ What united humanist Marxists most of all was the belief in a knowable essence to human beings. This essence and full freedom were yet unrealized and its expression divided among classes by capitalism.¹²² However, the idea of “Total Man” provided a normative measure of human flourishing against which conditions of non-flourishing could

¹¹⁹ Edmund Demaitre, “In Search of Humanism Marxism-Leninism”, *Problems of Communism* 14 (5/1965), p. 19.

¹²⁰ Didier Gauvin, “Un intellectuel communiste illégitime: Roger Garaudy”, Université Grenoble-Alpes 2016, pp. 297–97.

¹²¹ Henri Lefebvre, *Dialectical Materialism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2009, p. 50, p. 152, pp. 159–60; Lewis, “Editorial Introduction to Louis Althusser’s ‘Letter to the Central Committee of the PCF, 18 March, 1966’”, pp. 142–43.

¹²² Richard Eldridge, “Althusser and Ideological Criticism of the Arts”, in *Explanation and Value in the Arts*, Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (eds.), 1st ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, p. 198.

be measured and towards the realization of which politics could be oriented. Further, cultural production, including the arts, could be mustered in its realization.¹²³

In contradistinction to Marxist humanists, Althusser criticizes the notions of human essence, alienation, and the telic theory of history associated with its eventual overcoming as pre-Marxist. In place of these ideological concepts, he emphasizes the “mature” Marx and references him as the founder of a science of history rather than as the originator of a dialectical and telic philosophical anthropology.¹²⁴ The assertions associated with this reading of the mature Marx are that – somewhere around 1845 – Marx abandoned Hegel’s philosophical method and Feuerbach’s philosophical anthropology and founded a materialist science of history. This science is based on the discovery that what it is to be a human being is determined by a culture’s mode of production and the role that one plays in it. Another of its discoveries is that there is no logic to history save for that it consists of class struggle. It also holds that modes of production and therefore human subjectivities and social relations are amenable to transformation through class struggle.¹²⁵ An addendum to this last claim relates to Althusser’s insistence that Marx originated a novel and correct science of history. Specifically, and as explicitly counterposed to Marxist humanism, it is that this transformation is only possible with a scientific understanding of the material forces which shape humans and their socio-economic relations.¹²⁶

Given this background, we can better understand the interventions into art criticism Althusser undertook in close proximity to the humanist controversy and which were shaped by the battles within Marxist philosophy and aesthetics which gave rise to that conflict during the first half of the 1960s.¹²⁷ The first of these interventions is Althusser’s defense of the Piccolo Teatro’s 1962 pro-

¹²³ G. M. Goshgarian, “Introduction to The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings, 1966–67”, in *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings, 1966–67*, Verso, London and New York 2003, pp. xi–lxi; Lewis, “Editorial Introduction to Louis Althusser’s “Letter to the Central Committee of the PCF, 18 March, 1966””, pp. 142–45.

¹²⁴ Matonti, *Intellectuels Communistes : Essai Sur l'obéissance Politique : “La Nouvelle Critique” (1967-1980)*, p. 81.

¹²⁵ Althusser and Balibar, *Reading “Capital”*, pp. 122–3.

¹²⁶ Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 168, p. 229.

¹²⁷ Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory*, pp. 58–60.

duction in Paris of Bertolazzi's 1893 melodrama *El nost Milan*. The second is his take on the retrospective exhibition of Leonardo Cremonini's paintings at the 1964 Venice Biennale. Though markedly different in terms of subject matter, both focus on artists whose works consciously and intentionally enact an internal distance from humanist ideology and, thereby, reveal the real condition of human beings.¹²⁸ With *El nost Milan*, Althusser argues that spatial and temporal dislocations inherent to the play's structure accomplish this work. By way of contrast, Althusser traces the diachronic development of Cremonini's painterly depictions of human figures in order to make the case that Cremonini progressively decenters the human subject. The result, he claims, is that the viewer's ideological identification with the figures depicted becomes complicated.¹²⁹

To take *El nost Milan* first and to situate it in context, Althusser wished to defend its importance and aesthetic worth from the disregard of Parisian audiences and from the contumely of the capital's critics.¹³⁰ Apparently, when they were not bored, these critics could only see in Piccolo Teatro's production the tired revival of a dead form: the melodrama, which makes use of stock characters, dramatic, well-trodden plots, and outsized emotion to engage its audience.¹³¹ Rather than viewing the work as passé, Althusser emphasizes the tension within the piece between this passé form and its staging. In order to capture this strain, Althusser analyzes the play in terms of four dislocations. The first two dislocations, spatial and temporal, are "latent" within the play and brought to the fore by Giorgio Strehler's directorial choices. The latter two are the result of the dislocations made visible by the play and take place both on stage—in the form of a character's transformation—and beyond the footlights in the audience's consciousness.¹³²

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The temporal dislocation in the play is affected by the décalage between the two historical senses of time that the piece juxtaposes. The first temporality Althusser labels "tragic time." It is the procession typical of the melodrama, that duration within which history takes place and dramatic events unfold. Interestingly, and in a move that may render the first-reading of this essay diffi-

¹²⁸ Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract", pp. 157–66.

¹²⁹ Althusser, "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht (1962)", p. 142.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 151; Pippa, "A Heap of Splinters On the Floor", p. 14.

cult for a Marxist reader who thinks dialectics are generally positive, Althusser labels this time “dialectical” before adding that the dialectical transformation characteristic of this duration is that of a “false dialectic.” By the end of the piece, this false dialectic will be compared to the genuine dialectical transformation of the heroine’s and audience’s consciousness.¹³³

In the case of *El nost Milan*, the actual events of the melodrama and, therefore, of tragic time and of the “false dialectic” take up very little of the running time. As one of the Parisian critics put it, the plot revolves around three characters: “the vengeful father, the punished crook, and the young woman who sticks to her guns.”¹³⁴ Ostensibly, the play is about a young woman, Nina, torn between the designs of two men. The first, her father Peppon—a “fire-eater” in the circus, wishes to spare his daughter from the harshness of lumpen-proletariat life. He wants to raise her right and to keep her from falling in with a criminal element. This possibility and this class is represented by Nina’s love interest, the clown and crook Carloue, nick-named “the Togasso.” Like any melodramatic villain worthy of a nick-name, the Togasso’s intention is to seduce the virtuous young woman and to use her for his own nefarious ends. This conflict is introduced at the end of the first act in “lightning” fashion and, indeed, Carloue does abuse Nina in the second. With Togasso’s murder by Peppon, the dispute over Nina’s path is resolved at the end of the second act with the same alacrity. The drama of the third act is consumed with Nina’s reaction to her father’s confession that he has killed for the sake of her honor and her rejection of the bourgeois respectability so tragically gifted for a sub-proletarian life of her own choosing.¹³⁵ Like the *déroutement* of the events of the first and second act, this climax and denouement takes up only a few minutes of the third acts’ running time.

So where in this story is the tragic dialectic and why is it false? Althusser is subtle in his analysis and points out that the dialectic exists in multiple places: onstage, in the audience, and in the history of the melodramatic form. Onstage, it is represented in the figure of the father, Peppon, who has invented for Nina “the fiction of an imaginary condition, and encouraged her in her romantic illu-

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¹³³ Althusser, “Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract”, p. 151.

¹³⁴ Bertrand Poirot-Delpech, “‘El nost Milan’, de Bertolazzi par le Piccolo Teatro de Milan”, *Le Monde.fr* (June 15, 1962).

¹³⁵ Roger Pic, “[El Nost Milan, Texte de Carlo Bertolazzi : Photographies / Roger Pic]”, image, Gallica, 1962, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84200619>.

sions.”¹³⁶ Likewise entranced by this fiction, the play’s spectators identify with the imaginary possibility of escape into bourgeois respectability and the father’s desire to bestow it.¹³⁷ After all, don’t we all want the same thing for our children? The dialectic is then set in motion by the conflict between Peppon, who wants nothing more than the conventional “best” for his daughter: marriage, security, and respectability, by Carloue, who wants to use her, and a heroine, Nina, tossed between the two. Nina transcends this conflict, and thus provides an antithesis as well as a satisfying ending, but only in a tragic manner. This resolution is in keeping both with the conventions of the melodrama and the expectations of the audience. “Yes,” they say as they exit the theater, “life is just sometimes like that, especially if one is a member of the underclasses.” Later, in the essay “On Brecht and Marx,” Althusser will label this type of reaction a “fictive” risk. The audience takes pleasure in the possibility that their ideas about the world will be upset by the events of a play but, in the end, the drama only ever toys with this interruption.¹³⁸ In the end, the members of the audience recognize the world they believe that they occupy in the logic of the play.

Althusser, however, suggests that there is another reading to the play than the merely tragic and that, in Nina’s escape from her father, we see both tragedy and liberation from bourgeois convention. Stefano Pippa labels this choice an act of “disinterpellation.”¹³⁹ It is the conduct of a subject refusing to recognize herself in the dominant ideology as it is represented by her father’s and indeed the audience’s own wishes. What allows this choice, which is not quite free but nonetheless genuine, is precisely Nina’s eventual contact with “the real,” which, in turn, allows her to reject her father’s dialectical myths.

How is this contact with the real made? How do Nina and the audience which identifies with her both see it? Althusser attributes this perception to the genuine dialectic facilitated by Strehler’s spatial and temporal choices. In this regard, Althusser repeatedly calls attention to the choice of the director to present the melodramatic elements as swiftly as possible and to have these events appear

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¹³⁶ Althusser, “The ‘Piccolo Teatro’: Bertolazzi and Brecht (1962)”, p. 133.

¹³⁷ Per Brandt, “Fiction et Philosophie. Les Notes d’Althusser Sur Un Théâtre Matérialiste 1”, *Revue Romane* 1 (January 1, 1977), p. 37.

¹³⁸ Montag and Althusser, “On Brecht and Marx (1968)”, p. 147.

¹³⁹ Pippa, “A Heap of Splinters On the Floor”, pp. 131–32.

“in the wings, somewhere in the corner of the stage.”¹⁴⁰ What otherwise fills the time and space of each act are the trivial doings of minor underclass characters, the “flotsam” of the past. In the first act they are interminably “discussing industry, politics, and, almost, the future, but only just and with difficulty.” In the second, we see another group of them barely surviving. In the third, yet another configuration of the Milanese underclass almost disappears into the walls.¹⁴¹

One critic wondered if this imbalance between plot and depictions of the underclasses stemmed from the director's nostalgia for the realism of Eugène Sue or from a misplaced love for its Soviet variety.¹⁴² Althusser, though, tried to understand what this juxtaposition accomplished. His verdict was that the diminution of dialectical time and space: the time of the story, and the augmentation and foregrounding of the chronicle of the Milanese sub-proletariat in their “wretched existence” expresses the dissociation or “absence of relations” between the two temporalities displayed within the proscenium.¹⁴³ The ostensive subject, the tragic melodrama is acted against the background of the realistic “chronicle” and, due to this proximity, the viewer naturally assumes that they must be related.

If the spatial and temporal relations between the two were reversed and the events of the play given center stage, Nina's story could function as synecdoche. However, the sheer imbalance between the compressed unfurling “plot” of the play, acted in the wings, and the time and space devoted to a chronicle of “discussions and disputes which are either abortive or reduced to nothingness by a consciousness of their futility,”¹⁴⁴ suggest that Nina's relationship to both worlds is more complex. While her father exists in lightning-tragic time and wholly identifies with the values which support the stories permitted to exist within it, Nina's rejection of these values and affiliation with the wretched of Milan forces a different type of reckoning. Yes, as with all dialectic, there is a synthesis of the two times but this does not mean that they become identical; in the spectator's head as, eventually in Nina's, the two are held apart. On the one hand, there are the values and rules of the ideological world the melodrama represents and with which the spectator identifies. On the other, there is the real

¹⁴⁰ Althusser, “The ‘Piccolo Teatro’: Bertolazzi and Brecht (1962)”, p. 138.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 132–33.

¹⁴² Poirot-Delpech, “‘El nost Milan’, de Bertolazzi par le Piccolo Teatro de Milan”.

¹⁴³ Kowsar, “Althusser on Theatre”, p. 465.

¹⁴⁴ Althusser, “The ‘Piccolo Teatro’: Bertolazzi and Brecht (1962)”, pp. 135–7.

world of a sub-proletariat stuck in a post-Risorgimento existence. In these dislocated worlds, the agency Nina exhibits appears as a “free” choice made possible by the perception of the real conditions of her existence. The effect of the spatial and temporal dislocations is, therefore, to reveal the melodramatic consciousness of Nina’s father and of the spectator “as a veneer on a real condition.”¹⁴⁵

In the essay on the *Piccolo Teatro*, the terms “humanism” and anti-humanism are not mentioned. Despite avoiding the terms, it is clear that the false dialectic of the melodrama, the story which matches up with the spectator’s worldview, has all of the characteristics of a humanist ideology, albeit in bourgeois rather than Marxist guise. Represented by the father and occupying tragic time, this mystified consciousness recognizes that we live in a world of difficult circumstances and that we may be forced to make choices. Not unsophisticated, the tragic consciousness “knows” that it may even be the case that one’s status as a woman or as a member of the underclass makes these circumstances all the more difficult. However, by its own agency and actions, it also holds that it is possible to overcome these circumstances and to arrive at a less alienated state or, at the very least, to be true to oneself. Nina’s choice to reject these norms is not, however, presented as self-realization. Rather, it is presented by Althusser as a moment when Nina glimpses the true reality of the Milanese underclass and rejects the dream of bourgeois respectability. After this choice, Nina is in some ways more free than she was before. This is not because she has realized her essence; it is because she has stopped living in the world of ideology. With her choice to forsake her father’s gift, she thereby places herself back into the system of real relations which constrain her and which were previously invisible. By showing the “absence of relations” between the bourgeois humanist ideology and the objective situation that stands as its contrast, Nina, Strehler, and the *Piccolo Teatro*, Althusser claim, exhibit to the viewer their true relation ... united by a lived relationship.¹⁴⁶

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Compared to *El nost Milan* in 1962, the relation of Althusser’s criticism to theoretical anti-humanism is much clearer in the case of Leonardo Cremonini. As with the *Piccolo Teatro*, Althusser is motivated to defend an Italian friend’s art

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 138–39.

¹⁴⁶ Althusser, “Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract”, p. 135.

against French critics who see it as a poor example of a tired form.¹⁴⁷ However, if not by 1964, then certainly by the time the final French-language version of the piece was published in 1966, the conflict with humanism had become acute and Althusser's response to it well-rehearsed.¹⁴⁸ As in "Piccolo Teatro," we see Althusser moving fluidly (and confusingly) between the artist's intention, the formal qualities of the work(s), and the effect of the work on the audience. In this critique, however, the relevant temporality is not parallel and plural but linear and singular. In the progression of Cremonini's tableaux and development as an artist, Althusser claims, we see him move from an ideological, humanist project, concerned with connecting humans to nature, to a genuinely anti-humanist practice of painting where both the artist and the "human" are effaced.¹⁴⁹

One of the things that Althusser clearly admires about Cremonini's paintings is that they are materialist. By this, he means that they are neither landscapes, nor portraits, nor narrative but, rather, that they consist of assemblages of material things: stones, water, rocks, beach balls, human bodies, mirrors, all placed in relation within the canvas. Though Cremonini's early tableaux exhibit a kind of spontaneous materialism, Althusser contends that they are also recognizably humanist. This is a strange thing to say as these daubs began with the geological—rocks and sea, moved to the vegetable—stems and sky, and progressed to animals—bones and skins. Humans were not the focus. Eventually, though, humans were added into these assemblages and connected by line to the scapular angles and slim stems. According to Althusser, what makes these works in their succession humanist is that they speak to an evolutionary origin: the human has evolved from nature and has a special place within it.¹⁵⁰

In the painter's next stage, Althusser views Cremonini's paintings as suggesting that the human figure stands in relation to the natural, just not as its end. A logic of natural progression of things to man gives way to a logic of differences among things and man.¹⁵¹ This difference is not just expressed in the human figures' relation to the natural, which shifts from nest to cage, but in their relation to one another and to themselves. These intra-human relations are depicted as a

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

¹⁴⁸ Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory*, pp. 57–58.

¹⁴⁹ Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract", p. 153, p. 165.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 159–60.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

kind of incomplete circuit. In shabby rooms, Cremonini's figures look at mirrors but see no self-image reflected. When they sleep, the mirrors look at them. As Sarah Wilson points out, this is all a visual representation of the "mirror stage". However, the stage is not complete and, as any reader of Lacan knows, if one cannot recognize oneself, then one cannot misrecognize oneself as a coherent and whole subject.¹⁵² Therefore, the human-formed "non- subjects" depicted by Cremonini can only be what they are: objects in abstract relation to the other objects which circumscribe their space and their possibilities for action. Mirrors – men – water – rocks – wardrobes "'depict' the fact that the objects and their forms, though related among themselves, are only so related because they turn in the same circle, because they are subject to the same law, a law which now 'visibly' dominates the relations between the objects and their men."¹⁵³

After casting humans from any story of natural origin and then visually depicting them as neither being identical to their own notions of themselves nor responsible for their own relations, Althusser argues that Cremonini and his paintings progress to one final visual critique of humanist ideology. Spying paintings from this phase, anonymous French critics at the Biennale labeled them hackneyed expressionism. However, Althusser views them as confirmation of his (and Cremonini's) materialist antihumanism.¹⁵⁴ Guessing what the critics were thinking, Althusser acknowledges that the "monstrous" "deformed" faces Cremonini paints in this phase could be read as indictments of modernity, of the pressures that deform the genuine human subject and which trouble its soul. In order for the spectator to identify with such expressionist portraiture, they need to see themselves in it. In this sense, Edvard Munch and Francis Bacon's paintings of "deformed" subjects reflect back to us our anxious interior states. Inasmuch as we recognize ourselves in their figures, we reaffirm the universal human experience as the true subject of the painting.

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In contrast to what expressionist figures signify, Althusser argues that Cremonini's monstrous representations of the human face accomplish something altogether different. Unlike the well-known visages of *The Scream* (1893) or *Untitled*

¹⁵² Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, Norton, New York 2006, pp. 78–79; Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory*, p. 58.

¹⁵³ Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract", p. 160.

¹⁵⁴ Gen Doy, "Materializing Art History", *Art History* (1998), p. 178.

(*Pope*) (1954), Cremonini's faces are characterized not by deformity but by de-formation.¹⁵⁵ In them, the "humanist-religious ideology of the function of the human face" is short-circuited. The viewer no more recognizes herself in these faces than does Nina's father – still living through and in bourgeois humanist ideology – recognize himself in the historyless "flotsam" that surrounds him.

Part of what makes portraiture appealing, even of the expressionist "ugly" kind, is that we recognize ourselves in it. Even dressed in purple, ermine, and crowns, painted subjects appear "like us." What Althusser says about Cremonini's final stage of painting is that he makes this identification impossible. Yes, we see figures that are recognizably human but these figures are not a representation of ourselves as we are used to thinking about ourselves: that is, as whole individuals endowed with agency and capable of free choices. Because of the way Cremonini paints them, we can only perceive these figures as human-shaped material objects de-formed by and fixed in relations to other material objects. The result of this dislocation of the human subject and the fixing of humans according to the relations which govern them evidences, Althusser argues, "a profoundly anti-humanist and materialist understanding."¹⁵⁶

II. Critique of Stalinism and official Soviet ideology: Solzhenitsyn, Fanti

If one of Althusser's ongoing preoccupations was the critique for humanism, another was to delineate a rigorous Marxist philosophy (first the quest of a philosophy *of* Marxism, later turned into the quest for a philosophy *for* Marxism) purified from the distortions, deformations, and reductions that arose from its Stalinist inflection, and its further ossification at the hands of the official Soviet state apparatus even after the ostensible announcement of de-Stalinization. Thus, Althusser was particularly interested in challenges, theoretical, literary or artistic, to Stalinism, especially those that had the potential of bypassing humanism, which he considered as a liberalizing influence on communist politics. Already in his letter to Daspre, Althusser cites Solzhenitsyn as an author who makes visible the "lived experience" of Stalinism, or what he refers to as "the 'cult of personality' and its effects."¹⁵⁷ The choice of Solzhenitsyn is guided by Daspre's original letter, so Althusser does not delve into an analysis of

¹⁵⁵ Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract", p. 163.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 163–64.

¹⁵⁷ Althusser, "A Letter on Art", p. 224.

Solzhenitsyn's novel. Instead, while he asserts that Solzhenitsyn's work offers a view of Stalinism from within, by effecting an internal distance from it, he really mobilizes the example to underscore the distinction between "reality" and "lived experience" of that reality. Arguing against an empiricist approach to art, and the reflection theory, Althusser writes: "This 'lived' experience is not a given, given by a pure 'reality', but the spontaneous 'lived experience' of ideology in its peculiar relationship to the real."¹⁵⁸ This move allows Althusser to put forth the argument that whereas art and science may share this "lived experience" as their object, the kind of knowledge produced by each on the basis of the same object remains distinct from one another. While Solzhenitsyn's novel captures the effects of Stalinism as they have been lived by subjects experiencing it, it does not offer an understanding that science would: namely, "the conceptual knowledge of the complex mechanisms which eventually produce the 'lived experience' that Solzhenitsyn's novel discusses."¹⁵⁹ Nor can it offer ways to overcome the effects of "cult of personality" – which is the domain of politics.

Nonetheless, the assertion of Solzhenitsyn's novel in making visible the effects of Stalinism is just that, an assertion that is unsubstantiated in the absence of analysis. However, a similar point is made by Althusser, this time in greater depth, in relation to the work of Lucio Fanti about a decade later. In 1977, Althusser pens a catalog entry for Fanti's exhibition in Paris at the Krief-Raymond Gallery. In this short text, Althusser characterizes Fanti's painting as "painting an ideology," the official ideology of the Soviet Union, but he also emphasizes that this painting is not simply the reproduction of that ideology. Instead, he finds in Fanti's arresting work the production of a "miniscule interior distance, which destabilizes [that ideology], identifies it and denounces it."¹⁶⁰ Fanti paints Soviet sculptures, paintings, and museum objects – personas and artifacts of official ideology – but in painting them he practices an "implacable décalage." The ideology in the photographic images that Fanti paints is not immediately available as ideology; instead, it has permeated not only the objects of the photographs – the statues and and paintings – but also the "symbolism of the figures, the framing, the type of landscape" in which these objects are

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¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

¹⁶⁰ Althusser, "Sur Lucio Fanti", *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, p. 593.

found.¹⁶¹ “The photographers pictures [clichés] framing/composing the ideological clichés at one-thousandth of a second,” writes Althusser. By painting the photographs of official ideology, is Fanti reproducing their clichés? Is he simply playing with them, while repeating them? Althusser answers these questions in the negative. Instead, Fanti enacts a *décalage*, exposing these images for what they mean. Through this *décalage*, he turns the usual into the unfamiliar, highlights the absence in the midst of presence, and unveils the ossification of an ideology which has permeated all facets of everyday life with its iconography. Offering a commentary that moves through Fanti’s various pieces, including the ones subtitled with Maiakovsky’s suicide note, Althusser notes how Lenin and Maiakovsky maintain ghostlike existences that haunt their own statues, insisting on a truth that cannot be wished away: “Words of a dead man, very dead, [yet] still alive in what he denounced.”¹⁶² Fanti makes us see the truth of Soviet ideology, beneath the constructed identity of the “new human,” the depoliticization and emptying out of a vision – “these gigantic electrifying pylons of a Communism lacking only Soviets!”¹⁶³ If the specters of marching workers above the young pioneers in his painting “Grandchildren of the Revolution [*I nipoti della rivoluzione*]” (1969) were not sufficient to capture the hope of a different future, there stood in his “Electrification plus the Sentiment of Nature [*L’électrification plus le sentiment de la nature*]” (1977) the ghostly presence of a huge pylon over a landscape, with an inexplicable light shining through the darkness surrounding the tall pine trees, encapsulating its lost promise.¹⁶⁴

Althusser’s reading of Fanti’s artwork could not have given a stronger endorsement of how materialist art – even in its most ironic, poetic, and dreamy forms – has the capacity to convey a “reality,” which one may dare call the “truth,” of an ideology. Althusser’s piece, commending Fanti for “reveal[ing] the naked truth,” ended with the dramatic declaration: “only naked kings reign.”¹⁶⁵ Reflecting Althusser’s disillusionment with the official ideology of the Soviet Union, his comments on Fanti appear as a necessary detour, a tragic coming to terms. In Sarah Wilson’s words, “Althusser’s self-investment in the Fanti preface may

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 592.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 593.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 591, p. 593.

¹⁶⁴ For Lucio Fanti’s paintings, see <http://www.documentsdartistes.org/artistes/fanti/repro1.html>

¹⁶⁵ Althusser, “Sur Lucio Fanti”, p. 594.

be read as an oblique *detournement* of the Communist genre of confessional ‘self-criticism’ (originating in the first Moscow show trials). At an acute moment of political crisis and personal dismay, apprehending the possible disintegration of the global Communist system, Althusser was, indeed, using the USSR as a ‘necessary detour’ to speak of himself.”¹⁶⁶ Of his disillusionment.¹⁶⁷

III. Critique of imperialism and peaceful co-existence: Álvarez Ríos, Lam

Finally, Althusser’s commentary on two other painters – Álvarez Ríos and Lam – are interesting in how it mobilizes their work as exemplars of a distancing, this time through vocabularies of surrealism, from imperialism. Althusser’s essay on Álvarez Ríos, his first writing on art, is composed prior to the development of his distinctive formulations as well as the influence of Macherey’s interventions. That being said, a retrospective analysis of his text in light of his later formulations, reveals similar insights, though lacking in the conceptual vocabulary that came later. Althusser attributes to certain painters an ability to transform a largely institutionalized (and thereby tamed) genre and pinpoints how Álvarez Ríos enacts this transformation. More importantly, the genre, in this case surrealism, has come to represent a geopolitical divide informed by the world’s political conjuncture. Writing on the heels of the Cuban missile crisis, the ideological atmosphere is saturated by American imperialism and its defiance. This crisis should be understood against the recent and violent background of France’s war in Algeria, which had already raised significant questions about imperialism. In line with the PCF, to which Althusser had become a member in the late 1940s, Althusser interpreted American imperialism as the main threat in the Cold War, a perspective largely shaped by the hegemony of the USSR within the international communist movement. As a result, the PCF’s ambivalent and delayed response to the Algerian War manifested in its adoption of a general call for peace. As Bécquer Seguí has also argued, the Algerian

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¹⁶⁶ Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory*, pp. 120–21.

¹⁶⁷ This disillusionment and his growing criticism of the PCF are reflected in Althusser’s more well-known writings from the same period. See, for example, Louis Althusser, “On the Twenty-Second Congress of the French Communist Party”, *NLR* 1/104, (July–August 1977”), pp. 3–22; Louis Althusser, “The Crisis of Marxism”, *Marxism Today* (July 1978), p. 215; Louis Althusser, “Marxism Today”, in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists & Other Essays*, Gregory Elliott (ed.), Verso, London and New York 1990, pp. 267–80; Althusser, “Marx in His Limits”; Louis Althusser, “Some Questions Concerning the Crisis of Marxist Theory and of the International Communist Movement”, *Historical Materialism* 23 (1/2015), pp. 152–78.

war had led French surrealism into a crisis, compounded with the leftwing ambivalence about decolonization.¹⁶⁸ In this conjuncture of the height of the Cold War, Álvarez Ríos's cultural biography as a young Cuban painter coming to Paris prompted Althusser's sympathies, according to Sarah Wilson, as well as a catalogue preface by "the Surrealist doyen Jose Pierre, who evoked magic, eroticism, spirituality," against which Althusser's politically charged take becomes even more pronounced.¹⁶⁹

In his essay, Althusser posits surrealism as a current that has largely become institutionalized and therefore lost its critical edge, even as he acknowledges how it lives on in the works of such painters as Ernst, Matta, and Lam. Against this background, he casts Álvarez Ríos as one of the "youths" in whose painting surrealism is "being born again."¹⁷⁰ The renaissance of surrealism against its death, ossified "like a church with its masses and its Latin, its syntax and its vocabulary, its lamentation of an old literary organ at the end of the nave, its passwords," renews our faith – its prayers, which had become familiar mumbles, come alive again and teem with meaning. This is because in the hands of Álvarez Ríos, as with other non-European painters (Cuban and Latin American) such as Lam, Cardenas, Matta, surrealism is transformed. These painters could transform the language of surrealism because of "the effect produced by the profound affinities with the living past of a world, with the matter of a working class life that is close by: that language does not have there the same meaning it had here."¹⁷¹

If one determinant of the ability of these painters to transform surrealism is their proximity to a working class reality, one that is also much more alive for them than it is for the "church" of surrealists, another is that history "there" is a "living past," an "open unconscious," in direct contrast to the way is occluded and buried "here." Althusser's class-based antagonism sits over a geographic breach between a "there" – Cuba and Latin America – and a "here" – France, Europe – reflecting the difference between the new world, with its rising prominence, and the old world, ossified and dying. His comments reflect an acknowledgement

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¹⁶⁸ Seguín, "Mute Cries", p. 100.

¹⁶⁹ Sarah Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory*, pp. 53–54.

¹⁷⁰ Althusser, "A Young Cuban Painter Before Surrealism: Álvarez Ríos (1962)", p. 110.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

that imperialism and anti-imperialism constitute the main ideological contradiction of the global political conjuncture, pitting the Western, imperialist camp against the socialist world. On one side of the breach within surrealism rests a proximate revolutionary history, a discourse of freedom based on the history of slavery and the revolutionary struggle to overcome it and transform society; on the other side only a conjuring of the specter of a fading and domesticated history – “the incantation of a lost, perverse history whose meaning one wanted to tame at all costs.”¹⁷² The new and the old, the south and the north, surrealism alive and reinvigorated and surrealism ritualized and emptied out: “Hence, the singular difference, so astonishing, between *two forms of speaking the same language*: here, the tense speech of a freedom less delivered than called upon to be born; there, an almost naive voice that speaks of men and beings.”¹⁷³

Further, addressing Álvarez Ríos more specifically, Althusser likens the transformation he enacts in surrealism to his speaking French – a language “born before him” and a language that he was not born into. Álvarez Ríos’s voice does not simply reproduce the language he is speaking but transforms it “in his speech, his accent, his syntactic and semantic invention, in the transformation of these turns and figures.”¹⁷⁴ This is how the language of surrealism avoids death – by being taken up by a speaker who can speak it in his own, foreign, way, bringing it to bear on the present. The result: “Everything is thus *displaced*.”¹⁷⁵ In one of the few paintings he comments upon, Althusser writes of *David’s Sling*: “a crowd of brothers that merges with the shoreline of an island all the way to the sea, with their outstretched arms as their only weapons against the monster of a thousand cannon blocking the sky.”¹⁷⁶ The references to “peace” and “freedom” echo the discourse of the PCF at the time, while also reflecting a “routine exoticism of the Third World,”¹⁷⁷ characterized by references to a certain “naivete,” a “natural language,” a “great harmony” between human beings and nature, a “happiness” that juxtapose it to the learned “abyss hidden in the night” that is Europe.

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¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁷⁷ Seguín, “Mute Cries”, p. 101.

Similar themes resurface when Althusser writes for Wilfredo Lam's exhibition to be held in Nanterre in 1977 upon the painter's request. Lam, Althusser writes, strikes a cord in him even at the first encounter: "Unbeknownst, it was already part of me."¹⁷⁸ And with each foray into Lam's work, Althusser confesses that he discovers that Lam "had always preceded me."¹⁷⁹ Not only does Althusser register Lam's pioneering role in surrealist painting, but he also shows his respect for his legacy, joining Lam in the quality that he attributes his work: humility. A humility marked by nativity to a foreign land and its riches, perhaps even a "primitivism."¹⁸⁰ Lam has already articulated in his painting the sense of a different world Althusser is only coming to discover and perceive by the encounter with his work. Lam's world is teeming with creatures, plants, animals, and humans; in it nature is alive, bodies naked, faces mute. The immediate presence of nature, raw, loved, vivacious, is implicitly counterposed to their absence for Althusser and his world. Lam reminds Althusser of something he knew but forgot, something always-already and not-yet, a nature that already preceded him but also encountered for the first time, something entirely foreign yet, like a "miracle," audible and recognizable, something to which he has already corporeally surrendered. How otherwise can we understand the novelty and difference of the world to which Lam belongs and which he conveys: "this man, who comes to us from the end of the world, the other one, from the edge of an endless ocean, this painter who traces in such long or dense lines birds beasts flowers creepers jungles and humans never before seen, this foreign man who speaks in silence our unknown language, and we hear him."¹⁸¹ It is because Lam speaks the language of the unconscious. But unlike Freud's "uncanny," that strange familiarity, Lam gives a "familiar strangeness." This is because Lam's art makes "his" world ours, without assimilating it into our own. He retains the strangeness, the otherness for us to encounter. That nature, foreign and alive, unassimilable, and uncolonizable, in Lam, we soon find out, is part of us, even if that part is buried deep in our unconscious. For Althusser, Lam's distinctive quality as a painter resides in his ability to transcend the distance and difference between his world and that of the viewer.

¹⁷⁸ Althusser, "Lam (1977)", p. 113

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹⁸⁰ Seguíñ, "Mute Cries", p. 108.

¹⁸¹ Althusser, "Lam (1977)", p. 114.

Written in a much more personal register than his earlier texts on art, Althusser's take on Lam is that his work nonetheless shares the basic quality of art – that of enacting a critical distance from ideology. What is this ideology? The answer to this question reveals how Althusser has moved in his political diagnosis in the supervening years. Now at stake is the ideology of a global peace, of “peaceful co-existence” and cooperation between the two camps.¹⁸² We can see this ideology thanks to Lam, “because he lays it bare.”¹⁸³ Althusser commends Lam's ability to disclose the deep tensions that permeate this global peace, as a result of accumulated histories of violence and relations of inequity. Having characterized Lam as hailing from a different world, from the limits of that world, he conveys how Lam thus paints “the mute cry of a people crushed by centuries of history,” a world whose suffering and dignity he thus opens to us. Here we encounter the divide Althusser had formerly characterized surrealism as being marked with – the south and the north, the anti-imperialist shores of the Atlantic and the old Europe. Lam paints at the limits of his own world; he thus also paints the limits of Althusser's world and the ideology that sustains their imagined unity. Lam unveils the violence that has attempted to oppress and humiliate his people, what has led to their suffering and then muted their cries. Althusser takes note of Lam's defiance of that humiliation and violence as well as the ideology of peace that covers it. Lam is timeless – a true “master” – who stretches from the past into the depths of the present and yet he signifies a new world being born in defiance of the old. Althusser ends his note: “I discover him: I have known Lam forever. He was born before us, the oldest painter in the world: the youngest.”¹⁸⁴

Conclusion

So, too, we can write: We discover Althusser: we have known Althusser forever. At once familiar and strange, Althusser's scattered reflections on literature, painting, and theater allow us to piece together these fragments – at once intuitive and sophisticated, overdetermined and undertheorized, brilliant and banal, novel and predictable, reflective of the sharpness characteristic of Althusser's pen while also dynamic, impure, and contradictory. Even after this charitable

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¹⁸² A slightly more detailed version of the political diagnosis can also be found in Louis Althusser, “Book on Imperialism”, in *History and Imperialism*, pp. 100–101.

¹⁸³ Althusser, “Lam (1977)”, p. 114.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

reconstruction, there remain multiple issues with Althusser's aesthetics which threaten its coherence with the rest of his philosophy and that limit its novelty. For us, an important limitation is Althusser's reliance on notions of "great" or "authentic" art and on the related supposition that such art is created by great artists. Reading Althusser symptomatically, we can see this insistence as an ideological holdover from a bourgeois theory of art, one that Althusser explicitly sets his aesthetic and political philosophy against. Not only that, we can see that these holdover notions compromise the ability of his aesthetic theory to recognize and make sense of the diversity of artistic phenomena and their effects. As such experiences are necessary to overcome existing ideologies and to put an issue on the political agenda,¹⁸⁵ limiting the site of their production to great artists, working in traditional media, with the support of traditional institutions, blinds the critic to artistic experiences which may be initiated neither by a single subject, nor occur in a traditional medium. In fact, these works may not even look like "art" endowed with the rituals of cultural recognition at all. It is our belief that such "everyday" and extra-institutional displacements, dislocations that enlarge and democratize the field of aesthetic production may also have that subversive and transformative effect on subjects viewing and participating in them as the plays of the Piccolo Teatro, the novels of Balzac, and the paintings of Álvarez Ríos, Cremonini, Fanti and Lam had on Althusser. Inasmuch as these "everyday" and extra-institutional displacements achieve such effects, they may, thereby, help initiate radical political change.

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¹⁸⁵ Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", p. 153.

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Dave Mesing*

The Intervening Prince: Althusser, Foucault, and a Theory of Strategy

Intervening in the Second Reception

Today it has become *de rigueur*, especially albeit not exclusively among those of us writing within what Stefano Pippa has proposed to synthesize as Althusser's second reception, to adopt a posture of intervention, demarcating in this way a contribution towards that other Althusserian *mot de passe* of the conjuncture.¹ Given the proliferation of this strategic couplet throughout Althusser's published and unpublished writings, such a gesture is unsurprising. Moreover, further interventions into conjunctures have also been elaborated and innovated upon by some of Althusser's closest readers and interlocutors. For example, in *Can Politics Be Thought?*, Alain Badiou aligns intervention with a polemical conception of politics as the rupture of the political understood as the fictive

¹ To cite only some very recent examples in English (despite the fact extensive, innovative, and challenging Althusser scholarship has flourished in other languages and contexts), see the following introductions to special issues on Althusser: Banu Bargu and Robyn Marasco, "The Political Encounter with Louis Althusser: Introduction", *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 31 (3/2019), pp. 239–241; Stefano Pippa and Vittorio Morfino, "Reading Althusser, Again", *Revista Filosofía de la Universidad de Costa Rica* 58 (152/2019), pp. 11–14. My focus and reference-point in this essay remains the Althusserian context, but I would emphasize that a strategic, interventionist approach is by no means some exclusive property among Althusser scholars. Barnard E. Harcourt, for example, has recently underscored the efforts of Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht to establish a journal they titled *Krisis und Kritik* as well as *Kritische Blätter*, noting that "Interventionist thinking" was the order of the day [and] "inconsequential thought" was to be avoided." Bernard E. Harcourt, "Counter-Critical Theory: An Intervention in Contemporary Critical Thought and Practice", *Critical Times: Interventions in Global Critical Theory* 1 (1/2018), p. 7. Harcourt both excavates this interventionist inheritance in Benjamin and Brecht's plans as well as mobilizes it in the present towards what he calls "counter-critical theory." Benjamin and Brecht's journal title was reanimated for the 2014 launch of *Crisis & Critique* by the Dialectical Materialism Collective, which has published several essays involving Althusser.

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bond between State and civil society.² Writing from a distinct but not entirely antagonistic perspective, Étienne Balibar also has recourse to a multifaceted sense of intervention which is perhaps more imbued with the Marxian critique of political economy,³ in turn adopting intervention as an object of analysis,⁴ but also and more basically in the way I invoke here, as a self-description of the theoretical enterprise.⁵

As a multifaceted rhetorical and conceptual device, intervention and its dyadic companion conjuncture often indicate a strategic orientation which foregrounds specific context, historical inscription, a shifting balance of forces, and a kind of tentative yet aggressive experimentation captured in the Napoleonic slogan *on s'engage et puis on voit* – first we engage the enemy and then we see what sticks or does not stick.⁶ Such a strategic orientation is perhaps succinctly captured,

² Alain Badiou, *Can Politics Be Thought?*, trans. Bruno Bosteels, Duke University Press, Durham, NC 2018, p. 36.

³ Étienne Balibar, “Critique in the 21st Century: Political economy still, and religion again”, *Radical Philosophy* 200 (2016), pp. 11–21. For an important analysis of Badiou in this regard, see Gavin Walker, “On Marxism’s Field of Operation: Badiou and the Critique of Political Economy”, *Historical Materialism* 20 (2/2012), pp. 39–74.

⁴ Étienne Balibar, “Politics and Truth: The Vacillation of Ideology, II”, in *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, trans. James Swenson, Routledge, London 1994, p. 168. This sense is particularly suggestive of a critical point that should not be too quickly dispensed with, but which I can only gesture to here for reasons of space, namely that intervention has been one of the central legal, economic, political, and military practices of the state in recent decades. Balibar claims that economics is the main area of state intervention into social practice. A study of the histories and practices of intervention is sorely needed for those who adopt the theoretical posture of intervention. For a perspective generated by a critical reading of Foucault on some of the questions which arise when taking intervention as object of analysis rather than theoretical modality, see Jessica Whyte, “Human rights: confronting governments?: Michel Foucault and the right to intervene”, in M. Stone, I. Wall, and C. Douzinas (eds.), *New Critical Legal Thinking: Law and the Political*, Routledge, London 2012, pp. 11–31.

⁵ One among other examples of this, characteristically for Balibar as well as Althusser, concerns Spinoza, whom Balibar presents as composing the *Theologico-Political Treatise* “as a direct intervention in the political conjuncture of the crisis of the [Dutch] Republic.” Étienne Balibar, “Spinoza: The Anti-Orwell”, in *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, trans. James Swenson, Routledge, London 1994, p. 9.

⁶ I follow Warren Montag in noting this phrase, which he uses in order to synthesize “strategy for Althusser” in terms of his philosophical interventions which were coupled with extensive reflections on the surrounding theoretical (philosophical as well as scientific) conjuncture. See Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy’s Perpetual*

without recourse to the intervention-conjuncture dyad, in Michel Foucault's formulation of a "conceptualization [which] implies critical thought—a constant checking."⁷ And yet to invoke Foucault here as one possible crystallizer of such strategic theoretical practice suggests a further question, which hopefully does not open onto an infinite regress: what does it mean to intervene among friends (or enemies) concerning the status of intervening into the conjuncture?

In what follows, I present a theory of political strategy not merely as the self-contained formula "intervention into a conjuncture," but rather with further reference to the surrounding conceptual contexts of intervention, conjuncture, and other terms as a part of Althusser's philosophical lexicon. By means of a critical confrontation between some of Althusser's later writings and certain strategic formulations in Foucault, I sketch an account of strategy as the anticipation of an encounter which modifies, abolishes, or otherwise alters the relations constituting its conjuncture. To borrow Warren Montag's ambivalent deployment, Foucault is certainly best approached in this way as among Althusser's philosophical contemporaries, rather than simply a friend or enemy. Yet in some of Foucault's writing, we find a productive set of assumptions which enable the further elaboration of the intervention-conjuncture dyad in order to offer an account of strategy absent in both Foucault and, at least explicitly, Althusser. In other words, by proposing a definition of strategy as a reflection on the intervention-conjuncture dyad, I will traverse through Foucault's writings as those of an eminently strategic thinker in order to sharpen them by turning to Althusser as offering a philosophy for strategy, in addition to his own conception and lifelong project of offering a philosophy for Marxism.⁸

In order to propose a definition of strategy as part of the Althusserian lexicon, it is useful to tarry further with Pippa's remarks concerning Althusser's ongoing second reception, which allow me to isolate a protocol for staging a narrow

War, Duke University Press, Durham, NC 2013, p. 4. Invoking the question of engagement as another strategic modality opens up a line of inquiry into Althusser and Sartre, among others.

⁷ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in J. Faubion (ed.), *The Essential Works of Foucault Vol. 3: Power*, The New Press, New York 2000, p. 327.

⁸ For a succinct description as well as enactment of Althusser's distinction between philosophy for and philosophy of Marxism, see Jason Read, *The Politics of Transindividuality*, Haymarket Books, Chicago 2018, pp. 1–16, especially pp. 6–7.

Althusser-Foucault encounter vis-à-vis the alternative between strategy and strategic thought.⁹ With his proposal of Althusser's second reception, Pippa calls attention to a tidal wave of posthumously published material, which has in part animated renewed interest in Althusser's writings, a flourishing set of debates only possible to capture in brief snapshots here.¹⁰ As he points out, since Althusser's death in 1990, "over 5,000 pages of notes, quasi-finished texts almost ready for publication, an autobiography, [and] letters" have all been published, "opening up an entirely new perspective in Althusser's scholarship."¹¹

Pippa's key anchorage point lies with the empirical fact that this enormous amount of material calls for a reconsideration of Althusser's philosophical production. However, in terms of the helpful periodization of a second reception, Pippa's insight does not only stabilize this empirical shift for those working in light of Althusser's concepts and problematics. To this first observation concerning the productive eruption of posthumously published writings, we can add two further starting points for a second reception of Althusser which are helpful in approaching an alternative between strategy and strategic thought by reading Althusser together with Foucault.

⁹ I stress the narrowness of this encounter, hoping it proves productive for those thinking in light of problems shared by Foucault and Althusser. For reasons of space I have been unable to enter into the complex discussions and utilizations of Foucault's methodologies, instead trying to situate a narrow set of assumptions observable in his arguments against the context of Althusser's philosophy for strategy. For one debate on methodological questions, see Colin Koopman, "Historical Critique or Transcendental Critique in Foucault: Two Kantian Lineages", *Foucault Studies* 8 (February 2010), pp. 100–121; Kevin Thompson, "Response to Colin Koopman's 'Historical Critique or Transcendental Critique in Foucault: Two Kantian Lineages'", *Foucault Studies* 8 (February 2010), pp. 122–128; and Colin McQuillan, "Transcendental Philosophy and Critical Philosophy in Kant and Foucault: Response to Colin Koopman", *Foucault Studies* 9 (September 2010), pp. 145–155. For a Foucauldian perspective closer to the Althusserian one I delineate here, see Johanna Oksala, "Foucault's Politicization of Ontology", *Continental Philosophy Review* 43 (November 2010), pp. 445–466. For a helpful and more expansive contrast between Foucault and Althusser throughout the 1960s and 1970s, see Andrew Ryder, "Foucault and Althusser," *Foucault Studies* 16 (September 2013), pp. 134–153.

¹⁰ Below I discuss an "early" reassessment-type text by Vittorio Morfino. Another "early" text in this regard which might be useful to revisit for those working in the second reception is Maria Turchetto, "I 'due Marx' e l'althusserismo," in R. Bellofiore (ed.), *Da Marx a Marx? Un bilancio dei marxismi italiani del Novecento*, Manifestolibri, Rome 2007, pp. 101–107.

¹¹ Stefano Pippa, *Althusser and Contingency*, Mimesis International, Milan 2019, p. 17.

First, Pippa convincingly demonstrates the way that the second reception of Althusser's writings has helped introduce distance from a prevailing position among earlier scholars that Althusser abandoned a faith in Marxist science in order to embrace a philosophy of contingency as the theoretical manifestation of political despair. Pippa's work is to date the most extensive treatment of the category of contingency throughout Althusser's writings, and in providing such a thorough analysis, his advancement of the second reception does not exemplify that this shift constitutes only the *refusal* of such rigid demarcation of distinct Althusserian stages, but rather that this reception has helped to overcome such a position. Indeed, we can find proof of this overcoming by attending to some contributions within the second reception by scholars who have labored within Anglophone Althusser scholarship prior to Pippa's proposed indexing of the second reception to the mid-to-late 1990s, such as Warren Montag's helpful discussion of the "early" appearance of the concept of encounter.¹² Or, to borrow from Panagiotis Sotiris' formulation, by stepping back from an internal assessment of Althusser's variegated theoretical production, the critical, polemical, and appreciative attention Althusser has received from *consecutive waves* of Marxist scholars should give permanent pause to any neat typography of Althusser's structuralist phase, irrationalist phase, and so on as we continue to debate Althusser's contributions and relevance in the present.¹³

¹² Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, p. 188. Indeed, in suggesting we have arrived at a second reception, Pippa rightly notes Montag's similar assessment in an article published in 1998, which I will return to later. For one elaboration of this position concerning a break in Althusser, see Antonio Negri, "Notes on the Evolution of the Thought of Louis Althusser", trans. Olga Vasile, in A. Callari and D. Ruccio (eds.), *Postmodern Marxism and the Future of Marxist Theory: Essays in the Althusserian Tradition*, Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, NH 1995, pp. 51–68.

¹³ Panagiotis Sotiris, *A Philosophy for Communism: Rethinking Althusser*, Brill, Leiden 2020, p. 529. Sotiris provides an extensive discussion of Althusser's entire career in a text which will undoubtedly be debated at much length in the years to come. In part three of the book especially, he undertakes a reading of Althusser's intellectual production as a continuous intervention in the context of the communist movement and what would eventually come to be called the crisis of Marxism. Moreover, he situates Althusser's entire work with regard to various strategies within this context. I offer an approach to strategy in this essay which is distinct from these nuanced and important problems synthesized well by Sotiris, which I hope is useful for revisiting these lessons throughout Althusser's work in further detail than I am able to accomplish here.

In addition to the quantitative avalanche of posthumously published writings and the refusal of a break or discrete periods in favor of the continued elaboration of problems, a third and perhaps most relevant aspect Pippa outlines as part of the second reception concerns Althusser's status, from the beginning to end of his work, as a philosopher. To focus too narrowly on the delimitation of the philosophical enterprise, a vexed question,¹⁴ would take us too far afield, but the simple fact that Althusser's theoretical labor is animated by an engagement with classical philosophers as well as his contemporaries who undertook similar engagements in their own fashion, is important to recall. Notably, as Montag underscores in a manner which reinforces Pippa's proposal of a second reception, in terms of the Anglophone scholarship concerning French philosophers during Althusser's time, too often there has been a silo effect of thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze, despite the similarities in questions among them. More importantly, I would suggest, is that each silo was indexed to a tradition: "Foucault to French epistemology, Derrida to phenomenology and Heidegger, Deleuze to Bergsonianism, and, of course, Althusser to Marxism," such that we witness the unfortunate and unproductive appearance of monstrous groups such as Foucauldians, Derrideans, Deleuzeans, and Althusserians.¹⁵

Pippa's deployment of a second reception of Althusser is likely best understood as a heuristic starting point rather than a rigid break within intellectual history, but I take these three elements within his work and the work of other contemporary scholars as decisive touchstones for my intervention concerning intervention in what follows. Situating ourselves within this second reception allows for the possibility of new insights and problems. It is in this sense that I would

¹⁴ In light of the context I will turn to in my discussion of Althusser's "Lenin and Philosophy" address in part three, one especially technical elaboration of this question is the work of François Laruelle. An important and understudied development of this theme in Althusser's work is Paulin Hountondji, "The Myth of Spontaneous Philosophy", *Conséquence* 1 (1974), pp. 11–37. I am thankful to Dhruv Jain for bringing this text to my attention. I have addressed some of the details in Laruelle's enterprise with respect to Althusser's conception of philosophy in Dave Mering, "Critical Theory as Theoretical Practice: Althusserianism in Laruelle and Adorno," in R. Gangle and J. Greve (eds.), *Superpositions: Laruelle and the Humanities*, Rowman & Littlefield International, London 2017, pp. 59–74.

¹⁵ Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, p. 8. For an illuminating discussion of Althusser and French historical epistemology, see David Maruzzella, "The Two Bachelards of Louis Althusser", *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy* 31 (2019), pp. 174–206.

like to stage an encounter between Althusser and Foucault by traversing some of the latter's writings which show Foucault practicing a strategic thought, in order to contrast them with a definition of strategy as part of an Althusserian philosophical lexicon. In using such a protocol, I follow what I take to be an exemplary and, within the second reception of Althusser, "early" text by Vittorio Morfino, in which he emphasizes focusing on concepts, categories, and their functions in order to clarify a lexicon of terms.¹⁶ With reference to the intervention-conjuncture nexus, I will sketch an account of strategy as the anticipation of an encounter which modifies, abolishes, or otherwise alters the relations constituting a conjuncture. I will illuminate this theory of strategy by means of a critical contrast to a set of assumptions within Foucault's theoretical practice of strategic thought, to which we can now turn.

Foucault's Strategic Priority

In part four of *La Volonté de savoir*, Foucault advances a number of general propositions concerning objective, method, domain, as well as some provisional periodizations about power, particularly in light of his investigation into the history of sexuality. Despite the fact that throughout his project, Foucault presents analyses of power relations in a number of contexts, his comments in this section provide a helpful condensation of assumptions observable in his theoretical practice of strategic thought.¹⁷ One other locus of this practice, which offers a helpful way into these assumptions, is the following programmatic remark in an interview he gave in 1975, one year prior to the publication of this text. Asked to expand upon his preceding comments about making visible the unseen by changing a level, by "addressing oneself to a layer of material which

¹⁶ Vittorio Morfino, "An Althusserian Lexicon," trans. Jason Smith, *borderlands e-journal*, 4 (2/2005). Available at: http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol4no2_2005/morfino_lexicon.htm. Note that the text was originally published in 2000 as an introduction to the Italian translation of some of Althusser's late writings.

¹⁷ In this context I focus on the question of Foucault's understanding of strategy and what I call his strategic priority in light of the way he invokes strategic rhetoric. Foucault's assessment of power, especially his criticisms of moralizing notions of power, are especially relevant for further debates about strategy and the history of strategy. In order to focus on drawing out a particular approach to strategy as strategic priority, I leave these substantive aspects of the context of his writings on power to one side for reasons of space. I am thankful to Asad Haider for bringing this point to my attention.

had hitherto no pertinence for history and which had not been recognised as having any moral, aesthetic, political or historical value,” Foucault responds:

Mechanisms of power in general have never been studied much by history. History has been studied by those who held power – anecdotal histories of kings and generals; contrasted with this there has been the history of economic processes and infrastructures. Again, distinct from this, we have had histories of institutions, of what has been viewed as a superstructural level in relation to the economy. But power in its strategies [*le pouvoir dans ses stratégies*], at once general and detailed [*à la fois générales et fines*], and its mechanisms, has never been studied.¹⁸

Here Foucault offers a clear statement of his strategic priority: in order to track the layer of power within the archives where it has as yet received no history, it is necessary to conduct analyses of a plurality of power relations within a plurality of contexts, thereby making visible, by means of conceptualization and a nuanced, constant checking, that “the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information.”¹⁹ In other words, analyses of power uncover power-knowledge relations by attending to strategies as the mechanisms of power. Such mechanisms come from everywhere. “One needs to be nominalistic, no doubt: power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation [*une situation stratégique complexe*] in a particular society.”²⁰ Here Foucault has identified the “general” as opposed to the “detailed” of power in its strategies, namely, a complex strategical situation. Should a strategist press for further clarification, Foucault continues: “perhaps we should postulate rather that this multiplicity of force relations [*multiplicité des rapports de force*] can be coded—in part but never totally—either in the form of ‘war’, or in the form of ‘politics’; this would

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¹⁸ Michel Foucault, “Prison Talk,” in C. Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972–1977*, Pantheon Books, New York 1980, pp. 50–51. The original is reprinted as Michel Foucault, “Les jeux du pouvoir,” in D. Grisoni (ed.), *Politiques de la Philosophie*, Grasset, Paris 1976, pp. 155–174.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, Pantheon Books, New York 1978, p. 93. All references are checked against the original. Cf. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir*, Éditions Gallimard, Paris 1976.

imply two different strategies [*deux stratégies différentes*] (but the one always liable to switch into the other) for integrating these unbalanced, heterogenous, unstable, and tense force relations.”²¹ Hence in being nominalistic in order to pursue the task of analyzing power mechanisms, we have an ambivalently articulated general level of strategies as war and politics, understood as integrating forms of force relations, always capable of tilting into one another.

Accordingly, Foucault’s strategic priority describes both the orientation and enactment of his theoretical practice as a strategic thought into the history of mechanisms of power, on the one hand, and a postulate subtending his other assumptions about this practice throughout this part of *La Volonté de savoir*, on the other: there are strategies, but no strategy. In order to speak of strategy, we must do so heuristically, granting a kind of paradoxical, logical priority to the strategic over strategy. Strategy is but one tool in the arsenal of the strategic thinker in search of the mechanisms of power suffused everywhere throughout history.

By carefully attending to a number of passages in this part of *La Volonté de savoir*, we can observe three related assumptions Foucault makes in pursuing his strategic priority. First, as Foucault clarifies in a manner that presents more specifically how to go about writing the history of power he broaches in the interview, it is necessary to develop “an analytics” [*une analytique*] of power in order to displace what he calls “a theory” [*une théorie*] of power, understood as the juridico-discursive representation of power.²² Foucault maps out a series of “principal features” of this theory of power, but what is most important to notice for understanding his strategic priority is his claim animating the turn towards an analytics of power: “The analysis, made in terms of power, must not assume that the sovereignty of the state, the form of the law, or the over-all unity of a domination are given at the outset; rather, *these are only the terminal forms* [*les formes terminales*] power takes.”²³ In other words, for Foucault, a theory of power oriented around these forms—elsewhere, he fleshes them out by referring to overlapping conceptual problems such as “right and violence, law and ille-

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 82.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 92. My emphasis.

gality, freedom and will, and especially the state and sovereignty”²⁴—implicitly renders static the actual mechanisms of power at work throughout history.

Turning to analyze power mechanisms without the structuring mediation of such a theory of power, Foucault wagers, opens up entirely new vistas. Most notably as far as strategies are concerned, an analytics of power uncovers power otherwise than under the guise of its terminal forms taken as its final word, instead allowing power as “the moving substrate of force relations [*le socle mouvant des rapports de force*] which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender [such] states of power,”²⁵ to flare up before our eyes. Hence Foucault’s displacement of theory for analytics enables a conception of power which “one must first understand as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization.”²⁶ It is in this context of presenting a series of equivocal descriptions of such “primary” force relations that Foucault draws closest to specifying an account of strategy. In addition to the imperative to first attend to an immanent multiplicity of force relations, he adds:

[Power must be understood as] the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses [force relations]; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies [*les stratégies*] in which [these force relations] take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies.²⁷

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As such, in addition to Foucault’s first assumption concerning the methodology of analytics as opposed to theory, we witness the second: force relations as the omnipresence of power, understood dynamically as always in motion and coming from everywhere, “produced from one moment to the next, at every point,

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 92. Translation modified. Interestingly, Robert Hurley’s translation renders the initial phrase as “in the first instance.”

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 92–93.

or rather in every relation from one point to another.”²⁸ This second assumption concerning the omnipresence of power and its linear production expressed in relations effectively involves a more detailed elaboration of Foucault’s claim we examined earlier concerning the necessity to “be nominalistic” in examining power mechanisms. An analytics of power uncovers a complex strategical situation coded as politics and/or war.

Foucault’s third assumption in these passages allows us to begin grasping how force relations as expressed in strategies which circulate within the state apparatus, law, and social hegemony are actually composed. Whereas the “general” level of strategies reveals itself as the Janus-faced complex strategical situation of war-politics, at the more detailed level of strategies in their effectuation, we find Foucault conceiving of strategies as the agglomeration of tactical instances. It is perhaps here where Foucault’s strategic priority is most rooted, so to speak.²⁹ Indeed, such an agglomeration of tactics appears to be the result of Foucault’s methodological displacement of theory into analytics: the complex strategical situation, qua moving substrate of force relations constantly engendering states of power such as the state, law, or domination which “are always local and unstable [*locaux et instables*].”³⁰ As Foucault suggests in probably one of his most well-known phrases, “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.”³¹ In light of what I have argued is Foucault’s strategic priority, we can read this summary proposition of Foucault’s claims throughout this section as both an expression of the major advantage gained from an analytics of power *and* as what enables us to make sense of Foucault’s remarks which align strategies and tactics by means of formulating strategies, always and necessar-

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 93. In light of this assumption, the relationship between power and relation would be useful to study further. Foucault draws near in a few formulations to what Vittorio Morfino has called the primacy of relations, to which my account of strategy is indebted. See Vittorio Morfino, “Spinoza: An Ontology of Relation”, trans. Jason E. Smith in *Plural Temporality: Transindividuality and the Aleatory Between Spinoza and Althusser*, Brill, Leiden 2014, pp. 46–71.

²⁹ Perhaps this is why some suggest Foucault provides an analysis of tactics but not strategy. For a reading of Foucault which moves in this direction by supplementing his arguments with Michel de Certeau, see Claire Colebrook, “Certeau and Foucault: Tactics and Strategic Essentialism”, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 100 (2/2001), pp. 543–574.

³⁰ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, p. 93.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

ily in the plural, as ultimately comprised of particular tactical instances of the exercise of power.

Foucault develops this sense of strategies as the agglomeration of tactics in the summary proposition prior to his remark about the coterminous existence of power and resistance by claiming that “power relations are both intentional and nonsubjective.”³² Arising from everywhere, no power arrives without being fixed to aims or objectives. However, the rationality of this power is displaced to level of tactics, understood as particular instances of decision-making with regard to power, out of which arises the general level of power as complex strategical situation.

[L]et us not look for the headquarters that presides over [power’s] rationality; neither the caste which governs, nor the groups which control the state apparatus, nor those who make the most important economic decisions direct the entire network of power that functions in society (and makes it function); the rationality of power is characterized by tactics that are often quite explicit at the restricted level where they are inscribed (the local cynicism of power), tactics which, becoming connected to one another, attracting and propagating one another, but finding their base of support and their condition elsewhere, end by forming comprehensive systems: the logic is perfectly clear, the aims decipherable, and yet it is often the case that no one is there to have invented them, and few who can be said to have formulated them: an implicit characteristic of the great anonymous, almost unspoken strategies [*des grandes stratégies anonymes*] which coordinate the loquacious tactics whose ‘inventors’ or decisionmakers are often without hypocrisy.³³

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Hence, by using analytics, we uncover the mechanisms of power relations which arise everywhere from local tactics. These tactics provide, by means of becoming concatenated to one another, the basis for strategies which comprise a moving substrate of force relations.

Accordingly, one of the crucial implications of Foucault’s shift to analytics, as expressed in the well-known passage about power and resistance, is that he provides the tools for a method capable of attending to a plurality of resist-

³² *Ibid.*, p. 94.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

ances without end. Yet Foucault punctuates these remarks with a curious and indecipherable comment on Machiavelli, which I will revisit in light of turning to Althusser in the next section. Falling back onto the received wisdom of Machiavelli as a scandalous cynic about power,³⁴ Foucault grants his importance for conceiving “the power of the Prince in terms of relations of force,” but adds, “perhaps we need to go one step further, do without the persona of the Prince, and decipher power mechanisms on the basis of a strategy that is immanent in relations of force [*une stratégie immanente aux rapports de force*].”³⁵ And yet as we have observed in attending to Foucault’s comments about strategies throughout this section, Foucault’s analytics of power actually forestalls this question, suggesting instead that we need to take a step back rather than a step forward.³⁶ In terms of Foucault’s strategic priority expressed throughout his innovative analyses in these remarks on power relations, we can analyze strategies but never strategy.³⁷ We can uncover a complex strategical situation

³⁴ For an alternative perspective which directs careful attention to the theoretical work of the people in Machiavelli’s writing, see Stefano Visentin, “The Different Faces of the People: On Machiavelli’s Political Topography”, in F. Lucchese, F. Frosini, and V. Morfino (eds.), *The Radical Machiavelli: Politics, Philosophy, and Language*, Brill, Leiden 2015 pp., 368–389.

³⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, p. 97. Translation modified.

³⁶ In an entirely different context, such a need to step back in order to ask the question of strategy was also broached by Gayatri Spivak in relation to the transmutation of her phrase “strategic use of positivist essentialism” into the watchword “strategic essentialism.” I discuss the reference and related texts in Dave Mesing, “From Structuralism to Points of Rupture: George Jackson and the Tactics of the Subject”, *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy* 23 (1/2019), pp. 123–125.

³⁷ In an interview with Roger Pol-Droit published in *Le Monde* in February 1975, on the occasion of the publication of *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault makes some brief comments which further illuminate some of the assumptions I have tracked here and perhaps open up further lines of inquiry for a more thorough consideration of his writings on these questions. Responding to the question of whether he has a method, Foucault insists on abandoning the search for a system’s “unconscious,” instead proposing to be both more “modest and more prying [*plus modeste et plus fureteur*].” When studying the “mass of documents that constitute the actual discourse of political action” for the bourgeoisie, Foucault claims, we find “an absolutely conscious, organized, and reflexive strategy [*une stratégie absolument consciente, organisée, réfléchie*].” We must thereby substitute a logic of unconscious with a logic of strategy. Foucault thus seems to align strategy with bourgeois thought in its wielding of power, and in terms of his own proposal towards counter-strategy or counter-power, adopts the register of discrete struggles rather than strategy or strategies, proposing (likely in reference to his famous interview with Deleuze from three years earlier) that his books may be “little toolboxes [*petites boîtes à outils*]” capable of finding a use in these struggles. See Michel Foucault “Des suppliques aux cellules”, in

or attend to the local in order to observe the agglomeration of detailed tactics as what comprises anonymous and nonsubjective strategic obstacles, but we can never truly ask after strategy. Foucault's strategic priority hence conceals the possibility of approaching the question of strategy as part of a concerted nexus of theory and practice in a specific conjuncture, a concealment that I will suggest can be overturned by displacing this strategic priority by moving towards a theory of strategy.

Theory and the Tasks of Strategy

A number of potential avenues for conducting a narrow Foucault-Althusser encounter are possible,³⁸ but one illuminating point of contrast which will enable us to move towards an account of strategy as part of an Althusserian lexicon concerns the philosophical position of nominalism and the distinct manner in which Foucault and Althusser inhabit it. Such a contrast enables us to take a step back from Foucault's strategic priority in order to develop the suggestive possibility of strategy as intervention into conjuncture into a proposal for defining strategy as the anticipation of an encounter which will modify, abolish, or otherwise alter the relations constitutive of the conjuncture. As such, I turn to nominalism not as some eternal possibility within *philosophia perennis*—an idealist perspective on philosophy that Althusser and Foucault would reject in their own fashion—but rather to illuminate and produce a definition of strategy as a reflection on the intervention-conjuncture dyad, thereby allowing me to draw out some further consequences about these concepts and their functions as part of a philosophy for strategy.

D. Defert and F. Ewald (eds.), *Dits et écrits tome II (1970–1975)*, Éditions Gallimard, Paris 1994, pp. 716–720.

³⁸ For one example of a productive encounter between Foucault and Althusser, see Banu Bargu, "Police Power: The Biopolitical State Apparatus and Differential Interpellations", *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society*, 31 (3/2019), pp. 291–317. Importantly, Bargu stresses that Althusser's work has been a useful starting point, but only that, for feminist and critical race theorists. I have sketched out an initial development of some arguments which are adjacent to the contrast between strategic thought and strategy I stage here, using George Jackson's work to extend the framework I sketch in relation to a dynamic understanding of tactics in Mering, "From Structuralism to Points of Rupture", pp. 131–137.

As I have broached a few times, Foucault's invocation of nominalism in the context of enacting his strategic priority as an inquiry into power relations is presented in the form of an injunction: "One needs to be nominalistic, no doubt [*Il faut sans doute être nominaliste*]."³⁹ Foucault does not clarify what he means in this context, beyond the implicit suggestion that rather than fix the name of power to or as an institution, structure, strength, or capacity, "it is the name that one attributes [*c'est le nom qu'on prête*] to a complex strategical situation in a particular society."⁴⁰ In an essay of decisive importance on Foucault and Marx, Balibar suggests that Foucault's work represents a form of nominalism in which he simultaneously carries out a break with Marxism as theory at a global level while partially using Marxist tenets or claims which are compatible with some in the Marxist tradition.⁴¹ At such a global or general level of his analyses, Balibar points out, Foucault questions "the concept of 'social relations', or contradiction as a structure internal to power relations."⁴² As part of this questioning, Foucault practices a "historical nominalism" in order to make notions such as power or contradiction impossible as idealized concepts. Starting from a sense of materiality linked to the apparatus and practice of power on bodies rather than the materiality of social relations, Foucault's nominalism not only takes the form of refusing an abstract essence for such notions, but also "*forbids* one to pass directly from the material nature of bodies to the ideal nature of life."⁴³ In other words, Foucault's injunction to "be nominalistic" expresses both a rejection of Marx's historical materialism and its emphasis on contradiction *as well as* a sort of structural similarity to the usage made of nominalism as a necessary theoretical supplement for materialism against metaphysics, which describes its deployment in Althusser's Marxian practice of philosophy.

³⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, p. 93.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* One proposal for how to typologize Foucault's rhetorical usage of such terms is provided by Colin Koopman and Tomas Matza, who suggest that "central philosophical debates into which Foucault is often drafted," such as "nominalism versus universalism," be understood as "doctrines of philosophy", meaning that Foucault only raises the specter of such an "-ism" for rhetorical effect. Colin Koopman and Tomas Matza, "Putting Foucault to Work: Analytic and Concept in Foucaultian Inquiry", *Critical Inquiry* 39 (4/2013), pp. 822–823.

⁴¹ Étienne Balibar, "Foucault and Marx: The Question of Nominalism", in T. Armstrong (ed. and Trans.), *Michel Foucault: Philosopher*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead 1992, p. 53.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

Balibar provides the latter description of nominalism as a synthetic suggestion that both Marx and Foucault practice critiques of philosophies of history, in which the question of materialism or the nature of the material is often at hand. “One might agree to call upon nominalism as a supplement to materialism necessary to stop a particular form of materiality – economic, political, or discursive – from turning back into metaphysics.”⁴⁴ As Montag points out, such supplemental use of nominalism for materialism also characterizes Althusser’s brief descriptions of the term. For Montag, the insertion of a nominalist moment into materialist theorization can be captured for Althusser by that “superb phrase” of the first proposition in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist.⁴⁵ However, as often is the case with Althusser, a slight shift is then introduced into the citation, such that the proposition as a “fundamental thesis of nominalism” becomes, to translate the phrase into English, “there exist only cases.” As such, much like Foucault’s ambivalent injunction to “be nominalistic” in order to approach the specificity of power relations, Montag shows how Althusser perceives the nominalist thesis as a means for emphasizing and focusing on the singular and diverse.⁴⁶ To borrow Foucault’s rhetoric, both Foucault and Althusser occupy nominalist positions as part of their strategic or philosophical practice within complex strategical situations.

Of course, as should be clear at least to scholars of Althusser working within the second reception of his philosophy, one important name for a “complex strategical situation” is precisely the conjuncture. In light of the manner in which both of them introduce nominalism into their theoretical practice, one question for Foucault’s work concerns whether and to what extent it is helpful for the analysis of a conjuncture. In the short section discussing power relations we focused on earlier, it is clear that the conjuncture would only comprise one among other

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁴⁵ Warren Montag, “Althusser’s Nominalism: Structure and Singularity (1962–6)”, *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 10 (3/1998), p. 68. Montag quotes interviews with Fernanda Navarro, available in English as “Philosophy and Marxism: Interviews with Fernanda Navarro, 1984–87”, trans. G.M. Goshgarian in F. Matheron and O. Corpet (eds.), *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978–1987*, Verso, London 2006, pp. 251–289. I note Montag’s attention to Althusser’s “early” writings in conjunction with much later discussions with Navarro, further giving credence to Pippa’s proposal regarding the second reception of Althusser and the overcoming of neatly fixed stages in favor of an elaboration of related and revisited problems.

⁴⁶ Montag, “Althusser’s Nominalism”, p. 69.

possible heuristic names for unveiling the omnipresence of power-knowledge relations. Such a strategic priority, as we have seen, forestalls the possibility of a theory of strategy understood as a concerted nexus of theory and practice as part of a specific conjuncture. In order to break with such a priority, we might rewrite Montag's Wittgensteinian illumination of Althusser's nominalism as follows: the conjuncture is all that is the case, and yet there is intervention.

This proposition enables us to shift our focus to Althusser's philosophical lexicon. As Vittorio Morfino argues, conjuncture is Althusser's way of rewriting facticity with a further elaboration. "Conjuncture names the set of material conditions within which one is compelled to think and act."⁴⁷ As a category, conjuncture does not only rewrite facticity into another term, but rather entails at least two further claims.⁴⁸ First, conjunctures are comprised of intertwining, contradictory, and overdetermining relations. When viewed in light of Foucault's analytic of power relations, such a claim presents an Althusserian gloss on another Foucaultian nominalistic injunction, which he presents twice over in the concluding propositions we explored above: one must not suppose that there is a neatly identifiable center from which such relations emanate.⁴⁹

Second, to be precise, any reference to "the" conjuncture must be done with the recognition that such a conjuncture is only one among other conjunctures, each of which "holds" due to the sedimentation of practices expressed in its constitutive relations while also being the object of practices able to change such relations. As Morfino writes, "the conjuncture is the facticity [...] that practice

⁴⁷ Morfino, "An Althusserian Lexicon".

⁴⁸ A study of Althusser's nearly continuous use of the term conjuncture would make an important contribution to Althusser scholarship and contemporary political and critical theory more generally. Here I have tried to emphasize its importance as a category rather than only a concept, and it seems to me that such a distinction might be useful to pursue in light of Althusser's materialism. I follow Morfino's discussion focused on some of Althusser's later writings but note that the term appears in a nearly constant fashion throughout his work.

⁴⁹ "One must suppose rather [*Il faut plutôt supposer*] than the manifold relations of force that take shape and come into play [...] are the basis for wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole. [...] there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives. But this does not mean that it results from the choice or decision of an individual subject; let us not look [*ne cherchons pas*] for the headquarters [*l'état-major*] that presides over its rationality". Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, pp. 94–95.

confronts, and practice is in turn possible only within the interstices of this facticity, since it can only intervene within the relations that constitute practice in the first place.”⁵⁰ As a category, conjuncture thus invokes what we might call the thesis of relational entwinement without center or simple contradiction, on the one hand, and the thesis of practical plurality and transformative possibility, on the other.

As apparent in attending to Morfino’s brief elaboration of conjuncture as a part of Althusser’s philosophical lexicon, attending to the function of this category in Althusser’s arguments requires invoking the notion of intervention, perhaps not surprisingly given my repeated insistence on the intervention-conjuncture nexus as a strategic dyad, or as I have now proposed to reflect on it, the proposition that the conjuncture is all that is the case, and yet there is intervention. Morfino does not discuss intervention as a part of Althusser’s lexicon, and as thorough readers of Althusser could suspect, one reason for this absence may be that, at least for a certain tendency within Althusser’s continual unfolding and elaboration of his philosophical problems, intervention constitutes much less a specific part of the lexicon than the modality in which such a lexicon is expressed. By attending briefly to the question of intervention in Althusser’s philosophy, we will be able to return to Foucault’s refusal of the Prince and its relevance for taking a step back from his strategic priority in order to propose a theory of strategy.

Within Althusser’s second reception, an important theme is the continued development of problems, or perhaps even more sharply put, the at-times continuous and at-times discontinuous clarification of a conjunctural conceptual lexicon. The notion of intervention is crucial for drawing out such a reading of Althusser’s philosophical enterprise and what I propose to call his philosophy for strategy, which entails the recognition of further questions and problems which he only began to broach as a part of his own conjunctural deployments of a conceptual lexicon. Sorting out a comprehensive reading of Althusser in this regard would be beyond the scope of the present argument, but an analysis of

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⁵⁰ Morfino, “An Althusserian Lexicon”. An important question, which can only be briefly broached in this context, concerns distinguishing between conjunctures. This question would need to take on both the problem of the different determinations of the category or concept of conjuncture, as well as issues in space and, in my view especially, time.

intervention in the 1968 “Lenin and Philosophy” lecture in light of some of his reflections on a continuous, strategic companion in Machiavelli will enable us to sketch such a proposal and put it to work in developing a notion of strategy as an implicit part of such a lexicon in the sense of pushing further the intervention-conjuncture dyad in order to stipulate a theory of strategy rather than only a strategic practice of thought.

As is well-known, Althusser’s lecture scandalously proposes an extended reflection on Lenin in relation to philosophy for the Société Française de Philosophie, opening with a kind of provocation that the idea of a philosophical communication would have made Lenin laugh, “with that whole-hearted, open laugh by which the fishermen of Capri recognized him as one of their kind and on their side.”⁵¹ Such a provocation attempts to impress upon the audience, or even enact, Lenin’s response to an invitation from Maxim Gorky to discuss philosophy with a small group of Russian intellectuals. Regarding Lenin’s laughter, Althusser proposes the following: “To be sure, [laughing as a refusal to philosophically discuss] was a tactical attitude: since political unity among Bolshevik émigrés was essential, they should not be divided by a philosophical dispute.”⁵² However, Althusser suggestively continues:

*We can discern in this tactic much more than a tactic [beaucoup plus qu’une tactique], something I should like to call a ‘practice’ [pratique] of philosophy, and the consciousness of what practicing philosophy means; in short the consciousness of the ruthless, primary fact that philosophy divides, and it can only unite by dividing. We can thus understand Lenin’s laughter: there is no such thing as philosophical communication, no such thing as philosophical discussion. All I want to do today is to comment on that laughter, which is a thesis itself.*⁵³

⁵¹ Louis Althusser, “Lenin and Philosophy”, in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, Monthly Review Press, New York 1971, p. 23. Louis Althusser, *Lénine et la philosophie*, François Maspero, Paris 1969. Althusser was verbally reprimanded by Jean Wahl towards the beginning of his talk, choosing not to publish this reprimand in the publication of the text of his address. See the editorial notes in Louis Althusser, *Solitude de Machiavel et autres textes*, PUF, Paris 1998, p. 138. I am thankful to David Maruzzella for reminding me of these details.

⁵² Althusser, “Lenin and Philosophy”, p. 26.

⁵³ *Ibid.* My emphasis.

Althusser links this polemical conception of philosophical practice directly to the notion of intervention, arguing that “Lenin thus defines the ultimate essence [*l’essence ultime*] of philosophical practice as an intervention in the theoretical domain [*intervention dans le domaine théorique*].”⁵⁴ For Althusser, Leninist philosophical intervention simultaneously operates theoretically by formulating categories, and practically “in the function [*pratique par la fonction*] of these categories,” or as I have attempted to reiterate here, via the clarification and demarcation of a conjunctural conceptual lexicon.

To translate Althusser’s remarks in the “Lenin and Philosophy” essay in this manner and submit the notion of intervention itself to a conjunctural determination requires a brief study of Althusser’s reflections on Machiavelli, the conjunctural thinker *par excellence*. In a manner recalling the Wittgensteinian proposition I introduced above, Althusser posits that “Machiavelli is the first theorist of the conjuncture [*le premier théoricien de la conjuncture*].”⁵⁵ However, he then makes a decisive remark for understanding the sense in which a philosophical lexicon which includes strategy as part of its conceptual contribution can only be understood as an initial definition, subject to additional clarification and development. Althusser claims that Machiavelli is a “theorist” of the conjuncture in the sense of “if not to think the concept of conjuncture [*concept de conjuncture*] [...] then at least consistently – in an insistent, extremely profound way – to think *in* the conjuncture [*pensé dans la conjuncture*]: that is to say, in its concept of an aleatory, singular case [*cas singulier aléatoire*].”⁵⁶ In terms of understanding Althusser’s theoretical enterprise as a philosophy for strategy, then, his extensive study of Machiavelli is absolutely decisive. Althusser’s concepts and categories, especially intervention and conjuncture, may help to establish a more elaborate, conceptual definition of strategy, but we must

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⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁵⁵ Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, trans. Gregory Elliot, Verso, London 1999, p. 18. Louis Althusser, “Machiavelli et Nous (1972–1986)”, in F. Matheron (ed.), *Écrits Philosophiques et Politiques Tome II*, Stock/IMEC, Paris 1995, pp. 39–168.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* Althusser’s emphasis.

and, we should add, practitioner in the conjuncture, truly lets us observe the functioning of strategy in his works.⁵⁷

And yet, we should not run ahead of ourselves, especially given the need we have uncovered to step back from strategic prioritization in Foucault. If intervention is merely the modality of Althusser's conjunctural conceptual lexicon, we must still address whether intervention can be understood as a distinct concept helping to illuminate the definition of strategy I propose. Much like conjuncture, which I only quickly reflected on above, such a task would be helpful for pushing further into the nuances and possible counter-tendencies of the insights I have attempted to stipulate here. However, it is the question of intervention that I think the contrast with Foucault usefully illuminates, again involving Machiavelli's Prince.

As I noted at the end of the previous section, Foucault punctuates his remarks in which he practices a strategic priority with a puzzling comment on Machiavelli's Prince. Entangled perhaps with the omnipresence of force relations, Foucault proposes an acknowledgement that Machiavelli's cynical scandal towards power makes him "among the few" to conceive the power of the Prince as in terms of force relations. He then adds: "perhaps we need to go one step further, do without the persona of the Prince, and decipher power mechanisms on the basis of a strategy that is immanent in force relations."⁵⁸ Reading Foucault to the letter, however, would seem to suggest we will always be in search of such a strategy absent from his strategic practice of analyzing power relations. Althusser and especially Machiavelli might propose the following rejoinder: rather than seek to decipher [*déchiffrer*] power relations, a theory of strategy proposes, and in turn takes all of its force from such a proposal, to *intervene* into power relations for the sake of modifying, abolishing, or otherwise altering them.

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Such a displacement of Foucault thus enables us to step back from his strategic priority in order to sketch a theory of strategy. However, in putting to work such a notion, category, or concept of intervention, such a theory of strategy needs to

⁵⁷ The same could be said for Lenin, and I might add that such a suggestion could be a helpful starting point for trying to work out a theory of strategy in light of Lenin's theory and practice – something which, to my knowledge is absent from his writings at an explicit level, though codified within Stalin's *Foundations of Leninism*.

⁵⁸ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, p. 97.

go beyond merely the repeated insistence within Althusser, for different contexts and concepts within his theoretical archive, that strategy might be abbreviated as intervention into a conjuncture. For we know that interventions into conjunctures do not come with guarantees. Indeed, Althusser's reading of Machiavelli attempts to enact and reflect upon this necessity of theory and practice submitted to the exigency of class struggle. As a concluding gloss on the theory of strategy we have proposed, then, in light of this narrow Foucault-Althusser encounter and its implications, we might propose the following, quasi-Wittgensteinian proposition of a *Strategōs Logico-Philosophicus*: conjunctures are all that is the case, and yet there is intervention—and, thankfully, encounter.

* * *

Although my reading of Foucault has been for the sake of illuminating the possibility of introducing strategy as a part of an Althusserian lexicon, I have attempted to suggest that they share a strategic theoretical practice whose encounter is quite productive, presenting my intervention concerning intervention as something capable of introducing new insights and problems for present and future conjunctures. To this end I would like to conclude by drawing out some additional consequences of this narrow Foucault-Althusser encounter.

First, intervention-conjuncture is indeed best understood as a strategic couplet, which extends beyond the narrow confines of Althusser and his interlocutors and critics. From the vantage of a theory of strategy, such a dyad is only strategic insofar as we propose encounter as a mediating term which inscribes the necessity of contingency, i.e., the dialectical gesture of political practice,⁵⁹ into the sketch of strategy as anticipation of an encounter which modifies, abolishes, or otherwise alters the relations constitutive of its conjuncture.

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Second, as Balibar has suggested, the category of conjuncture belongs to a critique of certain eschatological imaginaries imbued in various philosophies of history, expressing instead an attempt to practice philosophy *in* history. Despite not consistently operating with a category of conjuncture, Foucault shared in such an attempt as part of his strategic practice of thought. By intervening to propose the question of strategy polemically to Foucault's text, I have attempted

⁵⁹ Sotiris, *A Philosophy for Communism*, p. 531.

to demonstrate how Foucault's analyses of power relations forestall a sense of strategy as a concerted effort of theory and practice as part of an intervention into a specific conjuncture.

Yet despite some scattered indications, a similar line of attack could be taken towards what I have tried to suggest is Althusser's philosophy for strategy. Althusser often limited his strategic undertaking to the history of philosophy in a manner that proves itself immensely productive for proceeding to investigate into philosophical strategies and practices, but it must be noted that the theory of strategy I have attempted to clarify cannot remain only philosophical in its determination. As such, in order to formulate this important caveat in a manner which I think breaks with Althusser's theoretical endeavor by remaining faithful to its conceptual intervention, we must add the following claim: any theory of strategy, initially sketched as the anticipation of an encounter which will modify, abolish, or otherwise alter the relations constitutive of the conjuncture, must be developed in the way Machiavelli proceeded—not only making use of a concept or category of conjuncture, but rather submitting theory to the discipline of the conjuncture. In this sense the initial definition I have repeated should undergo a final alteration: strategy does not speculatively anticipate encounters and assess changes in the relations of “the” conjuncture, but rather *its* conjuncture. Strategy first and foremost as the thought of political practice *requires* practice in order for its further elaboration as a theoretical and practical weapon in any conjuncture.

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Althusser, Machiavelli, and the PCF

Introduction

Althusser's interest in Machiavelli traverses the most productive theoretical period of his thought, despite the fact that in the work published during his lifetime, Machiavelli's name only rarely appears.¹ However, this rarity is offset by the large quantity of texts dedicated to Machiavelli contained in the archives at IMEC, which are now at least in part published:

- 1) the manuscript of a course held in 1962²
- 2) the manuscript of a course held in 1971–72, of which there is a second version with numerous modifications presumably made in 1975–76, with the title *Machiavelli et nous* [*Machiavelli and Us*] (a version that Althusser continued to correct until the 1980s)³
- 3) an article with the title “La solitude de Machiavel” [“Machiavelli's Solitude”] from 1977⁴
- 4) a note on Machiavelli and Gramsci from 1977⁵
- 5) a text with the title *Que faire?* [*What is to be done?*] with a long digression on Machiavelli, from 1978⁶

¹ Cf. Louis Althusser, *Montesquieu. La politique et l'histoire*, PUF, Paris 1959, p. 12 ; *Pour Marx*, Maspero, Paris 1965, p. 93 and especially Louis Althusser, “Soutenance d'Amiens”, in Y. Sintomer (Ed.), *La solitude de Machiavel*, PUF, Paris 1998, p. 205.

² Louis Althusser, *Machiavel (1962)*, in *Politique et Histoire de Machiavel à Marx*, Seuil, Paris 2006, pp. 207–254.

³ Louis Althusser, *Machiavel et nous*, in F. Matheron (Ed.), *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, t. II, Stock/Imec, Paris 1995, pp. 42–168.

⁴ Louis Althusser, “La solitude de Machiavel”, in *La solitude de Machiavel*, pp. 311–324.

⁵ Manuscript in the Althusser Archive at IMEC with the label ALT2. A57-01.09. (now published: *Que faire?*, ed. G.M. Goshgarian, PUF, Paris 2018.

⁶ Manuscript in the Althusser Archive at IMEC with the label ALT2. A26-05.06 / 07.

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- 6) the part dedicated to Machiavelli in *The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter*, from 1982⁷
- 7) two excerpts from the autobiography, given the title *The Only Materialist Tradition* by the editors, from 1985⁸
- 8) a manuscript text from 1986 entitled *Machiavelli philosophe*⁹

This series of texts merits consideration. I will not closely track variations in the details of Althusser's interpretation throughout each text here. Instead, I will try to isolate the most significant moments and highlight the continuities and discontinuities. In order to synthesize, I think we can observe four phases of Althusser's reading of Machiavelli across this series, within which we can trace some discontinuities:

- 1) The 1962 course
- 2) *Machiavelli and Us* from 1972–76
- 3) Althusser's new confrontation with Gramsci in 1977–78
- 4) The writings of the 1980s

However, before considering these phases it is necessary to establish a premise that allows us to frame Althusser's overall relationship with Machiavelli. Althusser declares at the beginning of *Machiavelli and Us* that he will read Machiavelli directly, without interpretative filters, as if he were his contemporary. However, this is actually a misleading suggestion. Althusser reads Machiavelli as a Marxist and a communist: in this sense the question he poses to Machiavelli concerns an essential question, that of the party. But to understand the theoretical framework of the question it is necessary to keep in mind a fundamental mediation of Althusser's reading of Gramsci, namely Gramsci's interpretation of Machiavelli, which Filippo Del Lucchese has the merit of already emphasizing for us.¹⁰

⁷ Louis Althusser, *Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre*, in F. Matheron (Ed.), *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, t. I, Stock/Imec, Paris 1994, pp. 539–579.

⁸ Louis Althusser, "L'unique tradition matérialiste", *Lignes* 18 (1993), pp. 71–119.

⁹ Manuscript in the Althusser Archive at IMEC with the label ALT2. A29-06-07.

¹⁰ Filippo Del Lucchese, «Sul vuoto di un incontro: Althusser lettore di Machiavelli», in AA.VV., *Rileggere il Capitale. La lezione di Louis Althusser*, parte seconda, Mimesis, Milano 2009, pp. 31–49.

Without fear of exaggerating it can be said that Althusser's encounter with Machiavelli takes place entirely through Gramsci,¹¹ and if something new happens in his reading of Machiavelli, this *novum* must be thought in light of his work on Gramsci.¹² In one of the two autobiographical writings dedicated to Machiavelli in 1985, Althusser recognized this debt: Machiavelli's thought must be read as the project of the "historical realization of Italian national unity."¹³ He then adds: "Gramsci has seen this extremely well, although he has blundered with everything else."¹⁴ Here Althusser recognizes an important debt, but liquidates the rest, which in my view leads critics astray. Actually, Althusser's debt to Gramsci is much larger, although it is certainly animated by this key point.

The 1970s course, as well as the 1962 course, has as its fundamental interpretative framework the question of the unitary national state. This framework allows Althusser, on the basis of Gramsci, to reject the horns of the dilemma between monarchy and republicanism for a much deeper and more complex democratic reading: the absolute monarchy that is allied to the people against the feudal elements of society. And yet Althusser fully accepts the definition of *The Prince* as a manifesto and a utopia in Gramsci's sense, i.e., not as a yearning for an ideal state, but as a project of political intervention. Moreover, the entire reading that Althusser proposes of the principalities, armies, and the political practice of the prince is nothing but the full development of what Gramsci had only sketched out concerning the analytic chapters and rhetorical conclusion of *The Prince*: the entire analysis is carried out from the perspective of the construction of the strategy of the new prince in the Italian conjuncture. Althusser also accepts Gramsci's key reflection on the army and on the primacy of politics over the military element, on the anticipation of Jacobinism in the creation of the mixture between city and country, just as he also extends the logic of Gramsci's argument regarding the political value of the infantry over the cavalry. He also accepts the definition of the political practice of the prince, the definition of

¹¹ Cf. Emmanuel Terray, "An Encounter: Althusser and Machiavelli", trans. A. Callari and D. Ruccio, in *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory*, Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, NH 1997, p. 258.

¹² Cf. Adam Holden and Stuart Elden, "It cannot be a Real Person, a Concrete Individual": Althusser and Foucault on Machiavelli's Political Technique", *Borderlands* 4 (2005), p. 2, who refer to Althusser's "neo-Gramscian" reading.

¹³ Louis Althusser, "L'unique tradition matérialiste", *Lignes* 18 (1993), p. 101.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

religion as an all-pervasive ideological element of the time, as well as the two levels of force and consent on which the prince must act, and also the theory of violence directed against the feudal world.

But that's not all. If Gramsci's suggestion of the deep unity of *The Art of War* and *The Prince* is indeed taken up by Althusser, he also reads the unity of *The Prince* and the *Discourses* with the help of hints from Gramsci. Whereas Gramsci speaks of the two works as the moment of dictatorship (the individual) and hegemony (the universal), Althusser speaks of the absolute beginning and the "settlement of the laws and emergence from solitude," to which correspond the metaphors of foundation and taking root. In the 1977 text "Machiavelli's Solitude," Althusser will use the Gramscian term dictatorship, making the debt explicit even from a terminological point of view.¹⁵ There is thus no contradiction between a monarchic and republican Machiavelli, but rather unity: in the *Discourses* Machiavelli searches for the example of a state that lasts, a state founded by kings, but capable of becoming popular.

Is Althusser's reading thus a simple repetition of Gramsci? Such a claim would probably be unjust because Gramsci's reading, while being extremely powerful, is actually only hinted at: it would be more accurate to claim that Althusser grasps the profound internal logic of Gramsci's interpretation, developing it as far as possible. In a certain sense, it could be said that Althusser, in his course from the 1970s, wrote the book on Machiavelli that Gramsci could not have written, drawing out all of the analytic and synthetic consequences that, certainly in retrospect, appear to us as ineluctable, which does not mean that they were such prior to being drawn out.

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Having said that, some elements of the originality of Althusser's reading should also be outlined. First of all, we should emphasize the element of the encounter between *virtù* and *fortuna*, of the occasion, the conjuncture, the element that in the 1962 course will come to be identified as an "insoluble contradiction"¹⁶ of Machiavelli's thought. During the 1970s course and with even greater emphasis in the writings on aleatory materialism, precisely the impossibility of assigning

¹⁵ "[...] the first moment of the State [...] is [...] the monarchic, or dictatorial moment." Althusser, "La solitude de Machiavel", p. 316.

¹⁶ Althusser, *Machiavel (1962)*, p. 233.

a name and space to this beginning will constitute one of the points of force of Machiavelli's political thought and what Althusser calls his philosophy. From the viewpoint of political theory, this point marks Machiavelli's alterity to subsequent political philosophy, to the theory of the accomplished fact, to the state, whereas Machiavelli thinks the fact in its unfolding, and is capable of thinking the violence of the birth of the state and the radically aleatory character of its boundaries, what Althusser calls "primitive political accumulation"¹⁷ in "Machiavelli's Solitude." Now, this element of the aleatory has some consequences on the level of the conception of the Modern Prince, the party, which was clearly the question behind both Gramsci and Althusser's readings. If for Gramsci the Modern Prince is a historical given,¹⁸ which is necessary in order to think strategy, for Althusser it is subjected to the same contingency that characterizes the birth of the state and cannot renounce the figure of the "fox," which introduces the element of fear and cunning. In this context Machiavelli and the place from which *The Prince* is formulated returns, which has epistemological consequences: Gramsci claims that *The Prince* is "a self-reflection of the people,"¹⁹ that "Machiavelli himself becomes the people, is confused with the people, but not with a people "generically" understood, but with the people that Machiavelli has convinced with his earlier treatment, of which he becomes and feels the consciousness and expression, feels himself."²⁰ What Gramsci thinks through the categories of "myth" and "concrete fantasy,"²¹ the fusion of ideology and science on the one hand and the prince and people on the other, Althusser thinks through the category of the gap: the gap between science and ideology and between prince and people.²² The gap means that the theory must be inscribed in both the political and ideological conjuncture, but cannot become popular consciousness transparent to itself, and the prince must implement a popular politics, but cannot identify himself with the people, being a simple expression of them, but rather that the people will be produced as such by the political practice of the prince ("in the army common to them, the men of

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¹⁷ Althusser, "La solitude de Machiavel", p. 320. Cf. Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, trans. G. Elliott, Verso, London 1999, p. 125.

¹⁸ "This organism is already given from historical development and it is the political party." Q13, 1, 1558.

¹⁹ Q 13, §1, 1556.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Q 13, §1, 1555–1556.

²² Cf. Terray, "An Encounter: Althusser and Machiavelli", pp. 257–277.

the towns and countryside begin to become – learn to become – one and the same people.)”²³ It is here, in the definition of these “gaps,” that Althusser finds his Machiavelli, the Machiavelli of the materialism of the encounter and of the “fox,” which he will insist on in his writings in the 1980s.²⁴

But this extraordinary reading, I want to emphasize one last time with force, is not found simply because of work on Machiavelli’s text. Althusser’s Machiavelli is the Gramsci’s Machiavelli, and if one wants to put the correct light on what Althusser says, one must start from the work internal to this reading. In Quaderno 13, taking distance from the Sorelian myth, Gramsci writes:

The modern prince, the myth-prince cannot be a real person, a concrete individual, he can only be an organism; a complex element of society in which the concretization of a collective will recognized and partially affirmed in action has already begun. This organism is already given by historical development and is the political party, the first cell in which are summarized germs of collective will that tend to become universal and total²⁵.

I will propose a reading of Althusser’s writings on Machiavelli from the specific perspective of the way in which, through them, he re-elaborates the relationship with the party on a theoretical level. And not an abstract sense of the party, but precisely his own relationship with the PCF, which Althusser was a member of throughout the post-war period after joining in 1948.

The 1962 Course

Althusser’s 1962 lecture course is dedicated to a close analysis of *The Prince* and limited to this work. As I noted, the basic framework, although only referred to *en passant*, is Gramsci’s interpretation: the new prince must constitute the national state by giving a new form to an already existing matter. Now, according to Althusser, Machiavelli’s anti-utopianism consists in “*the insertion of the polit-*

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²³ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, p. 87.

²⁴ I refer here to my essay, “La storia come ‘revoca permanente del fatto compiuto’”, in R. Caporali (ed.), *La varia natura, le molte cagioni. Studi su Machiavelli*, Il ponte vecchio, Cesena 2007, pp. 125–140.

²⁵ Q13, 1558.

*ical plan in the matter itself, in the existing political structures themselves.*²⁶ The problem is that the status quo requires the constitution of the new state, but at the same time “renders impossible or almost impossible to assign a point of application, its beginning.”²⁷ This is because the initial matter is in such disorder that it is impossible to fix the birthplace of the form in advance. In this sense, Althusser emphasizes the originality of Machiavelli’s concept of matter, which has nothing to do with Aristotelian or Hegelian matter: “matter is pure void of form, pure formless expectation of the form.”²⁸

This radical exteriority of form to matter justifies the analysis of the first eleven chapters. These are nothing more than the analysis of existing negative forms, the recognition of the “*radical contingency of the application of the New Form.*”²⁹ Althusser first analyzes the treatment of hereditary principalities, and then focuses on chapters III and IV where the question of mixed principalities is at stake. Here there is “crucial question for Machiavelli,” that of the “enlargement of the State by annexations.”³⁰ The annexation does not present problems in the case of states with the same customs and language. If instead language, customs and governments are different, “fortune and ability are necessary.”³¹ Beyond Machiavelli’s suggestions, what is the question at stake here? For Althusser, the constitution of the national state is at stake: for Machiavelli, Italy does not have the same customs and the same language everywhere. Naples, for example, is “*almost foreign to the rest of Italy,*” being “old state marked by the Norman conquest, which established a very powerful feudal order, feudalism in the French way.”³² Thus we do not have to deal with an “unreal or foreign imaginary variation to the horizon of real problems [...] but [rather with] one of the specific problems of this constitution.”³³ Althusser reads chapters V–XI similarly, but we can leave the detailed analyses aside to arrive at Althusser’s conclusion. Is Italian matter really empty and is its enumeration neutral? In reality the enumeration of matter provides a series of suggestions:

²⁶ Althusser, *Machiavel (1962)*, p. 207. All emphasis is Althusser’s unless otherwise noted.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 211.

³³ *Ibid.*

- 1) From some states there is nothing to expect: the hereditary principalities, the ecclesiastical ones and those established by sheer wickedness “which are outside [...] the political as such, because historical monsters.”³⁴
- 2) New principalities, made up of men who owe their political promotion to luck, virtue or a social force, are quite interesting: these show that “the agreement [*l'accord*] between the Prince and the people constitutes the true ‘foundation’ of his power and his durability.”³⁵
- 3) Finally, the absence of the republics, because Machiavelli does not believe possible the creation of the national state starting from the republics for the reason that they “exist in Italy only in a corrupted form.”³⁶

The enumeration thus provides a series of indications, an enumeration dominated by the chapter on mixed principalities which “draws the near future of the new state: the conquest and annexation of other provinces, to constitute the national state.”³⁷

The analysis of chapters XII–XIV on the army presents us with a similar enumeration, whose purpose is precisely to provide indications. The prince must have his own army and a new military organization. Althusser summarizes: “the good army: *national troops*”³⁸ and adds immediately:

Machiavelli’s project. To create urban and peasant militias: to enlist peasants in the militias as well as the citizens of the cities. That is to say, to make of the army something that resembles to the future project of Jacobins: the amalgam, the crucible [*creuset*] of national unity (see Gramsci).³⁹

And again:

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

Primacy of the infantry. A kind of military democracy. [...] All technical problems are for him subordinated to the force constituted by the union [*réunion*] of the citizens in the national army: example *the artillery*.⁴⁰

What is the general meaning of these analyzes?

- 1) Military force is a necessary tool for the project of the national state.
- 2) But this force must be itself national and popular. Machiavelli in the tradition that leads to Clausewitz and Lenin is the first “theorist aware of the political nature of war and the need to give to the forms and means of violence a political content.”⁴¹

Althusser goes on to analyze chapters XV–XXIII on the methods of government that contain:

- 1) A theory of violence
- 2) A theory of appearance
- 3) A theory of relations with the people

According to Althusser, the theory of violence states one “internal law to violence that commands or prohibits it use.”⁴² The use of violence is justified only in the case of a just end: “the foundation or the preservation of a state.”⁴³ The end, that is, justifies the means only if it is a good end: *«in the general element of violence, which is the reality of Italian matter, we can only come out of violence by means of violence, provided that it is constructive, restorative and positive, resolute.*”⁴⁴

In commenting on the figure of the centaur, Althusser emphasizes how politics is “haunted by the law and yet most often rejected towards force.”⁴⁵ But force alone is not enough; the lion alone is vain, and this is the meaning of the fox: “to

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 223

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

be fox: to know how to dominate the use of the force with intelligence, to adapt it to its goal.”⁴⁶

As for the theory of appearance, Althusser emphasizes that the fox also has another meaning: the fact that the action of the prince takes place in the context of the opinion of men, an opinion dominated by moral and religious qualities. Acting politically means acting on two levels: “the real means and ends, but also the imaginary and ethico-religious ideological element in which the people move.”⁴⁷

According to Althusser there is a strong proximity between Machiavelli and Spinoza on this point, although in Machiavelli it functions in a practical state, in the identification of an organic link between “ideology and the essence of politics” and at the same time in the recognition of the unreformability of this “spontaneous ideological consciousness.”⁴⁸

As for the theory of the prince-people relation, Althusser’s analysis is only sketched:

Fear without hate or contempt [...] good use of imagination and passions.⁴⁹

Finally, Althusser arrives at the analysis of chapters XXIV–XXVI in order to ask if a theory of action has been sketched there. In the theory of *virtù* and *fortuna*, Althusser identifies a failure in Machiavelli’s thought: the impossibility of thinking the beginning of a national state, the beginning of an absolute monarchy:

All of his theory is summed up in the thought of this event, and all of his theory, all of his own concepts (*fortuna/virtù*, return to principles, enumeration of possibilities, etc.) are only the impotent thought of this event. That is why his theory, at the level of its concepts, is contradictory at this point, and finally comes undone at the very moment where it is made. That is why it exhausts itself in the definition of the New Prince and the New Principality, that is to say, in the obsession of the

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

absolutely New, without being able to think the event form of this Novelty. That is why it exhausts itself conceptually in the “tourniquet” of concepts through which it tries to grasp the conditions of this pure event: *virtù* and *fortuna*.⁵⁰

Certainly, Machiavelli captures this irreducible fact of modern history and is the only witness who has tried to think of this as a problem. This explains the enigmatic nature of Machiavelli’s concepts: they are foreign to modern conceptuality, to natural law theories, precisely because the problem with which Machiavelli tries to think “has been recovered by all the later theories of the accomplished fact, that is to say of the solution.”⁵¹

The failure that Althusser identifies in Machiavelli at the height of the 1962 course concerns the concept of *virtù* necessary to the foundation of a national state: it, which must be at the origin of every necessity, is subdued “in the man who must be the bearer, to a radical contingency”⁵²:

The radical voluntarism of *virtù* is itself subject to the irrational necessity of *fortuna*.⁵³

Now, if we transpose the question of the *virtù* of the founding Prince to the question of the *virtù* of the Gramsci’s Modern Prince, what seems to be unacceptable in Machiavelli for Althusser is subjecting the *virtù* of the party to radical contingency, to the irrational necessity of *fortuna*. This in 1962.

Machiavelli and Us

We come now to the course that will be published posthumously with the title of *Machiavelli and Us*. Althusser’s reading in this text is not limited to *The Prince*, but rather is an interpretation of the unity of *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. And in this course, his reading of Gramsci becomes the explicit starting point and occupies the entire first chapter. Here we find Althusser’s reflections on the “gripping, but elusive [*saissant mais insaisissable*]”⁵⁴ character of Machiavelli,

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 246–247.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 229.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁵⁴ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, p. 6.

which pertains to the political and philosophical fields at the same time. On the philosophical level, it is given by the fact that Machiavelli is a theorist of the beginning, “of the beginning that is rooted in the essence of a thing, since it is the beginning of *this* thing. It affects all its determinations, and does not fade with the moment, but *endures* with the thing itself.”⁵⁵

However, Althusser adds, before the thing begins, there was something else, but “nothing of it.”⁵⁶ The beginning is symbolized by the formula of the effectual truth [*verità effettuale*] that pushes the earlier discourses into the sphere of the imaginary. In this sense, Machiavelli’s silence on the political theories of Aristotle, Cicero, and Christianity has, according to Althusser, the meaning of a declared rupture: “It was enough for Machiavelli to speak differently to denounce the imaginary character of the reigning ideology in political matters.”⁵⁷

But it is in the political field that this character provides the greatest surprise. In order to illustrate it with all its force, Althusser returns to Gramsci. Machiavelli is not simply the thinker who introduced the question of the state, as Hegel thought:

The State that Machiavelli expects from *The Prince* [...] is not the state in general (corresponding ‘to its concept’) but a historically determinate type of State, required by the conditions and demands of nascent capitalism: a *national* State.⁵⁸

Thus, Machiavelli is the thinker who poses the political problem of the constitution of the national state. This is neither constituted spontaneously nor by decree, but is rather the stakes of a class struggle, whose outcomes are determined by a series of pre-existing economic, geographical, historical, linguistic, and cultural factors, but also by international relations of force.

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Gramsci claims that *The Prince* is a revolutionary-utopian text because we are dealing with “a theoretical text [...] affected in its modality and dispositive by political practice.”⁵⁹ In this sense, Althusser can say that Machiavelli is the first

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10. English translation modified.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

theorist of the conjuncture, insofar as he does not generally think about the question of national unity, but starts from the existing determinations and circumstances, not in order to simply enumerate them, but rather to transform them within the project of national unity and these circumstances. As Gramsci claimed, the effectual reality is not a static reality, but the effect of relations of force that change the meaning of a project. The problem then becomes which political practice is adequate to group together the positive forces of the Italian conjuncture.

According to Althusser, this produces a “vacillation” of the status of the theoretical propositions which is undermined by political practice. The theoretical space in fact has no subject, while the space of political practice has no meaning except for its subject: the new prince. The theoretical analysis of the conjuncture thus has meaning if it allows an identification of an “empty space” in which the action of the ‘subject’ [*sujet*] (a term that, due to its ambiguity, Althusser proposes to replace with agent, and which Gramsci had designated with the term ‘will’) to be inserted. Althusser adds:

I say empty, to mark the vacillation of theory at this point: because it is necessary for this place to be filled – in other words, for the individual or party to have the capacity to become sufficiently strong to count among the forces, and strong enough again to rally the allied forces, to become the principal force and overcome the others.⁶⁰

However, there is not only one empty space, but two, as Gramsci’s definition of *The Prince* as a manifesto indicates: the second empty space is the one through which the text stages this political practice. The text, in order to be politically effective, must be inscribed “*somewhere in the space of this political practice.*”⁶¹ The manifesto must declare itself to be a partisan and gain partisans. In other words, Machiavelli treats his text as a means, transferring political practice into the element of ideology. In order to do this, he constructs a topological space and fixes the viewpoint of his text: the people. In this sense, we can claim that Machiavelli is neither a theorist of tyranny, nor of the state in general, but rather of the popular state. However, if the viewpoint is that of the people, the text is

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

addressed to the prince. This implies the rejection of the democratic reading that identifies the viewpoint of the text with the addressee: the reflection of the people on itself, to which Gramsci refers, does not transform the consciousness of the people into a political force, but prepares for the advent of the prince.

Turning to an analysis of the *Discourses on Livy* in chapter two, Althusser takes some distance from a republican reading of this work. Machiavelli's main interest in the *Discourses* is Rome, but not insofar as it is a model of a republic: "Rome is the objective experience of the foundation of a state that endured."⁶² What interests him about Rome is its foundation, a republic founded by a king:

Machiavelli's utopianism does not consist in resorting to Rome as the prop for a moral ideology that is required in the present. It consists in recourse to Rome as guarantee or rehearsal for a necessary task, whose concrete conditions of possibility are, however, impossible to define.⁶³

It is thus not an ideological or political utopia, but a theoretical one, insofar as it attempts to think the conditions of possibility of an "impossible task,"⁶⁴ "to think the unthinkable,"⁶⁵ and in this effort, Machiavelli found himself "engaged in forms of thought almost without precedent [*engagé dans des formes de pensée à peu près sans précédent*]."⁶⁶

In the third chapter, "The Theory of the 'New Prince,'" Althusser shows the profound unity of *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*, a unity that resides in the project of the constitution of a national state: Rome outlines à la *cantonade* the theory of foundation and duration of a new state. In particular, the example of the history of Rome is instructive as regards the relation between laws and conflict:

There is no doubt that in his theory of the class struggle as the origin of the laws that limit it, Machiavelli adopts the viewpoint of the people.⁶⁷

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

From this, Althusser draws the following thesis: in the conflict between the people and nobles, the king takes the side of the people “by decreeing laws.”⁶⁸ This does not mean, however, that it is necessary to be alone in order to found. Gramsci had spoken of the unity of *The Prince* and the *Discourses* by thinking them under the categories of dictatorship and hegemony. Althusser thinks them through the categories of absolute beginning and duration, that is, the moment of the “settlement of laws” and the “emergence from solitude,” to which the metaphors of foundation and taking root correspond: “so long as their distinctiveness is borne in mind, these two moments can help us to think the difference between *The Prince* and the *Discourses* – in other words, their non-difference, their profound unity.”⁶⁹ Machiavelli is thus neither a monarchist nor a republican. Rather, there is nothing but one position: the definition of the theoretical space of the object of *The Prince*.

Turning to *The Prince*, Althusser more or less repeats the analysis of his 1962 course,⁷⁰ this time citing Gramsci explicitly:

Machiavelli can set up his political problem only on condition of making a clean sweep of existing feudal forms as incompatible with the objective of Italian unity.⁷¹

In other words, the enumeration of the principalities Machiavelli proposes in the first eleven chapters of *The Prince* is not neutral, but rather excludes several types of principalities as not being functional for the project: tyrannies, hereditary principalities, ecclesiastical principalities. Republics are not included in Machiavelli’s list because they are urban forms of feudalism. All of these are excluded as the base of the project, but not “from the political field in which this unity must be accomplished” given that

the body of the nation is not fixed in advance [...] it is in part aleatory, the stake of a struggle whose borders are not assigned [*arrêtées*], and [...] because it is ulti-

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁷⁰ Cf. chapter 1 (“Le point de départ: la revue des principautés”) in Althusser, *Machiavel* (1962), pp. 207–216.

⁷¹ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, p. 70.

mately necessary to envisage the annexation of territories with different languages and customs in order to embody the nation.⁷²

The new principality is identified as the basis of the project and is bound to a double adventure: that of a man “passing from private citizen to ruler” and that of a region “passing from ‘geographical expression’ to national state.”⁷³ A double adventure linked to the encounter or non-encounter of *virtù* and *fortuna*. This is the crucial point of the theory, in which, according to Althusser, politics presents itself in the form of a determinate absence, because Machiavelli “leaves the names of the protagonists in this encounter completely blank [*laisse complètement en blanc*]; he provides them with no identity.”⁷⁴

Therefore, the geographical space and individual are by definition unknown, and national unity cannot be accomplished by starting from the existing principalities. To Althusser, however, this seems to be a positive silence: the encounter will take place, but outside of the existing principalities and States. The example of Cesare Borgia shows precisely that this “starting from nothing” is attainable. There is in it a “discrepancy [*décalage*] between the definite and indefinite, the necessary and the unforeseeable. This discrepancy, thought and unresolved by thought, is the presence of history and political practice in theory itself.”⁷⁵

We can now examine chapter four, “The Political Practice of the New Prince,” which is what Machiavelli deals with in chapters XI–XXIII. In this chapter, Althusser partially reprises and partially develops the 1962 course.⁷⁶ According to Althusser, at this height Machiavelli leaves aside the problem of pure beginning as “unassignable” and presupposes that things have already begun: the process of becoming prince and becoming state has already begun. Althusser’s argument is focused on two elements: the army and ideology. As for the army, Althusser claims that Machiavelli’s theses are impressive in their consistency, incisiveness, and political acuteness. Like Gramsci, he maintains that these the-

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⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 72–73.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁷⁶ Cf. chapter 2 (“L’armée et la Politique”) in Althusser, *Machiavel (1962)*, pp. 217–220.

ses anticipate the Jacobins, as well as Clausewitz and Mao.⁷⁷ Machiavelli maintains first that the army is the state apparatus par excellence, that is, he affirms the primacy of force over ideology and laws. Second, the army must be thought *sub specie politica*, i.e., Machiavelli maintains the primacy of politics over military technique. Third, the aforementioned primacy of force must be thought under the aegis of the primacy of politics which is “the prince’s popular and national politics.”⁷⁸ And finally, the prince must rely on his own army.

Here Gramsci is again the fundamental point of reference for Althusser’s interpretation. Althusser broadly repeats his analysis from the 1962 course of the chapters on different types of troops as well as Gramsci’s conclusions on the popular army, founded 1) on recruitment from the popular strata of town and country (“the blending of town and country”⁷⁹) and 2) on reorganization based on the primacy of the infantry over the cavalry. These are profoundly revolutionary ideas: on the one hand, the armed campaign has a political significance against the feudal lords, and on the other, the primacy of infantry over cavalry reverses the social hierarchies of the time. Althusser refers extensively to Gramsci in order to conclude that “the men of the towns and countryside begin to become – learn to become – one and the same people.”⁸⁰ Thus, the army is necessary for the construction of the national state, but not as a simple means for an exterior end. Recruitment makes the goal internal to the medium: “The army,” Althusser writes, “can serve as a means to a political end only if it is already the realized form of the relevant end.”⁸¹ In other words, the army is not only a force available to the prince to reach national unity; it also creates consensus by acting on the minds of the soldiers: “the military apparatus simultaneously exercises an ideological function.”⁸²

Turning to the analysis of the side of consensus understood in a Gramscian sense, that is, as ideology, Althusser divides the field of Machiavelli’s treatment into religion and the image of the prince. The former, as Gramsci emphasized,

⁷⁷ Here it is interesting to compare the 1962 course, where instead of the name Mao, we find the name Lenin (p. 219).

⁷⁸ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, p. 84.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁸² *Ibid.*

is a dominant ideology of the masses (“without the support of ideology, no popular consent to the state”⁸³), which the latter, as a very particular ideological form, i.e., the representation of the prince, stands upon. On this point Althusser distances himself from Gramsci by emphasizing, in the figure of the centaur, the splitting of the beast into force and cunning. The latter

possesses no objective existence: it does not exist. If cunning is a way of governing, given that it has no existence, it can be employed only when it is based on laws or force [*en prenant appui sur les lois ou sur la force*]. Cunning, then, is not a third form of government [*une troisième forme de gouvernement*]; it is government to the second degree, a manner of governing the other two forms of government [*elle est un gouvernement au second degré, une manière de gouverner les deux autres formes de gouvernement*]: force and laws.⁸⁴

However, this ideological politics must be subjected to the primacy of politics: that is, the prince must compose and control his image politically not by conforming himself to the spontaneous ideology in a demagogic way, but by inserting himself into spontaneous ideology with his own political project. In this sense, the thematization of fear without hate has a clear class meaning according to Althusser, because hate is the hatred of the people against the nobles:

The theory of ‘fear without hatred’ is the theory of the political precondition for ‘popular goodwill’ towards the Prince. It is also, factually, an acknowledgement of the popular state’s double function: the unity of coercion and popular consent that so struck Gramsci in Machiavelli.⁸⁵

Machiavelli is therefore not a utopian thinker. Rather, in the way in which he thinks the conditions of existence and class of absolute monarchy, he thinks the conjunctural case and goes directly to the truth of the thing with concepts that make him “the greatest materialist philosopher in history.”⁸⁶

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⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

We thus arrive at a crucial point. What in the 1962 course was considered a veritable setback of Machiavellian thought, a concept of *fortuna* that dominates that of *virtù*, becomes in the analysis of *Machiavelli and Us* his true point of force: the encounter of *virtù* and *fortuna* cannot be theoretically anticipated, or rather, to use the words of Althusser itself, politics presents itself in theory in the form of a determinate absence: “he leaves the names of the protagonists in this encounter completely blank; he provides them with no identity.”⁸⁷ This absence is for Althusser the force of Machiavellian theory.

Now, *Machiavelli and Us*, unlike the course of 1962, is not a draft, but a text ready for printing. Althusser leaves it in his drawer, showing it only to some of his collaborators. Why? My hypothesis is that this reading of Machiavelli, of the new prince whose name cannot be anticipated by the theory, would feed back into the question of the Modern Prince, whose identity could not be established by decree or by genealogical rights, but could only be given in the encounter of *virtù* and *fortuna*. Starting from nothing means that there is no Subject, the PCF (legitimized by the PCUS), prior to the relationship with the masses, but that is precisely in the encounter (or non-encounter) between party and masses that opens the space of the *novum*.

“La solitude de Machiavel” and Que faire?

“Machiavelli’s Solitude” is a text written in May 1977 for a conference held on June 11th of the same year at the Fondation National de Sciences Politiques in Paris. Here Althusser repeats the interpretative lines in the earlier treatments, on which therefore we will not insist. It is enough to emphasize the parallel that Althusser proposes between the primitive accumulation reconstructed by Marx against the ideologies of capital and the primitive political accumulation mentioned by Machiavelli against the “Edifying discourse held by philosophers of natural law on the history of the state”:

Instead of saying that the state is born from right and nature, he tells us how a state should be born if it wants to last, and be strong enough to become the state of a nation. He does not speak the language of the law, he speaks the language of the armed force indispensable to constitute any state, he speaks the language of

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

the cruelty necessary to the beginnings of the state, he speaks the language of a politics without religion which must at all costs use religion, of a politics which must be moral but if necessary not be moral, of a politics that must reject hatred but inspire fear, he speaks the language of the struggle between classes and as for right, laws and morals, he puts them in their place, subordinate. When we read him, as well informed as we are of the violence of history, something in him catches us: a man who, long before all the ideologues have recovered the reality with their stories, is able not to live, not to endure, but to think the violence of the birth of the state.⁸⁸

Machiavelli's thought illuminates in a crude way the birth of bourgeois societies, but even more it sheds light on the "*aleatory character of the formation of national states*":

Because for us they are written on the map, as forever fixed in a destiny that would always have preceded them. For him, on the contrary, they are largely random, the borders are not fixed, it takes conquests but how far? At the limits of languages, beyond? At the limits of the force? We forgot all that. When we read it, we are seized by it as by our forgetfulness. By this strange familiarity, as Freud says, of a repressed.⁸⁹

The parallel that Althusser establishes between the primitive accumulation described in chapter 24 of *Capital* and the primitive political accumulation, the insistence on the element of force and cruelty necessary for the birth of the state, have a precise political meaning: they clearly take a position against the PCF's abandonment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. If the Althusser of *Machiavelli and Us* desacralizes the party through the theory of the encounter of *virtù* and *fortuna*, the Althusser of the 1977 conference takes a position within the party, against the Eurocommunist transformation that was taking place. It is not a case that, differently from the previous texts, he speaks of the Prince as "moment of the dictatorship." In this sense, to reinforce my hypothesis, there is also a passage from the 1978 text *Que faire?* in which Althusser takes Gramsci back up at an overall level, because he seems to consider him the inspiring phi-

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⁸⁸ Althusser, "La solitude de Machiavel", p. 320.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

osopher, via Poulantzas and Buci-Glucksmann, of Eurocommunism. Althusser introduces Machiavelli into the text starting from Gramsci's admiration for him:

What did Machiavelli do? He was the first to speak of the class struggle and of the domination of classes by active bourgeois over the idle and usurious nobility. He has shown that the class domination of the productive bourgeoisie can be assured only by a definite political force, that of the absolute monarchy of 'one', which relies not on the nobility but on the bourgeoisie to found a national state, and to govern the people by virtue and cunning, and by this capacity to subordinate (moral) virtue to cunning and sham (and to the worst means of lust and cruelty), which leads to him the unique, untranslatable name of '*virtù*'.⁹⁰

Everything is already in Gramsci, the beast-force and the human-consensus. But in Machiavelli there is more than in Gramsci why "*la bête chez lui se dédouble*"⁹¹ and *virtù* is the ability of the fox to use force or consent, according to the occasion (the conjuncture). Machiavelli goes further than Gramsci, showing that ideology is constitutive of all state power.

Whether in the form of religion, necessary to create the best consensus, that in any case that is best suited to hold a united army, but also a people, because it produces the best and safest, because the most constant of the forms of consensus of the masses of the people, in the form of the military amalgam, which mobilizes all the men of the people in the army, and giving to the infantry (of the simple men, of the peasants) the step on the cavalry (the traditional body of the nobles, owning horses), is not only a military principle, but a means of producing ideological transformation effects among citizen-soldiers, a real political school that teaches them in practice the unity of the discipline granted, and treating the nobles on horseback as they deserve: as auxiliaries and not the leaders of the real soldiers, the producing citizens.⁹²

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And he adds:

⁹⁰ Althusser, "Que faire?" (ALT2. A 26-05-06),

⁹¹ *Ibid.*.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 72.

We see how much Gramsci, who exalted Machiavelli, is poor compared to his master. For Gramsci never supported, like Machiavelli, the primacy of the moment of force (the army) over hegemony in the state. Highly present in Machiavelli, force appears in Gramsci only to prepare his pure and simple disappearance in the concept of state as hegemony. And when he invoked it, Gramsci never considered force except as brutal and bare force (the Machiavellian figure of the lion, which is only muscles and has nothing in the skull). Gramsci never suspected that the force could be productive, fruitful, and fit to enter a strategy where it can produce effects of hegemony (the political education of the citizens by the amalgam of the army). Finally, Gramsci never suspected that the beast may be anything other than force (the lion) but the trick (the fox), that singular beast infinitely more intelligent than man (which represents the recognition of moral virtues and the good), since all his reason consists in the power to feign. And Gramsci never understood that pretence was consubstantial with the state, or rather with the Prince's political strategy, and that it had above all the effect of producing this representation, this image of the Prince for the use of the people, without which there is no state power, since to exist this power must be recognized by the people who can recognize the state power only by recognizing themselves in him: precisely in the ideological image of the Prince as head of state rendered indisputable by it. In this way, Machiavelli responded to Gramsci's total silence on the question: but what can make the hegemonic apparatus work? He responded to Gramsci's total silence about the ideology considered in his major function, his political function.⁹³

On this point Althusser does not introduce new elements compared to the 1962 course and *Machiavelli and Us*. What is new is the anti-Gramscian accent of a reading that in reality owes a great deal to Gramsci, an emphasis which however can be explained in the context of a controversy with Gramsci as inspiration for Eurocommunism.

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From The Underground Current to Machiavel philosophe

Now we arrive at the group of writings from the 1980s dedicated to Machiavelli. In the *Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter*, written in 1982, Althusser seems to provide the 'philosophy' of Machiavelli promised in *Machiavelli and Us*. As is well-known, the fundamental concepts of this period

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

are those of encounter and void and from this perspective (an Epicurean one), Althusser reads Machiavelli.

Encounter between a man and a region, encounter between fortune and virtue, from which, from a nameless man in a corner of Italy without a name, the great project of national unity can arise. Nothing new compared to *Machiavelli and Us*.

The political *void*: it is in the political void that the encounter must produce itself by starting from what must take hold for national unity. But this political void is above all a philosophical void:

There is no Cause that precedes its effects, no Principle of morality or theology (as in all the Aristotelian political tradition: the good and the bad regimes, the decadence of the good ones in the bad ones), one does not reason there in the Necessity of the accomplished fact, but in the contingency of the fact to be accomplished⁹⁴.

Machiavelli's philosophy is a philosophy of the void:

[A philosophy that] begins by evacuating any philosophical problem, therefore by refusing to give itself any 'object' whatsoever [...] to begin from nothing, and from this infinitesimal and aleatory variation of the nothing that is the deviation of the fall.⁹⁵

And again:

Machiavelli who emptied all the philosophical concepts of Plato and Aristotle to think of the possibility of making of Italy a national state.⁹⁶

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It is a materialism of the encounter thought through politics, a materialism of the encounter that does not presuppose anything pre-established: it is a philosophy in which the alternative between the encounter and the non-encounter reigns. But more, this philosophy goes so far as to affirm the provisional nature of each encounter:

⁹⁴ Althusser, *Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre*, p. 546.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 567.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

[N]othing ever guarantees that the reality of the accomplished fact is the guarantee of its durability.⁹⁷

Machiavelli's philosophy, which Althusser reads through the Epicurean concepts of atoms, void and clinamen, is a philosophy *du fait à accomplir*:

History is only the permanent revocation of the accomplished fact by another indecipherable fact to be accomplished without knowing in advance or ever, where or how the event of its revocation will occur.⁹⁸

Now, through this materialism of the encounter, the real reason for the profound fascination exercised by Machiavelli, Althusser redefines the question of the party. In 1982 Althusser draws all the implications already implicit in *Machiavelli and Us*: there is neither a legitimated political subject nor a place designated *ex ante*, this is the reason for the insistence on the aleatory, on the fact that both the name of the federator and the region are left "blank" by Machiavelli. In other words, regeneration is not to be expected from the PCF: the model is Cesare Borgia, "a man of nothing, starting from nothing, and starting from an unassignable place [*un homme de rien, parti de rien, et partant d'un lieu inassignable*]."⁹⁹

Althusser returns to Machiavelli in two short texts of 1985 which were initially conceived as chapters of the autobiography and then deleted and published posthumously with the title of *The Only Materialist Tradition*. There is also a strong insistence on the categories of void, encounter, and taking hold in these texts. Again, the encounter between *virtù* and *fortuna*, the good occasion (it seems to me that there is an insistence on the concept of occasion that is not present in the previous writings), with an even stronger insistence on the absence of the presuppositions of political action:

The most astonishing thing about Machiavelli, in his theory of the New Prince having to found a new Principality, is that this new man is a man of nothing, without a past, without title or office, an anonymous man, alone and naked. [...] Not only is he like a naked man, but he finds himself intervening in a place that is

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 547.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 545.

itself anonymous and stripped of any significant social and political determination, which could hinder its action.¹⁰⁰

In this sense, it is extremely interesting that Althusser identifies the Machiavellian concept of *fortuna*, which in the course of 1962 constituted the failure of Machiavelli's thought, as the very heart of his philosophy:

[T]he unusual greatness of Machiavelli's thought (that it is largely implicit does not matter) to have at the very least conceived the essence of "fortune", as implausible as it may seem, as the nothingness and the void, that is to say the nothing of cause, of essence and origin.¹⁰¹

What relationship does this change of position have with the question of the party? Althusser explicitly declares that the Gramscian theory of the communist party as the new Prince was meaningful if linked with the Third International, "world party with a single center of decision and direction, its office to organize national parties and subject them to the same strategy and political tactics."¹⁰² With the dissolution of the Third International, however, the communist movement "no longer has a center of strategy and common tactics."¹⁰³ Althusser's surprising conclusion is then that "*Machiavelli does not serve us for anything*."¹⁰⁴ Surprising precisely because his philosophy of the encounter designates a political action that does not presuppose a center that directs *ex ante*, but the ability to federate the forces in the field without the presupposition of either a transcendent subject or a material structure of the world that contain the path for the emergence of a subject.

Finally, in a draft from 1986, *Machiavel philosophe*, in which he cursorily repeats a whole series of elements of his previous interpretation, Althusser summarizes Machiavelli's philosophy through four theses:

Thesis 1: die Welt ist alles was der Fall ist ("the world is all that is the case" Wittgenstein).

¹⁰⁰ Althusser, "L'unique tradition matérialiste", pp. 91–92.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

Corollary 1: Everything is encounter in the world.

Thesis 2: Primacy of movement over form or structure. Primacy of movement over matter/primacy of energy over mass / primacy of energy principle over inertia principle

Thesis 3: there can be sketched, missed, fugitive encounters, +++ or more or less durable. In this ++++ the encounters give rise to stable or hereditary (in biology) structure

Thesis 4: there are no laws of these structures, except that they present structural invariants¹⁰⁵.

And then in the pages 4-5 he adds:

Note that Thesis 3 has political implications. Primacy of mass movement over any political organization. [Notez que la thèse 3 a des implications politique. Primat du mouvement de masse sur toute organisation politique.]¹⁰⁶

Some interpretative elements remain, but the real novelty consists in the thesis that affirms the primacy of the movement of the masses over the prince, a sort of spontaneity that makes the void not in the absence of presuppositions of political action, but alluding to a sort of power that tends towards actuation, the void becomes the correlative concept not of the encounter, but of the world, of a fullness that must be grasped. This text should be read together with Althusser's *June Theses*¹⁰⁷ and is full with a strong eschatological charge.

Conclusion

It would be completely misleading to try to read every page Althusser dedicated to Machiavelli as a conscious taking of position within the party. It seems to me rather that there is an attempt to rethink through Machiavelli on the one hand the question of the party in relation to the Marxist theory of history and on the other to re-define his own position as a Marxist intellectual within the French communist party. In this sense I think it is relevant that in 1962 Althusser considered the Machiavellian theory of *fortuna* to be aporetic, while in 1972-76 it was precisely this element that became the heart of his interpretation of Machiavellian

¹⁰⁵ ALT2.A29-06.07, p. 3

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁰⁷ ALT2.A29-06.02.

political theory, and in 1982 the fundamental concept that renders Machiavelli a pillar of the subterranean current of the materialism of encounter. How can this element not be read as a reworking of both the party-history relationship and the party-intellectual relationship? And moreover, how can we not read in this sense also the affirmation of the 1986 text on the primacy of the masses over all political organization? Of course, we must avoid the risk to consider this position as the necessary outcome of his path.

Translated by Dave Mesing

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From Traces of Communism to Islets of Communism: Revisiting Althusser's Metaphors

Introduction

In 1976 Louis Althusser delivered a lecture at the Catalan College of Building Engineers and Technical Architects. In the Spanish translation of the text that appeared in a collection of Althusser's texts in 1978 there is a reference to “esbozos y sintomas de comunismo” (outlines and symptoms of communism),¹ a phrase that also appears in the English translation of the text.² When Althusser incorporated parts of this text in *Les vaches noires* (one of his unpublished manuscripts from the 1970s) he referred to “esquisses et promesses du communisme” (outlines and promises of communism).³ In the IMEC archives there is also another French version of the text that refers to “esquisses et traces du communisme” (outlines and traces of communism).⁴ It is also in *Les vaches noires* that we find another metaphor that would reappear in Althusser's texts. Althusser insists that “islets of communism already exist in the world” (“qu'il existe déjà dans le monde des îlots de communisme”).⁵ In an interview Althusser gave to Rossana Rossanda he speaks of “virtual forms of communism”⁶ emerging in those forms of associations that escape commodity relations.

All of these metaphors point to a preoccupation with how communist forms might emerge within capitalist societies. However, there are from the beginning

¹ Louis Althusser, *Nuevos escritos (La crisis del movimiento comunista internacional frente a la teoría marxista)*, Editorial Laia, Barcelona 1978, p. 54.

² Louis Althusser, “Some Questions Concerning the Crisis of Marxist Theory and of the International Communist Movement”, trans. David Broder, *Historical Materialism* 23 (1/2015), p. 178.

³ Louis Althusser, *Les Vaches noires. Interview imaginaire*, ed. G.M. Goshgarian, PUF, Paris 2016, p. 248.

⁴ Louis Althusser, “Conférence sur la dictature de prolétariat à Barcelone. Un texte inédit de Louis Althusser”, *Période* (2014).

⁵ Althusser, *Les Vaches noires. Interview imaginaire*, p. 264.

⁶ Louis Althusser, *Solitude de Machiavel*, ed. Ives Sintomer, PUF, Paris 1998, p. 285.

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open questions with regard to this particular line of thinking in Althusser. Does this reference simply point to a quasi-metaphysical conception of the communist mode of production emerging out of the capitalist one, reproducing a version of the classical historicist idea of the ‘necessary’ succession of modes of production, or the idea that every mode of production carries the seeds of its *aufhebung*? In what sense do communist elements exist as traces or outlines? How are these related to a theory of transition and revolution? What is the actual meaning of the reference to “islets of communism”? In what follows I will try to show how these metaphors point to both Althusser’s attempt to think through a “new practice of politics” for communism as well as to the limits of this thinking.

Conditions for the existence and non-existence of a mode of production

In order to discuss these questions we must first revisit a manuscript by Althusser from 1973, entitled “Book on Imperialism”.⁷ This is part of a series of unpublished manuscripts by Althusser from the 1970s, which already included the basic aspects of the materialism of the encounter or aleatory materialism that was to be associated initially with the texts by Althusser from the 1980s published posthumously.⁸ The importance of this manuscript is that it offers one of Althusser’s most elaborate attempts to present a theory of the modes of production and of transition.

Althusser’s starting point is an emphasis on the primacy of the relations of production over the forces of production and consequently the centrality of class struggle. However, it is interesting that Althusser starts the discussion on the mode of production with the assertion that “*the socialist mode of production does not exist*” and that in contrast “[t]he capitalist mode of production exists and the communist mode of production exists.”⁹ Althusser insists that this was also Lenin’s position:

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⁷ Louis Althusser, *History and Imperialism. Writings, 1963-1986*, ed. and trans. G.N. Goshgarian, Polity, London 2020.

⁸ Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings 1978–86*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian, Verso, London 2006.

⁹ Althusser, *History and Imperialism*, p. 63.

[Lenin] defines this transition, this “socialist socioeconomic” formation, as the contradictory co-existence of the capitalist mode of production and the communist mode of production – thus as the co-existence of capitalist elements and communist elements, of elements of the communist mode of production and of the capitalist mode of production.¹⁰

Until this point, we are within positions that can also be found in the French debates of that period. Bettelheim used this as the starting point for his research on the *Class Struggles in the USSR*,¹¹ and also Balibar would use this as an important part of his argument in *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*,¹² namely the idea that socialism is a period of transition marked by intensified class struggle and the contradictory co-existence of two opposing modes of production, the capitalist mode and the emerging communist mode of production.

However, it is at this point that Althusser attempts to suggest that the communist mode of production exists from the moment the capitalist mode of production comes into existence:

Hence the question: *when does communism* begin to exist, understood as elements (or seeds, but seeds in the sense of seeds capable of producing elements)? Answer: from the moment the capitalist mode of production exists. This answer is, however, too generic, and is abstract. Yet it means (a thesis defended by Marx) that the capitalist mode of production contains the seeds of the communist mode of production in its own contradictions from the moment it comes into existence. More precisely, we can say that communism exists (begins to exist in a real sense) with the earliest developments of the workers’ class struggle. Look at what Marx says in the [1844] *Manuscripts* about the French workers: society is no longer a means to an end, but a need. Look at everything Marx says about the disintegration of capitalist forms of the family, religion and so on.¹³

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹¹ Charles Bettelheim, *Class Struggle in the USSR*, 2 vols., trans. Brian Pearce, Monthly Review Press, New York 1976–77.

¹² Étienne Balibar, *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, trans. Graham Locke, New Left Books, London 1977.

¹³ Althusser, *History and Imperialism*, p. 63.

Althusser suggests that this is the result of the continuous effectivity of class antagonism inscribed in the capitalist relation of production. In this sense, an element of decomposition and disintegration of the capitalist mode of production is always present from the beginning.

The capitalist mode of production, which emerges on and from the decay of pre-capitalist modes of production (not just feudal, but other modes of production as well, and not just where there is no feudalism – for example, the Asiatic mode of production, the lineage-based mode of production, or the vestiges of the slave-based mode of production), itself decays from the moment it emerges, for a simple reason: the antagonism of the capitalist relation of production. This antagonism exists from the origin on and, from the origin on, produces effects of decomposition because of its antagonism (class struggle), which affects the forms of existence of the capitalist mode of production (division of labour, organization of labour, the family and other ideological state apparatuses).¹⁴

And here is how Althusser describes the communist elements emerging in the context of capitalism as a result of the class struggles of the working class.

The forms in which communist elements appear in capitalist society itself are countless. Marx himself names a whole series of them, from forms of children's education combining work and schooling to the new relations reigning in proletarian organizations, the proletarian family, the proletarian community of life and struggle, joint-stock companies, workers' co-operatives and so on, to say nothing of the "socialization of production", which poses all sorts of problems, yet should also be noted. All these elements (which have multiplied in the past few years, especially since 1968; see LIP, the proletarian inventions in the class struggle: "they have shown that the workers could do without bosses", Séguéy) will not by themselves lead to communism. Better: they are not all communist elements. They are elements for communism. Communism will adopt them, combine them, perfect them and develop their potentiality [*virtualités*], integrating them into the revolution in the relations of production which commands everything and is still absent from our world. Communism, however, will not come about by itself. It has to be

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 63–64.

built at the end of a long march, one stage of which is called socialism, which is not a mode of production.¹⁵

I think this passage is very important because it offers a rather complex theory of these elements for communism. The fact that Althusser insists that they are not communist elements but rather elements *for* communism points exactly towards the idea of communism being the outcome of a long period of transition.

In order to substantiate his position, Althusser attempts to offer elements of a theory of the mode of production. Of particular interest is the way he opposes any theory of simple commodity production / theory of the mercantile mode of production as a separate mode of production. We know how this theory, which in a certain way can draw on the authority of Engels's preface and supplement to *Capital* Vol. III,¹⁶ often returns in Marxist debates. However, Althusser also points out how the reference to the mercantile mode of production is also a basic reference within bourgeois ideology. Althusser insists that for bourgeois ideology:

[t]he capitalist mode of production is just the mercantile mode of production in its developed form, its naturally developed form: the mercantile mode of production serves to found the capitalist mode of production in bourgeois ideology, inasmuch as bourgeois ideology thinks the capitalist mode of production by way of the founding categories of the mercantile mode of production.¹⁷

For Althusser, this conception of the mercantile mode of production forms the background for the tendency of bourgeois ideology to present capitalism as the *natural* mode of production.

The capitalist mode of production, which exists, is the only one that can exist, the only one that exists, the only one that has a right to existence. The fact that it has not always existed (and even that must be qualified, for when we look into the matter in detail, we always find this reality, which is natural, everywhere: independent petty producers), or that it has not always visibly existed, obscured as it was by horrid realities – this is merely an accident of history. It should have

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65.

¹⁶ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works (MECW)*, Lawrence and Wishart, London 1975–2005, vol. 37.

¹⁷ Althusser, *History and Imperialism*, p. 88.

existed from all eternity and, thank God, it exists today, having carried the day against obscurantism, and we may be sure that nature having finally vanquished non-nature, light having finally triumphed over darkness, nature and light, that is, the capitalist mode of production, can be sure of existing for all eternity. It has finally been *recognized!*¹⁸

Althusser does not deny the existence of independent petty producers. What he rejects is the position that these represent “the originary form of the capitalist mode of production.”¹⁹ His proposition is that there exists a form that may be termed “independent petty production” but “[t]here is nothing natural about this form” and “[t]his form can exist in different modes of production.”²⁰

This elaboration gives Althusser the opportunity to return to what he defines as the “pseudo-mode of socialist production.”²¹ His main point is that “in the socialist social formation there co-exist, in contradictory fashion, elements belonging to the capitalist relation of production and elements preparing for the communist relation of production.”²² But what are these elements that are preparing for the communist relation of production? Here is Althusser’s answer:

The latter is prepared by collective ownership of the means of production and by a whole series of arrangements: the plan, guarantees that control the labour market, a wage structure that tends to reduce wage differentials and, generally speaking, organizational measures that tend to prepare communal forms of the management of enterprises and of the nation (measures that aim to attenuate and then do away with the division of labour, the division between mental and manual labour, the division between town and country and so on).²³

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For Althusser this suggests a broader non-historicist conception of the possibility but also of the non-possibility of a mode of production that is an integral part of a materialism of the encounter. Consequently, such a materialist theory of the emergence of capitalism presupposes

¹⁸ Althusser 2020, pp. 88-89.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

²¹ Althusser, *History and Imperialism*, p. 98.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²³ *Ibid.*

that we have a certain idea of what it means to exist for a mode of production: the conditions of its existence – of its enduring reproduction – and of the relationship of this existence to non-existence. In other words, it presupposes that we have a clear understanding of the fact that a mode of production may not exist, may exist and perish as soon as it appears, or, on the contrary, may grow stronger and pursue its historical destiny. This presupposes a theory of the conditions of existence that is at the same time a theory of the conditions of the non-existence or disappearance of a mode of production. For we always reason on the basis of accomplished fact and nothing else.²⁴

Although Althusser links this reference to his non-historicist conception of the emergence of the capitalist mode of production and the importance of thinking “on the basis of the accomplished fact,” a point he would also make in his later texts on aleatory materialism, at the same time it can be considered an attempt by Althusser to rethink the possibility and non-possibility of a communist relation of production. This relation of existence to non-existence points exactly to a conception of history as an open-ended process, something that also points to the open character of any process of revolutionary change and transition to communism. Thus, the entire problematic of the ‘socialist transition’ should not be considered in the sense of ‘building socialism’ but in terms of a theory (and experimental practice) of the conditions for the existence and the conditions for the non-existence of communist relations and forms within ‘transition processes’ conditioned by class struggle.

For Althusser, modes of production do not necessarily find corresponding social formations that enable their reproduction. This can explain why elements of modes of production emerge but fail to achieve such social reproduction. This is a basic tenet of Althusser’s conception of the centrality of the encounter and how an encounter might take place, might not take place, or might take place but not hold.

[N]ot every mode of production ‘finds’, automatically, by virtue of some sort of divine right or ontological argument (which would have it that every essence is fully entitled to exist, that every mode of production exists by virtue of its essence), *the form* in which it can exist. If it ‘finds’ that form, that is, if existing conditions

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

allow it to endow itself with existence, to realize its existence, to ‘forge’ it, then the mode of production in question will exist. If it fails to find that form, if existing conditions do not allow it to realize it, to impose it, then the mode of production will not exist. Or if it has begun to exist for a time but, at the end of the prescribed period (for in these matters Spinozist necessity is unrelenting), has not managed to endow itself with *the form* of social formation corresponding to it, that is, the form that allows it to reproduce itself in either simple or extended form, then the mode of production in question will perish.²⁵

For Althusser, this also goes for the communist mode of production and its historical possibility. That is why it is important for Althusser “to compare the cases of existence with the cases of non-existence (in the sense indicated above) and *think the conditions of existence setting out from the conditions of non-existence*.”²⁶ This points, in my reading, to Althusser at the same time thinking all the failures and shortcomings of ‘actually existing socialism’ and, by means of this, rethinking how the communist elements or the elements for communism can actually be transformed into communist social forms that could last. Moreover, it points towards the necessity of thinking the very contradictory character of any transition process, the constant and uneven antagonistic confrontation between capitalist and communist relations and forms, but also the equally constant and uneven class struggles involved, as well as the fact that there is nothing predetermined in this process.

This is not without political consequences, with all due respect to specialists of the accomplished fact. For (to come back to the case before us, socialism) it can tell us something about the conditions of existence of an embryonic mode of production setting out from the conditions of its non-existence. This contradictory situation is very interesting, for – what a surprise! – it simply repeats Lenin’s theory on the ‘transition’ from capitalism to communism. In socialism, the conditions for the non-existence of communism have all been met and are there for all to see: they are the subsisting elements of the capitalist mode of production. Of course, they exist in “different forms” (Lenin), as do the classes and the class struggle; of course, they exist in “different forms” – Marx would have [said] ‘transformed forms’. Yet they are there, and are not imaginary at all, but very

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 128–129.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

real and active. And it is clearly on condition that we ‘resolve’, in the right sense (in the right direction, thanks to a well-oriented political line), this contradiction between the conditions of existence and the conditions of non-existence of the communist mode of production that we will some day reach the communist mode of production. As for those who think that everything has already been decided in advance (as the destiny of the capitalist mode of production was decided in advance as soon as it came into existence, the proof being that, when it happened to perish because the conditions of its existence had not been fulfilled, one says it never existed – it is so easy to suppose, in this way, that all the dead never existed!), they need only reread Lenin, who said: we can fall back rather than advancing towards communism; we can “cool our heels” [*faire antichambre*] in a socialism which, because it has stopped advancing, retreats. It really seems to me that Lenin had understood the interest of this little question about the conditions of the non-existence (or death) of a mode of production fairly well. I mean the *political* interest (for, thank god, Lenin, at least, was not given to speculation).²⁷

Consequently, for Althusser “the question of the *existence* of a mode of production in a social formation is posed only as a function of this contradictory couple: conditions of its non-existence/conditions of its existence.”²⁸ However, it is also obvious that Althusser at this point insists on the fact that the elements for communism can be transformed into communist social forms only after a long process of struggle and transformation.

It is also interesting that later in this manuscript Althusser returns to this point. Althusser here deals with how Marx insists on only discussing phenomena in their pure essence. Althusser believes that Marx here refers to a process of scientific experimentation.

Yet Marx does nothing other than what any scientist does. He ‘isolates’ the mechanism that he has succeeded in identifying as essential; he isolates it from all details that might alter its course in an accidental, not an essential way; and he analyses the phenomenon in its ‘pure form’. Just like the physicist who analyses the law of falling bodies, to take a simple example, he ignores everything that does not concern the phenomenon in its pure form (friction and so on). He thus creates

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 132–133.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

the conditions for true scientific experimentation; the fact that it is purely conceptual experimentation changes nothing here. It is indeed an experiment in which the scientist Marx allows the elements to vary after isolating them as pertinent.²⁹

Although Althusser here mainly refers to Marx's attempt to theorize the capitalist mode of production, it is also possible to think that Althusser here also in a certain way is referring to the transition to communism as a process of experimentation, something that Marx also suggested in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*.

The question then arises: what transformation will the state undergo in communist society? In other words, what social functions will remain in existence there that are analogous to present state functions? This question can only be answered scientifically, and one does not get a flea-hop nearer to the problem by a thousandfold combination of the word people with the word state.

Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*.³⁰

Consequently, I would like to suggest that the theoretical line that we can find in Althusser's *Book on Imperialism* is exactly a conceptualisation of the question of the potential communist mode of production in terms of the contradictory and antagonistic co-existence of capitalist and communist relations in a transition period, a period that can only be described as a 'long march' of constant struggle and experimentation. This conception is also echoed in Balibar's arguments in his book on the dictatorship of the proletariat.

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That is why it produces nothing but confusion to picture socialism in terms of the simple 'rationalization' of the organization of social labour, the parasitic capitalist class having been eliminated (even if this process is supposed to be accompanied, at the social level, by a fair distribution of the products of labour, and at the political level by greater liberty and increased 'participation' for the masses). Such

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

³⁰ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works (MECW)*, vol. 24, p. 95.

a picture leaves out the essential point: that socialism, as an historical process, can only develop on the basis of a profound, progressive transformation of the division of labour, on the basis of a conscious political struggle against the division of manual and intellectual labour, against ‘narrow’ specialization, for what Marx called ‘all-round competence’. Socialism cannot consist in the permanent *association*, in the service of their common interest, of the various social strata and categories of ‘working people’ existing in capitalist society: it cannot perpetuate, or even ‘guarantee’ the distinctions in function and status which divide them, as if there always had to be engineers on the one hand and unskilled workers on the other, professors, lawyers and labourers . . . It can only be the continuous process of the *transformation* of these divisions, which will finally suppress the foundations of all *competition*, in the capitalist sense of the term, between working people, therefore the very foundations of wage labour and consequently the bases of *commodity* production, whether planned or not. In an earlier chapter I talked about the constitution of the proletariat as a class in terms of a process which can only ‘end’ with the constitution of the proletariat as the ruling class. It seems to me that it is therefore now time to propose the following argument: socialism is a process in the course of which the condition of the proletariat *becomes generalized* at the same time as it is transformed and tends to *disappear*. This is, in both senses of the term, *the end point of the formation of the proletariat*.³¹

Communism in the margins

However, there is also another emerging tendency in Althusser’s thinking of the emergence of potential communist forms. This has to do with the various references to the margins. We know that Althusser always referred to Marx’s passage in Vol. I of *Capital* about commodity relations emerging in the interstices of pre-capitalist modes of production. Here is the passage from volume one of *Capital*.

In the ancient Asiatic and other ancient modes of production, we find that the conversion of products into commodities, and therefore the conversion of men into producers of commodities, holds a subordinate place, which, however, increases in importance as the primitive communities approach nearer and nearer

³¹ Balibar, *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, pp. 149–150.

to their dissolution. Trading nations, properly so called, exist in the ancient world only in its interstices, like the gods of Epicurus in the Intermundia.³²

We have seen that this can be read in the sense of a non-historicist conception of the emergence of social forms and potential antagonistic forms of production and as part of a materialism of the encounter. However, there is also Althusser's interest in the image of the margin.

This is evident in his 1976 manuscript *How to be a Marxist in Philosophy*.³³ An important segment of this manuscript is dedicated to a discussion of the image of the margin. This segment is Althusser's attempt to rethink how different philosophical systems include a notion of Order, but also a notion of the limits of this Order, i.e. the particular relation between the inside and the outside:

We must accordingly find the means, and it is not easy, to think, simultaneously, the Order which is round, and thus limited by its curve, and the not-outside, that is, the absence of curves and limits. A limit that is, in sum, a non-limit, a circle that is a circle, but with no outside.³⁴

With regard to this notion of the limit, Althusser first turns towards Heidegger, whose thinking on the question of the limit he finds interesting, while at the same time he thinks Heidegger "acknowledges the issue, but thrashes around in rather than resolving it, since, instead of maintaining a healthy balance, he assigns Being primacy over beings, like the good spiritualist that he has basically continued to be."³⁵ Instead, Althusser turns towards Derrida.

Derrida has very convincingly shown that we must look to the *margin* for the answer to the question of a limit that is not a limit. Everybody knows what a margin is: there is one on this very page, an empty space alongside a full one. You would think that fullness could not do without emptiness, and the other way around. This presupposes a limit between the two, of course, but a limit that is not an Order or, at any rate, does not derive from an Order, since we can vary the margin,

³² Marx and Engels, *Collected Works (MECW)*, vol. 35, p. 90.

³³ Louis Althusser, *How to be a Marxist in Philosophy*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian, Bloomsbury, London 2017.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

and thus the limit. It makes no difference whether the margin is two centimetres wide, or three; it's enough to come to an agreement with the compositor, and you're all set. Derrida has seen, then, that this 'play' matters to the margin, quite as much as the margin matters to the limit. But this 'play' of course changes everything, since it is free, not constrained; thus it frees itself and frees us of all Order, flat or round, monist or dualist, or even twisted.³⁶

However, Althusser does not limit himself to this appreciation of Derrida and his conception of the margin.³⁷ For Althusser, the margin becomes here the central part of an almost poetic thinking of the emergence of new social forms and communist virtualities within capitalist formations.

This margin is now beginning to sustain our hopes, after being subjected to our despair. For what is in the margin is marginal: the mad, children, deviants, philosophers, the mentally ill, deranged or normal artists, the abnormal and so on. And it turns out that, once normality has been demystified (Canguilhem has done a great deal to help us understand this, after Spinoza and Nietzsche), one suddenly realizes that interesting things go on in the vicinity of the margin: on the margin of official society, where the exploited workers and the immigrant workers are, together with children, from whose mouths the truth has long come, and artists, from the greatest to the humblest, with Breton and his friends in-between, and the poor in spirit when they are saints, even if they don't know it, and the mad, and certain prisoners, Soviet and Latin American prisoners in particular and so on. The margin is also the beach, the one on which everyone will alight to enjoy the sun after we have at last crossed this terrible river of socialism in the boat of the dictatorship of the proletariat. And then we shall have the free reign of the margin on the beach of communism: there will be no more written texts, no more written right, no more written law, no more written orders, no more writing, nothing but living traces, traces of the spoken word, exchanges of words and goods without money, without (written) accounts, exchanges of looks and voices, of love or hate, with no dishonest descriptions of the merchandise. This will be

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 87–88.

³⁷ For Derrida's conception of the *margin* see Jacques Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Harvester Press, London 1982.

the end of the dictatorship of writing, the end of the dictatorship of language, the reign of the universal margin and the universal family.³⁸

Moreover, Althusser insists that this emergence of new social forms at the margins is something that is already happening, and that it is not just some type of utopian thinking.

What is encouraging – for I know you, you’re going to say I’m raving – is that the margin is no utopia; it exists today, well and truly, in reality. Witness not just Derrida’s theory, but the existence of all the marginal sorts, in the official statistics or not. It exists and is developing in every country – yes, in every country, even the USSR. I shall explain that to you some day; unfortunately, I don’t have the time today. If that isn’t a way of saying that Derrida hasn’t missed the mark in putting the question of the margin in the command post! The interest of Derrida’s research resides in the demonstration that philosophy and politics are, in a certain regard, the same thing. The fact that a theory of the margin such as his leads straight to an encounter with the theory of politics and, from a certain angle, anticipates communism, proves this, quite obviously, with no need for comment.³⁹

After some references to how science can offer ways to think of new forms, Althusser does not elaborate more on the subject, calling on us to be “sure that the work of the sciences, the reflections of the philosophers, and the imagination of artists and politicians will know how to pursue it and make it more precise.”⁴⁰

Leaving aside the poetic overtones of some of the formulations, it is obvious that Althusser, with this imagery of the margin, attempted to think through this idea of elements of communism emerging in struggles and movements. However, what is missing with regard to the formulation concerning communist elements

³⁸ Althusser, *How to be a Marxist in Philosophy*, p. 88 The paragraph ends with a strange invocation of universal whiteness. ‘I tell you, the reign of whiteness, which one will see in the whites of people’s eyes, the universal reign of whites, that is, of the white race, but all the races will be white [*blanc*], that is, all colours, and only the wise guys [*blancs-becs*, literally, white beaks] will have to watch their behaviour, unless they turn into Prince Charmings [*merles blancs*, literally, white blackbirds]. What is more, all blackbirds will be white: black will be suppressed, along with all the mourning and suffering it is possible to avoid (*Ibid.*, p. 88).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 88–89.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

in *Book on Imperialism* is this idea of a ‘Long March’ of a processes of struggles, confrontations, and experimentation, as part of a transitional period of intensified class struggles, which would also have as a starting point a revolutionary rupture.

It is true that in the second half of the 1970s Althusser often stressed the importance of initiatives of the masses. In his intervention in the debate at the 22nd Congress of the French Communist Party Althusser insisted on the importance of

restoring their voice to the masses who make history. Not just putting oneself ‘at the service of the masses’ (a slogan which may be pretty reactionary), but *opening one’s ears to them*, studying and understanding their aspirations and their contradictions, their aspirations in their contradictions, learning how to be attentive to the masses’ imagination and inventiveness.⁴¹

However, at the same time Althusser also concentrated on another crucial aspect that perhaps can explain the imagery of the margin. This is the fact that many of the popular initiatives that represented for him a hopeful way out of the crisis of the communist movement were happening outside the official parties and trade unions. This poses a grave problem for him, in both the East and the West.

In the East as in the West we are confronted with the grave problem of the relation existing between these organizations and the State: with the problem, in the East, of the fusion of these organizations with the State, an open fusion; with the problem, in the West, of the *risk* of fusion, because the bourgeois State never stops trying to integrate the organizations of class struggle of the working class into its own operations, often with success.⁴²

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Consequently, Althusser in the same text, the text of his 1977 Venice intervention on the crisis of Marxism, insists that this is the crucial question:

And above all – the most important of questions for past and future – how can relations be established with the mass movement which, transcending the tradi-

⁴¹ Louis Althusser, “On the Twenty-Second Congress of the French Communist Party”, *New Left Review* (July 1977), p. 11.

⁴² Louis Althusser, “The Crisis of Marxism”, *Marxism Today* (July 1978), p. 220.

tional distinction between trade union and party, will permit the development of initiatives among the people, which usually fail to fit into the division between the economic and political spheres (even ‘added together’)? Because we are witnessing more and more mass movements of the people arising by themselves, outside of the trade unions and parties, bringing – or capable of bringing – something indispensable to the struggle. In short, how can we properly respond to the demands and expectations of the masses of the people?⁴³

So one might say that this increased importance of the imagery of the margin is one way for Althusser to suggest the difficulty posed by the fact that the autonomous initiatives of the masses emerge outside the traditional organization and political forms associated with the working class movement, thus making it even harder to actually think how it is possible to transform the elements for communism into a transitional process. Thus, the reference to communist forms actually emerging in the margins or interstices or the reference to communist islets is one way to emphasize the dynamic of these elements, even in a manner that seemingly at least overlooks the question of the organizational forms. Or one might suggest that this is exactly Althusser’s way of pointing to the radical political and organizational novelty and ingenuity required to actually transform the ‘traces of communism’ into a feasible strategy for communism.

Islets of communism

However, he, at least in some of his texts and interventions, seems to turn more towards this conception of communism already existing in the interstices of contemporary societies. A 1980 letter offers an almost poetic vision of an already existing communism in those practices and relations that escape the commodity relation.

I am in Greece with friends. In Athens. What a wonderful country: the beauty of the city under the sun, and now the storm: a splendour, I see the city from the apartment, and I am listening to Beethoven’s 7th Symphony on the radio. Only the sea, the islands, and the beach are missing. The woman I love is with me. Friends will come, wonderful. I am happy and communism is within reach.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Communism exists today in all places where

- 1) there is no commodity relation
- 2) therefore no economic exploitation
- 3) therefore no political domination
- 4) therefore no ideological servitude or intimidation

It exists everywhere in the world, in the islets of friendship (between all the friends that love each other and talk about what interests them, between all the children that play, between all the men that play football or other games where it is about winning by respecting the rules of the game, without hurting anyone. Communism is respect for others, when all relations of exploitation, domination and intimidation have been suppressed or suspended.⁴⁴

The same tone emerges in all the accounts we have from Althusser's intervention in a debate at Terni in Italy again in 1980. Christian Lo Iacono has attempted to offer a reconstruction of this intervention by looking at the reports in various newspapers.

On 4 April 1980 one can read in the Italian newspapers various accounts of a debate that took place during the "Study days at the Paris Commune", organized by political and artistic collectives of the Terni steelworks. Althusser took part in them with his old friend Cesare Luporini. The film recording has been lost, but there are reports of extensive segments, the most significant. In any case, a comparative reading of the different newspapers leaves no doubt as to what Althusser said. He overwhelms his listeners with a radicalism that, according to witnesses, overflows into delirium. They describe a frenetic Althusser as he waits to take the floor. He poses as an interpreter who almost disappears behind the 'voices' and 'actions' of which he is the bearer. The protagonists are the mass movements that all over the world play on a political scene completely different than that dominated by the system of representation, be it democratic or bureaucratic. Despite the insufficient documentation at our disposal, it is very clear that he had an idea of politics far removed from that of the slow activity of institutional transformation. Above all, there is the idea of the paradox of politics, of its impossibility (indeed, the Machiavellian idea of "occupying the place

⁴⁴ Louis Althusser in William S. Lewis, « Sur un voyage en Grèce », 2018, available at: <https://www.imec-archives.com/papiers/william-lewis/>.

of the impossible”). “Never,” he said, “in history has there been verified such a favourable situation as the present [...]. The military forces of the great powers [...] cancel each other out, mutually paralyze each other; Western communist parties and workers’ organizations are at an impasse, cannot move, therefore, the space for revolution is free: the only thing is to know what we want, and to want it by thinking reality as it is.”⁴⁵

And again we have the image of communism already existing everywhere, and of the islets of communism already existing in the interstices of society.

Communism exists “everywhere – even here, today, in Terni, or in a church, or on a field where football is played – there where real relationships, are created, islets of communism characterized by three conditions: no economic exploitation, no pressure from political power, no ideological servitude.” “Otherwise,” Althusser adds, “socialism is crap.” Communism is not eclipsed, on the contrary, “the future is played in our head,” on condition of defeating all “paper tigers,” all “misconceptions.”⁴⁶

The similarity between the citations in the journalistic reports and the letter mentioned above suggests that the reports are rather accurate. Moreover, we also have similar references in his interview with RAI 30 of April 1980.⁴⁷ In a certain way, this idea of already existing communism in the islets of communism emerging in contemporary capitalist societies combined with this emphasis on the actual strength of popular initiatives (a recurring theme in his interventions from that period) is Althusser’s ‘bending the stick to the other side. It represents Althusser’s attempt to escape the difficulty of rethinking the political, theoretical, and ideological conditions in order to overcome the deep crisis of the existing communist parties and mass organisations.

⁴⁵ Christian Lo Iacono, “Un amour compliqué avec les marxismes dissidents italiens”, 2015, available at : *La Pensée* 382, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-la-pensee-2015-2-page-139.htm>.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Louis Althusser, “The Crisis of Marxism: An interview with Louis Althusser”, trans. Ron Salaj, 2017, available at: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3312-the-crisis-of-marxism-an-interview-with-louis-althusser>.

The margin and underdetermination

To return to the imagery of the margin, it is interesting how Althusser also linked it to the notion of underdetermination. Here is a relevant reference in a 1984 letter to Fernanda Navarro:

Of course there are, as you say, ‘possibilities’ within social determination, if only because there are several different orders of social determination and because this creates a play – of gaps, blank spaces, or margins in which the subject may find his path determined or not determined by social constraints; but this non-determination is an effect, a sub-effect, of determination, of determinations; what I called not only overdetermination, but underdetermination ... Do you see what I mean?⁴⁸

For Althusser, the notion of underdetermination refers exactly to the uneven character of class struggle and antagonism and how the working class is not just the opposite of the capitalist class.

[I]f you take seriously the nature of the Marxist whole and its unevenness, you must come to the conclusion that this unevenness is necessarily reflected in the form of the *overdetermination* or of the *underdetermination* of contradiction. [...] [C]ontradiction, as you find it in *Capital*, presents the surprising characteristic of being *uneven*, of bringing contrary terms into operation which you cannot obtain just by giving the second a sign obtained by negating that of the first. This is because they are caught up in a *relation of unevenness* which continuously reproduces its conditions of existence just on account of this contradiction. [...] Because the working class is not the opposite of the capitalist class, it is not the capitalist class negated, deprived of its capital and its powers – and the capitalist class is not the working class plus something else, namely riches and power. They do not share the same history, they do not share the same world, they do not lead the same class struggle, and yet they do come into confrontation, and this certainly is a contradiction since the *relation of confrontation reproduces the conditions of confrontation* instead of transcending them in a beautiful Hegelian exaltation and reconciliation.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings 1978–86*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian, Verso, London 2006, p. 236.

⁴⁹ Louis Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. Grahame Locke, New Left Books, London 1976, pp. 184–5.

Étienne Balibar has suggested that this ‘enigmatic’ reference in the 1975 *Soutenance d’Amiens* must be read as suggesting a philosophical programme to think, besides the “necessity of contingency,” also “the contingent of this contingency, the ‘under-determined’ multiplicity of possibles or tendencies that coexist within the same event.”⁵⁰ I think that apart from the broader implications that the notion of underdetermination has for any theorization of historical dynamics that do not manage to reach a certain threshold of determination, it also points to the very unevenness and difficulty of any attempt to transform subaltern resistances and aspirations into a historical initiative capable of social change.

The inescapable tension

In this sense and contrary to some of Althusser’s more enthusiastic passages, the communist elements at the interstices or the margins and the islets of communism point to both the possibility and impossibility of communism. They point to dynamics that are constantly reproduced, but also to counter-dynamics and political, ideological, and institutional obstacles thereto, beginning with the very weight of previous defeats. This can explain both the constant observation of such traces of communism and at the same time all of the effects of the miscognition, disorientation, disillusionment, and disaggregation of the subaltern classes and groups.

That is why it is important to stress the tension running through such references by Althusser and how they point to both an actual attempt to rethink communism as the limit of class antagonism and of the constant resistance and struggle inscribed at the heart of the capitalist relation of production, and to a certain desire to bypass the complex political labour of creating the conditions to turn these elements into new social forms and relations, i.e. all the effort associated with assembling the modern Prince and rethinking transition as both struggle and experimentation.

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If we could discuss this tension in another way, we could say that on the one hand we have Althusser trying to expand his original politico-theoretical project of recreating the possibility of a fusion between the working class and Marxism,

⁵⁰ Étienne Balibar, “Avant-propos”, in Louis Althusser, *Pour Marx*, La Découverte/Poche, Paris 1996, p. xiii.

by means of a radical renewal of the communist movement, even in the sense of new movements outside official communist parties. On the other hand, the realisation of the extent of the rupture between the subaltern classes and both Marxist theory and communist political organisations led Althusser to a conception of the encounter as almost chance, including the imagery of islets of communism, which is closer to Derrida's suggestion of an eschatology without teleology than to a non-teleological materialism of the encounter. Here is how Derrida puts it:

To this extent, the effectivity or actuality of the democratic promise, like that of the communist promise, will always keep within it, and it must do so, this absolutely undetermined messianic hope at its heart, this eschatological relation to the to-come of an event *and* of a singularity, of an alterity that cannot be anticipated. [...] It would be easy, too easy, to show that such a hospitality without reserve, which is nevertheless the condition of the event and thus of history (nothing and no one would arrive otherwise, a hypothesis that one can never exclude, of course), is the impossible itself, and that this *condition of possibility* of the event is also its *condition of impossibility*, like this strange concept of messianism without content, of the messianic without messianism, that guides us here like the blind. But it would be just as easy to show that without this experience of the impossible, one might as well give up on both justice and the event. That would be still more just or more honest. One might as well give up also on whatever good conscience one still claims to preserve. One might as well confess the economic calculation and declare all the checkpoints that ethics, hospitality, or the various messianisms would still install at the borders of the event in order to screen the *arrivant*.⁵¹

However interesting Derrida's attempt to rethink an eschatological although non-teleological conception of communism is, it is obvious that we are moving beyond the idea of a political process elaborating and transforming social dynamics and struggles into a transitional process and strategy for communism. This can also be considered to be an indication of the tensions and limits of Althusser's thinking within the context of the philosophy of the encounter.

⁵¹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Routledge, London 2006, pp. 81–82. See the discussion in Étienne Balibar, 'Eschatology versus Teleology: The Suspended Dialogue between Derrida and Althusser', in *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac, Duke University Press, Durham 2009.

It is the same tension that we find in Althusser's constant return to Machiavelli. On the one hand, Machiavelli, for Althusser, is an attempt to rethink the very idea of a new practice of politics that is able to deal with the complexity of the conjuncture, both its overdetermination and underdetermination, in order to create the conditions for a radical change in the relation of forces. On the other hand, there is a conception of radical and emancipatory politics as pure novelty, as a radically novel political gesture, a solitary political act that initiates a new political sequence.⁵²

Althusser never published *Machiavelli and Us*. Perhaps this had to do with these tensions. Perhaps it was the weight of the realisation that the need for a politics of radical novelty and the creation of the conditions for fortunate encounters between struggles, strategy, and social dynamics could only be answered by a painful and thorough recomposition of the political organisations of the working class, a task well beyond a simple call for a left-wing turn of the actually existing communist movement and also beyond simply investing in the expansion of already existing islets of communism.

In a certain sense, Althusser's references to traces or elements of communism point to both an indispensable starting point for any strategy for communism and all the open questions associated with the very idea of a political practice with a communist horizon. Retracing the tensions running through Louis Althusser's confrontation with these questions is also a way to rethink a challenge that is more actual and urgent than ever.

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Philosophy and its Artistic Other

Articles in the section that follows were edited by Rok Benčín in Jelica Šumič Riha

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Adorno humoriste malgré lui

Pour R.B.

En 1844, dans les *Manuscrits économique-philosophiques*, Karl Marx écrit :

Tout ce que l'économiste national te prend en vie et en humanité, il te le remplace par de l'argent et de la richesse, et tout ce que tu ne peux pas, ton argent le peut : il peut manger, boire, aller au bal, au théâtre ; il connaît l'art, l'érudition, les curiosités historiques, le pouvoir politique ; il peut voyager, il peut te permettre d'acquiescer tout cela ; il peut acheter tout cela ; il est la vraie capacité¹.

En 1947, dans la *Dialectique de la Raison*, Theodor W. Adorno et Max Horkheimer écrivent :

L'opération que le schématisme kantien attendait encore des sujets, à savoir rapporter le divers sensible aux concepts fondamentaux, le sujet en est délesté par l'industrie (culturelle). Elle pratique le schématisme comme service rendu au client².

Là où l'argent peut les choses à notre place, un siècle plus tard, l'industrie culturelle pense à notre place. Ce que fait ressortir la contiguïté de ces deux citations, c'est leur rhétorique. Ici, Marx ne décrit pas empiriquement la circulation du capital, ne propose pas un énoncé théorique, il élucide l'équivalent général

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¹ Karl Marx, *Manuscrits économique-philosophiques de 1844*, trad. Franck Fischbach, Éditions Vrin, Paris 2007, p. 180 (traduction modifiée).

² Theodor W. Adorno et Max Horkheimer, « L'industrie culturelle. L'*Aufklärung* comme tromperie de masse », in *Dialectique de la raison*, trad. Eliane Kaufholz, Éditions Gallimard, Paris 1974, p. 133. Cette traduction rend le propos d'Adorno et de Horkheimer incompréhensible dans la mesure où elle traduit *Subjekt* par individu, *Schematismus* par formalisme, etc. Dans toutes les citations ultérieures, ainsi que dans le titre, nous avons modifié la traduction.

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allégoriquement, geste qu'il réitère et approfondit dans le premier chapitre du *Capital* consacré au caractère fétiche de la marchandise. De même, dans l'essai de la *Dialectique de la Raison* de 1947 intitulé « Industrie culturelle. L'*Aufklärung* comme tromperie des masses », Adorno et Horkheimer ne mènent pas une enquête empirique sur le phénomène de l'industrie culturelle ; ils ne proposent pas davantage une théorie de la « tromperie » propre à la superstructure. À vrai dire, cet essai ne théorise pas tant qu'il n'invente un style. À même son caractère ulcéré, excessif, sa prose manifeste une aversion fascinée pour son objet. Avec ce texte, Adorno et Horkheimer se sont érigés en maîtres d'œuvre virtuoses d'une jouissance de la mélancolie, qui n'a eu de cesse de se propager et de se banaliser. Cette jouissance-là en est venue à se confondre avec le geste critique lui-même. Si invention d'un « style critique » il y a, c'est l'invention d'un style lui-même réifié, dont les ferments agissent chez des philosophes comme Giorgio Agamben, Guy Debord, Bernard Stiegler.

Nommons un premier paradoxe. N'importe quelle lecture de cet essai, même cursive, remarque qu'il n'y va ni d'une description phénoménale « exacte » de l'industrie culturelle, ni d'une exposition de la « vérité » propre à l'aliénation que celle-ci génère. Citons deux occurrences du texte à l'appui de ce constat.

Le bourgeois dont la vie se scinde en vie d'affaires et vie privée, la vie privée en représentations et en intimité, et l'intimité en maussade communauté conjugale et amères consolations procurées par la solitude, brouillé avec lui-même et avec tous les autres, est virtuellement déjà le nazi à la fois enthousiaste et furieux, ou l'habitant des grandes métropoles incapable de concevoir l'amitié autrement que comme "contact social" avec des gens avec lesquels il n'a aucun contact réel.³

Les réactions les plus intimes des hommes envers eux-mêmes ont été à ce point réifiées, que l'idée de ce qui leur est propre ne survit que dans sa forme la plus abstraite : pour eux, *personality* ne signifie guère plus que les dents blanches, l'absence de taches de transpiration sous les bras l'absence d'émotivité. Et voici le résultat du triomphe de la publicité dans l'industrie culturelle : les consommateurs sont contraints de devenir eux-mêmes ce que sont les produits culturels qu'ils ont percé à jour.⁴

³ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

Si la synonymie du nazi allemand et de l'agent commercial états-unien devait être exacte, nous serions véritablement livrés à une nuit où toutes les vaches sont grises, et où aucune différenciation de la connaissance ne pénètre plus. Et si l'assimilation du consommateur à ses produits avait le statut d'un énoncé de vérité, alors il faudrait en conclure que l'étant réifié est bien tout ce qu'il y a, qu'il n'y a finalement, pour le dire dans un autre lexique, que des corps et des langages, sans même pouvoir y adjoindre la proposition soustractive cruciale, « sinon qu'il y a des vérités ». Il vaut la peine d'insister : concevoir la « révélation » de la réification comme une opération de vérité revient à s'enfermer dans un contresens, à ignorer le postulat adornien : ce n'est que si ce qui est peut être transformé que ce qui est n'est pas tout.

Sur ce dernier point, Adorno et Horkheimer sont d'ailleurs on ne peut plus clairs. Dans la préface d'ensemble de l'ouvrage, ils écrivent : « Nous n'avons pas le moindre doute – et c'est là notre pétition de principe – que dans la société, la liberté est inséparable de l'*Aufklärung*⁵. » Ce n'est pas la démonstration de l'imbrication supposément inévitable entre *Aufklärung* et domination, mais bien l'éclatement de la mesure du « rien de plus que l'étant », qui fait l'enjeu de la *Dialectique de la raison*. Autant dire que la tendance de l'*Aufklärung* à se retourner en mythologie n'est saisissable que comme tendance. D'une part parce que le mythe lui-même est déjà *Aufklärung*, ce qui le rend d'emblée non-identique à lui-même. D'autre part parce que l'historicité du mythe contient en elle-même une possibilité divergente irréductible, celle d'une *Aufklärung* qui se sépare de la tendance à la domination⁶. Voilà pour l'inscription de l'essai dans les inversions heurtées, asymétriques de l'ouvrage dans son ensemble.

Pour autant, l'essai sur l'industrie culturelle pose un problème immanent supplémentaire, indépendamment de son inclusion dans le livre. Notons-en d'abord quelques traits frappants. Adorno et Horkheimer ne reculent pas devant des images très prosaïques, ici la transpiration sous les bras, mais il y en a bien d'autres. D'où une sorte de *schize* envoûtante : les auteurs déclarent leur sainte horreur devant le prosaïsme de la culture industrielle en faisant un usage guerrier du prosaïque dans leur attaque de cette même industrie. Plus généra-

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Voir à ce propos Alexander Garcia Düttmann, *Philosophie der Übertreibung*, Suhrkamp, Francfort-sur-le-Main 2004.

lement, l'effet claustrophobique du texte provient de son absence de questions, qui donne une forte impression d'angoisse ; il embarque immédiatement dans une série d'affirmations défensives sans répit.

Ce n'est pas une enquête, bien que la cascade d'images s'apparente à des morceaux de sociologie sauvage. On ne peut donc ni le réfuter par d'autres enquêtes, ni y chercher un savoir analytique des objets qu'il traite. Cette industrie n'a nullement pour condition la croyance des consommateurs, qui lui succombent alors même qu'ils l'ont percée à jour : la vérité ne saurait y intervenir sur le mode du désillusionnement. Tout cela apparaît d'emblée, et pourtant cet essai a subi une réification permanente, aussi bien dans le sens de l'exactitude que dans celui d'une vérité adossée à la logique de soupçon. Il donne lieu à des exercices aussi vides que répétitifs de désillusionnement, voire de « dénonciation » de l'industrie culturelle, s'élargissant jusqu'aux abstractions réelles qui ne prétendent même plus à une critique, mais seulement à une « cartographie ». Son style d'écriture n'a cessé d'être imité, dégradant peu à peu l'aversion initiale en une figure ornementale, elle aussi disponible à la consommation. Dans les années soixante, « l'adornien » était un idiome couramment parlé en Allemagne, et cet essai en constituait la source principale.

Ces prolongements ne sont pas simplement le fait de contresens. Ils répercutent un embarras de la pensée quant au statut matriciel indémêlable de cet essai. En effet, ce dernier continue à nous déranger alors même qu'il peut paraître caduc sous bien des aspects. Les rapprochements avec le nazisme sont politiquement myopes : il n'y a jamais eu autant de luttes ouvrières aux États-Unis qu'entre 1933 et 1947⁷. Aux prises avec son propre présent, le texte tend bien plus à brouiller qu'à clarifier les coordonnées de la séquence historique dont il participe.

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Pourtant, les difficultés abordées par les deux philosophes continuent à être les nôtres, même si les paramètres ont drastiquement changé. L'industrie culturelle est une machine qui transforme tous les objets en objets satisfaisant des demandes, que ce soit l'art élevé, les films de télévision, les *podcast*, les confé-

⁷ Voir à ce propos, « La lutte des classes aux États-Unis » et « Marx à Detroit », in Mario Tronti, *Ouvriers et Capital*, trad. Yann Moulier-Boutang, Éditions Christian Bourgois, Paris 1977, ainsi que Mike Davis, *City of Quartz, Los Angeles, capitale du futur*, trad. Michel Dartevelle, Éditions La Découverte, Paris 2006.

rences *youtube*, les images *vimeo*. Ce que nomme le concept d'industrie culturelle, alors comme maintenant, ce sont ces étranges objets sociaux que sont les œuvres sous condition du capital.

En quoi cette intégration de la culture au régime de la valorisation oblige-t-elle à transformer le concept de critique fondé dans la conscience, et, du moins est-ce l'hypothèse défendue ici, à abandonner sa détermination comme jugement ? Quelle modification l'industrie culturelle introduit-elle dans l'idéologie, étant donné que celle-là n'a plus vraiment une fonction de justification, mais que sa réalité est déjà sa propre idéologie ? Enfin, l'industrie culturelle ne redouble pas simplement la puissance de l'argent, elle se structure autour d'une prolétarisation aggravée (ou du succès).

Bien sûr, les clivages de la critique ne commencent pas avec l'industrie culturelle, mais bien avec le penseur du jugement lui-même qu'est Kant, se prolongeant dans autant de bifurcations : Marx, Benjamin, Deleuze, etc. Il n'empêche : la confrontation avec ces objets « façadisés », surrationalisés, insomniaques, qui évincent toute surprise, tuent l'ennui, proscrivent l'échec, tend inmanquablement à effondrer la critique, à la rendre strictement superfétatoire. Aux prises avec cette opacité, la critique peut bien entendu elle aussi intégrer l'industrie culturelle, ce qu'elle n'a pas manqué de faire sous les formes du relativisme ou du pluralisme.

Mais l'obstacle demeure : quelle critique serait apte à s'immiscer dans l'industrie culturelle, de manière à en fissurer les effets, à générer des bifurcations dans un sensible séquestré, consensuel ? La question est d'autant plus prégnante que l'art n'échappe pas à cette tendance. Adorno et Horkheimer ont déjà insisté sur ce point : dès lors que l'art répond à un besoin, que ce soit du grand art ou du divertissement, il est ramené à la formule de l'industrie culturelle. On le sait, ce diagnostic n'a cessé de s'aggraver.

L'essai de 1947 sur l'industrie culturelle fait de la critique de la culture un chantier central de la philosophie, allant de pair avec une transformation de son mode d'écriture. Il y a bien des suites. On peut citer quelques occurrences : Slavoj Žižek, et dans une moindre mesure Alenka Zupančič puisent dans l'industrie culturelle comme dans un régime d'exemples. Fredric Jameson appréhende la *fantasy* et la science fiction comme deux moments d'une synthèse utopique pos-

sible. On pourrait tirer là bien d'autres lignes, avec Mark Fischer, Boris Groys, etc. Mais le problème d'une critique de l'industrie culturelle, d'une détermination de son statut reste entier. Retour donc au monument que constitue l'essai d'Adorno et de Horkheimer, quelque soixante-quinze ans après sa première publication.

Comment dégager le ferment problématique de cette matrice ? Plusieurs écueils sont à éviter. Le premier postule une continuité historique avec cet essai aux prises avec les années trente et quarante, et partant à l'hypostasier⁸. Un second écueil consiste à ontologiser la reproductibilité propre à l'industrie culturelle, à l'assimiler à des manières d'être des choses que sont les artefacts esthétiques, ainsi dans les ontologies plates du réalisme spéculatif : c'est le concept d'industrie culturelle, moins les violences du capitalisme⁹. Le dernier écueil, si massivement présent qu'il est lui-même devenu un « trésor » de l'industrie culturelle, fait de celle-ci l'un des pôles du mauvais infini qui oppose l'art élevé aux sous-cultures, et à défendre l'un ou l'autre¹⁰.

Où, quand et comment se formule le concept d'industrie culturelle ? Son exposition relève d'une pensée attachée à élucider son propre présent, et elle se conçoit depuis le monde des avant-gardes. Dans la perspective adoptée ici, il s'agit d'investir le portrait monolithique qu'en proposent Adorno et Horkheimer pour y réactiver une des fissures, une des tendances divergentes qui y sommeillent. Ce cheminement généalogique s'attache avant tout au style, le style de l'industrie culturelle tel que l'essai le thématise, mais surtout le style de l'essai lui-même. Par ce biais, on espère le retour d'un des spectres qui le hante, et qui est rarement aperçu : son humour noir.

⁸ C'est ainsi qu'Adorno est mis en jeu par les théoriciens de la valeur, notamment Robert Kurz. Ce dernier emboîte également le pas à son maître en ne distinguant aucunement le champ de la politique de celui de l'industrie culturelle.

⁹ Voir Roger Pouivet, *Philosophie du Rock*, Éditions PUF, Paris 2010, ou Tristan Garcia, *Forme et objet. Un traité des choses*, Éditions PUF, Paris 2011.

¹⁰ Ainsi d'Agnès Gayraud, qui se propose de réhabiliter la pop contre Adorno, grand contempteur de la musique légère, alors même que la question d'une légitimité du pop semble définitivement sans objet. Agnès Gayraud, « *Dialectique du pop* », Éditions La Découverte, coll. « La rue musicale », Paris 2018.

Le tout premier geste de l'essai consiste précisément à interroger la cohérence implacable du consensus sensible comme production d'un style, production qui oblige à reconsidérer tous les attendus de celui-ci. La traque des effets de style est préférée à toute explicitation empirique concentrée sur les sites réels, mais aussi à toute argumentation. L'empirie n'atteint pas le principe, le pseudo-naturalisme rhétorique de l'argumentation rate l'imbrication de l'artificialité et du truisme propre aux composantes que sont le film, le jazz associé à la musique légère, la radio, le magazine. Saisir la stéréotypie de la culture n'est possible qu'à la dramatiser, à percevoir ses traits hors de la complète banalité qui en constitue la logique. L'essai se condense tout entier en une telle dramatisation ; il noue rhétorique et concept dans un acte d'écriture hérétique à leurs distinctions respectives.

Le renversement dramatique opéré peut d'abord se décrire comme suit. L'industrie culturelle génère la contrainte à la conformité, elle sature le temps de loisir, obturant tout effort de pensée. Etant avant tout consensus sensible, elle constitue la doxa, la monotonie de l'homogénéisation accrue caractéristique de ce que les auteurs appellent le « capitalisme tardif ». Ce commerce de l'adhésion puise de toute évidence dans la logique du vraisemblable inaugurée par la rhétorique aristotélicienne du juste milieu. Or voilà que cette industrie vouée tout uniment à un intermédiaire « optimal » fait l'objet d'une étrange permutation : elle se trouve exposée sous l'aspect de quelque chose d'absolument invraisemblable.

Adorno et Horkheimer présentent l'industrie culturelle telle une totalité surpuissante coïncidant avec sa totalisation, éliminant tout dehors. Sa propagation annule intégralement le sujet de la pensée, se substituant à son activité schématique. Son développement historique augmente encore cette puissance. D'abord inscrite dans le cycle du travail et du loisir qui prépare à retourner au travail, l'industrie culturelle gagne de plus en plus de terrain, jusqu'à en arriver à imposer une volatilisisation complète du sens. La chose n'en reste pas à une schématisation standardisée des intrigues, à une facilité d'écoute dont l'évidence abrogerait toute inquiétude. Elle va plus loin, s'attaquant aussi bien à l'insouciance rétive du clown, de Chaplin, des Marx Brothers, à la folie des premiers dessins animés. Leur refus affiché, leurs interruptions loufoques de toutes les médiations sacrificielles divisant la vie en loisir et travail tombent eux aussi sous le couperet du divertissement, pré-jugé, pré-fabriqué, pré-digéré, à l'instar

du *baby food*. Loin d'un sens, imposé ou non, ce divertissement se transforme en une série de « signaux » appelant des réactions programmées.

Bref, l'essai sur l'industrie culturelle nous met en présence d'une exagération permanente. Pour en saisir la charge, on peut prendre appui sur la remarque d'Adorno concernant l'exagération dans *Minima Moralia* :

Le *sense of proportion* finalement se rapporte à ceci que l'on est censé penser dans les relations de mesure et les ordres de grandeur de la vie qui sont déjà établis. Il faut seulement entendre une fois les représentants endurcis de la clique dominante dire : "cela n'est pas si important", il faut seulement observer, quand les citoyens parlent d'exagération, d'hystérie, de lubie, pour savoir que c'est exactement à l'endroit où l'appel à la raison est invoquée de la manière plus prompte, que s'annonce une apologie de l'irrationnel.¹¹

L'exagération ne provient pas tant de sa mise en jeu rhétorique que d'un rappel des limites, d'une réaction hostile face à la pensée. Tout surcroît de réflexion ne coïncidant plus avec l'état de fait est taxé d'exagération par d'autres. L'effet d'exagération se trouve écartelé, divisé par la socialité qui l'informe. D'une certaine manière, il apparaît comme étant sans rapport avec ce qui le cause. Dans l'essai d'Adorno et de Horkheimer, cette disjonction est reprise à front renversé. Là où, à proprement parler, il n'y aurait rien à penser, puisque le filtrage industriel des sensations a subjugué toutes les irrégularités, impensés, ratages, les philosophes choisissent de s'en étonner.

Une première manière de s'étonner revient à accorder à l'industrie culturelle le crédit d'une invention stylistique, là où les historiens de l'art nostalgiques n'y voient que sa dégradation.

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Les historiens de l'art et les défenseurs de la culture n'ont aucune raison de se plaindre de la disparition de l'énergie créatrice du style en Occident. L'utilisation stéréotypée de tout – même de l'informe – en vue de la reproductibilité industrielle, dépasse en rigueur et en valeur tout ce qu'on appelle style, ce concept par lequel tous les amis de la culture idéalisent le passé précapitaliste qu'ils consi-

¹¹ Theodor. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trad. Eliane Kaufholz, Éditions Payot & Rivages, Paris 2011, p. 89.

dèrent comme organique. [...] Aucun constructeur du Moyen Âge n'a passé en revue les sujets des vitraux et des sculptures avec plus de suspicion que celle avec laquelle la direction des studios de cinéma examine une œuvre de Balzac ou de Victor Hugo avant de l'accepter définitivement. Aucun théologien médiéval ne pouvait déterminer le degré de tourments à infliger aux damnés conformément à l'*ordo* de l'amour divin avec un soin plus méticuleux que celui avec lequel la direction d'une superproduction calcule la torture que devra subir le héros, ou la hauteur de l'ourlet de la robe de la vedette. Le catalogue explicite et implicite, exotérique et ésotérique de ce qui est interdit et de ce qui est toléré est si étendu qu'il ne se contente pas seulement de circonscrire le secteur laissé libre, mais qu'il le domine de fond en comble. [...] L'obligation permanente où elle se trouve de produire sans cesse de nouveaux effets qui restent pourtant conformes à l'ancien modèle, sert uniquement, comme une règle supplémentaire, à augmenter le pouvoir des conventions auxquelles chaque effet aurait tendance à échapper.¹²

La continuité stylistique propre aux anciens styles — moyen âge, renaissance — configurait l'unité structurante des formes sociales de domination. Mais cette unité n'existait réellement qu'à être parcourue de discordances : l'inscription à même le style d'une promesse qui n'appartient plus à son unité, mais la désagrège. Historiquement, l'activation de cette dialectique contradictoire génère une constellation nouvelle. L'usure moderne de la stabilité traditionnelle du stylistique se renverse en une négation complète de la continuité, notamment chez Dada ou chez les expressionnistes : refus de la convention formelle au profit d'un protocole d'enregistrement direct des affects pour ceux-ci, focalisation « scandaleuse » sur la désagrégation des conventions chez Dada, mettant en jeu les décharges pulsionnelles destructrices, niant toutes les formes préfabriquées d'être, de parler, d'agir, court-circuitant l'œuvre.

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Le style de l'industrie culturelle procède en sens inverse de cette dynamique. Il nie tout ce qui du matériau, des gestes, des formes, de la tradition, des techniques ne se prête pas à la convention. D'où sa surrationalité : il n'y a rien en lui qui ne soit programmé, calculé, voulu, adapté au monde tel qu'il va. La négation de toute tension contradictoire entre ses moments a pour effet de les rendre tous interchangeables : le détail peut se substituer au tout, la règle à l'objet spécifique, le particulier au général, etc. Dans la mesure où il supprime toute pola-

¹² Adorno et Horkheimer, *Dialectique de la raison*, p. 137.

risation, toute tension des objets qu'il produit, le style de l'industrie culturelle se confond avec la négation du style. Un tel style dispose d'une force prédatrice et intégratrice redoutable, dont les occurrences scandent la longue durée qui nous relie aux années trente : il peut diluer ce qui prétend s'y opposer en le promouvant sur le marché, assimiler n'importe quelle tradition à n'importe quelle autre, réduire l'extériorité dans l'uniformité de sa grille, homogénéiser l'écart entre travail et consommation dans la temporalité du 24/7¹³.

Quelle que soit sa perspicacité, cette thématization du style de l'industrie culturelle produit moins l'effet d'un étonnement que celui d'être assommé. Adorno et Horkheimer semblent tellement pris par l'efficace du style que tous deux parcourent qu'ils en oublient de nommer ce qui le troue, ici et là. Certes ils mentionnent, comme en passant, les objets soustraits à la tyrannie du style de l'industrie culturelle : l'indiscipline d'Orson Welles, auquel le studio RKO laissa les mains libres, les films de Chaplin et des Marx Brothers, les premiers dessins animés, Mark Twain. Par contre, ils assortissent ces mentions d'une réserve immédiate : ce ne sont finalement que des alibis qui confirment le système.

C'est faire peu de cas de ceci : l'ensemble de ces objets n'est pensable que sur le terrain de l'industrie culturelle, dans le monde où celle-ci s'impose, selon ses modes de production et distribution, le film, le magazine. Evidemment, ces objets ont une incidence différente, relatives aux distances historiques qui nous en séparent. Sans doute Adorno et Horkheimer étaient-ils marqués par l'élimination de telles possibilités, par l'aplatissement impitoyable que subissait la culture, tandis qu'aujourd'hui nous y percevons davantage des chances inaugurales, une ouverture remise au temps, un possible dans lequel renouveler notre expérience. Dans le contexte des années trente, on pouvait certainement s'arrêter sur la différence que comportait leur archaïsme, évoquer la transition historique entre cirque et film, assigner ces objets à une période « artisanale » de l'industrie culturelle plutôt qu'à sa pleine maturité.

Reste que le rouleau compresseur de l'exagération, barricadé dans la sphère imaginaire d'une toute-puissance du capital, semble incapable de s'interrompre. Disons simplement que sa logique ignore tout des contradictions faisant valoir

¹³ Jonathan Crary, *24/7 Le capitalisme à l'assaut du sommeil*, trad. Grégoire Chamayou, Éditions La Découverte, Paris 2016.

les désirs inaliénables contre les savoirs de l'aliénation. À ce titre, cette logique ne fait d'ailleurs que répéter le toujours-semblable de l'exagération triomphale qui caractérise déjà l'industrie culturelle, style que l'on retrouve aujourd'hui dans n'importe quelle quatrième de couverture : « ce livre marquera toute une génération », « ouvrage provocateur, radical, sans concession », etc.

On touche au moment où l'essai fatigue, ennuie, où son sériage et ses arrangements imagés ne cessent de revenir au même point, tout comme dans les films de l'industrie culturelle la fuite pour se marier recolle au quotidien sinistre qu'elle rêve de quitter. Il y a bien là l'impasse d'une économie du soupçon. Mais peut-être faut-il chercher ailleurs le point où l'accumulation des tropes défait cette économie.

Dans l'avancée en cascade du texte, un développement s'esquisse : la mainmise croissante de l'industrie culturelle sur le sujet, le genre humain, l'individu, leur naufrage complet finit par se retourner contre celle-là. En dévorant son propre support, la demande marchande de culture quelle se targue de produire et de satisfaire, en éliminant toujours davantage du client ce qui le différencie encore d'un client, le *vacuum* de l'industrie culturelle finit par détruire sa propre finalité. Il se transforme alors en une « chose du passé », c'est-à-dire qu'il accomplit sa propre autodissolution.

Vu sous cet angle, l'aspect monolithique de l'essai se charge d'une tension nouvelle. Sa dimension thétique reflue pour laisser place à une dialectisation des extrêmes. Là où l'industrie culturelle prescrit continuellement le *fun* comme bain vivifiant, Adorno et Horkheimer s'astreignent à la mortifier. L'on se trouve en présence d'un geste critique emprunté tant à Hegel qu'aux surréalistes, celui d'un « humour objectif », qui convertit l'expérience subjective en l'objectivité fantastique d'une hallucination.

« L'industrie culturelle, l'*Aufklärung* comme tromperie des masses » est-il un monument d'humour noir ? Pour percevoir « ce bord de néant » qui accompagne tous ses développements, il suffit de déporter l'attention de son caractère systématique, assertorique vers son montage. On peut alors se tourner différemment vers la remarque inaugurale : « L'opération que le schématisme kantien attendait encore des sujets, à savoir rapporter le divers sensible aux concepts

fondamentaux, le sujet en est délesté par l'industrie (culturelle). Elle pratique le schématisme comme service rendu au client¹⁴. »

La citation procède par capillarité ; la doctrine transcendantale kantienne s'étend de manière tordue : elle se dilate en une forme parodique de théorie. Sa conceptualité rigoureuse a été contaminée par le lexique de l'industrie culturelle, sa pureté est compromise. Autant dire que la philosophie ne peut plus simplement se fier à cet intermédiaire élaboré par Kant, à cette synthèse qui faisait du jugement, et donc de la pensée, une activité productrice, un nouage temporel apte à unifier réceptivité du sensible et spontanéité de l'entendement. L'homogénéisation synthétique est tombée aux mains de l'homogénéité industrielle, le coude temporel discontinu rapportant le Je au Moi a été raccourci jusqu'à les amalgamer, et partant à les liquider. Qu'à cela ne tienne : on se passera désormais de l'homogénéisation propre à l'imagination, on ira puiser les agencements du sensible et de l'intelligible ailleurs, notamment dans les procédures mises à disposition par les avant-gardes, la psychanalyse, voire par l'industrie culturelle elle-même, c'est-à-dire par le langage de la publicité. Disloquer et assembler dans l'élément de l'hétérogène, décentrer, soustraire les morceaux du scénario culturel à leur cohérence, défier tous les réquisits de la vérification, improviser des connexions *witzig* en lieu et place de tout ordonnancement. Voilà autant d'échantillons de méthode que charrie le montage de cet essai.

Celui-ci n'hésite pas à promener ses observations de registre en registre, sans égard pour leur hiérarchisation ou leur localisation. Ainsi, l'on navigue du « sein dans le *sweater* » à « la star copie d'elle-même », aux « autos et cigarettes » jusqu'à « l'homme sans scrupule », à « la jeune fille dynamique ». Des objets de pulsions partielles côtoient des simulacres, des idéologies-marchandises prennent place à côté d'indications didascaliques : l'industrie culturelle est mise en lambeaux, lambeaux des discours psychanalytiques, des typologies, des anciens arts libéraux, des technologies à partir desquels elle tisse sa toile. Son principe d'unification étant en même temps le principe de sa ruine, sa cohérence étant son irrationalité, il suffit de braquer les projecteurs sur ses processus pour que sa représentation se déchire d'elle-même, pour qu'elle s'identifie étrangement à son propre recadrage, un recadrage interlope, grinçant.

¹⁴ Adorno et Horkheimer, *Dialectique de la raison*, p. 133.

Dans cet essai, tout apparaît comme reconnaissable et pourtant non familier ; plus rien n'est à sa place, on a passé un seuil sans que l'on soit vraiment passé ailleurs (Brecht n'est pas loin). Adorno et Horkheimer ont beau réprover le rire comme étant une fuite devant le pouvoir, ils ont beau affirmer que Baudelaire lui-même était dépourvu d'humour, rien n'y fait : là où leur texte touche juste, il déclenche l'hilarité. Sans doute, ces philosophes se tiennent en retrait. Mais à tout le moins, leurs considérations provoquent le rire sans y participer.

Leur maniement corrosif du sérieux sociologique balance d'un coup par-dessus bord les faits, les classes sociales, la géographie, les hiérarchies artistiques, amalgamant l'Europe et les États-Unis, mêlant l'invocation matérialiste de la poudre de pudding aux considérations sur l'incidence des statistiques¹⁵. Au monde de l'industrie culturelle quadrillé par le préjugé d'exactitude de la connaissance positiviste, l'essai oppose un monde en lequel l'homme a disparu et où les objets, étrangement animalisés par les circonstances, ne cessent de permuter entre différents comportements, tantôt se faisant rébus, tantôt allégorie. Ce démontage hilarant de la platitude positiviste, laquelle affecte aussi bien nombre d'orientations qui prétendent s'en exempter, ainsi de l'objectivisme marxiste ou de la micrologie ethnographique, constitue aujourd'hui plus que jamais un antidote à la bêtise savante des sciences sociales.

Et qu'en est-il du rapport à la vérité ? Les deux philosophes s'en prennent à toute conception du sujet qui prétend fonder l'origine de la conscience dans sa propre activité, et ce faisant manque à penser la façon dont les sujets sont constitués sur le sol de l'objectivité. C'est dans ce contexte qu'ils mettent en avant la défaite infligée par l'industrie culturelle au schématisme kantien.

La chose mérite d'être dépliée, car il n'est rien moins qu'évident que le schématisme tombe sous ce verdict. L'activité productrice qui synthétise réceptivité du sensible et entendement catégoriel génère bien une unité, mais seulement au prix d'y inscrire une non-coïncidence à soi du sujet. En mettant fin aux conceptions contemplatives de l'idée, que celle-ci soit transcendante ou innée, en faisant du jugement synthétique une activité productrice, Kant a découvert un

¹⁵ En écho à la célèbre remarque de Friedrich Engels, « la preuve du pudding c'est qu'on le mange ».

nouveau problème : celui de l'écart irréductible entre le procès d'unification de l'expérience et l'unité qui en résulte.

Rappelons brièvement les termes de ce problème. Le dualisme du réceptif et de l'intelligible donne lieu à un nouage, un intermédiaire : c'est là qu'intervient le schématisme, associé par Kant à la forme *a priori* du sens interne, le temps. Avec les catégories, qui sont des concepts *a priori*, hors de l'expérience, la forme du temps a en commun qu'elle est une règle générale. Avec la sensibilité réceptive, elle a en commun qu'elle est contenue dans toute représentation du divers sensible.

La faculté productrice du schème est l'imagination, l'activité de former des images ou de présentifier un non-être, de se donner une vision intuitive de ce qui, « absent », ne relève pas de l'intuition. Cette faculté est bifide. Elle est réceptive dans la mesure où elle ouvre à une intuition, mais cette intuition est créée de toutes pièces, schématisée. Par là, elle est donc active, à l'instar des catégories intellectuelles. Point d'importance : le schématisme n'est pas une image calquée sur des images sensibles, reproduction d'un existant. Se décollant de toute image donnée, toute expérience, les schèmes ne sont des images de rien, mais l'activité temporalisante à partir de laquelle se forment les images.

À proprement parler, l'imagination ne produit rien d'autre que la relation impliquée par la forme du temps. En effet, le temps ne peut être série des maintenant que si ces derniers sont toujours déjà dépassés par une vision unitaire de la série. C'est-à-dire que le temps doit toujours se donner l'image de son propre déploiement pour que le « maintenant » ne s'éparpille pas, ne se perde pas. Il faut qu'il présentifie, à même chaque « maintenant », le schème de tout « maintenant », à savoir le passé, le futur, la série comme règle totalisante.

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Ce que génère ainsi le schématisme, c'est une asynchronie du temps, qui fait que je ne peux jamais me retourner sur lui pour le saisir, et surtout que je ne peux jamais me retourner sur moi, que l'objectivation de mon moi est impossible. Dès que je me retourne sur le temps pour m'identifier à moi-même, l'acte de ce retour lui-même échappe. Il y a bien un procès d'unification, mais l'unité de la conscience qu'elle génère se diffracte en même qu'elle se produit. L'unité de la conscience arrive toujours trop tôt ou trop tard dans la conscience qu'elle prend d'elle-même. Ainsi, le schématisme de l'imagination kantienne ne surmonte le

dualisme qu'en affectant la pensée d'un impensable, en séparant le « je pense » du moi existentiel par la ligne du temps qui les rapporte l'une à l'autre sous la condition d'une différence fondamentale.

On trouve donc bien dans le schématisme transcendantal un clivage inaugural qui affecte irrémédiablement l'unité du sujet moderne. Plus précisément, c'est ce clivage qui constitue le sujet. À partir de là, Adorno et Horkheimer font le constat suivant. La capture active qu'exerce l'industrie culturelle sur l'effort schématisant exigé du sujet, son effacement de l'impensable qui l'affecte en révèle un écueil, atteste d'un « malaise du schématisme ».

Le schématisme kantien temporalise les catégories, les rend applicables aux phénomènes, mais le système catégoriel lui-même conserve un statut invariant, ce qui bloque toute possibilité d'historiciser tant ces catégories transcendantales elles-mêmes, que aussi et surtout l'expérimentation de leurs enchaînements. Il apparaît alors que le tableau catégoriel n'a rien de neutre. Ce qui est conçu par Kant comme condition *a priori* de l'entendement renvoie en réalité à la genèse de la subjectivité dans le champ objectif du capital.

Que faire de cette hétéronomie du catégoriel ? Faut-il en prendre acte comme d'une aliénation irrévocable, quitte à se consacrer inlassablement à en faire le procès ? Ce penchant n'est pas complètement absent chez Adorno et Horkheimer, il y figure comme une tentation à laquelle les auteurs résistent, mais qu'ils ne surmonteront jamais tout à fait. La force de cet essai réside alors précisément dans la manière inédite qu'il a de déjouer cette conclusion.

Prendre acte, enfin, de ce que le sujet dit « autonome » est toujours déjà un sujet aliéné, cela permet plusieurs déplacements. Le premier est simplement de ne plus chercher l'issue à l'aliénation dans une supposée réappropriation, laquelle ne fait que nous assujettir toujours davantage à l'objectivité déjà donnée. Le second, plus essentiel, est d'ouvrir une voie autre au sein même de l'objectivité.

En effet, qu'il appartienne au sujet d'être aussi un objet, cela ne le condamne pas à l'aliénation. Bien au contraire, cela lui offre tout autant la chance de se décentrer de lui-même : la désorganisation de sa constitution catégorielle lui permet d'échapper enfin à l'imaginaire de son moi, d'expérimenter des modalités non-catégorielles de sa propre extériorité. Ce frayage hétérogène, disparate,

de la multiplicité « pré-intégrée » par l'industrie culturelle — montage, collage, fragmentation pulsionnelle, sismographie, trognon de jouissance, allégorisation — pose les jalons d'une pensée autre du sujet, d'un sujet auquel le primat de l'objet est accessible, et dont la *Dialectique négative* proposera une formulation définitive¹⁶.

Sans doute est-ce ce frayage qui fait tout le prix de l'essai, bien qu'Adorno lui-même n'aide pas toujours à discerner cette ligne forte. Ainsi, dans son « Résumé sur l'industrie culturelle », il s'effraie lui-même des conclusions appelées par cette trajectoire, à savoir que la réalité axiale du sujet n'est aucunement dans son moi, et se rabat une nouvelle fois sur la fonction imaginaire, selon des catégories empruntées directement à l'*ego psychology* : l'emprise de l'industrie culturelle renverrait à une « faiblesse » du moi, à laquelle il n'y a plus alors qu'à opposer un « moi fort »¹⁷.

Se vérifie alors, avec et contre les auteurs de « L'industrie culturelle. *Aufklärung* et tromperie de masse », tout l'intérêt d'éclairer l'humour qui s'est glissé en contrebande dans leur essai. Car l'humour jamais ne s'arrête en chemin, même quand le chemin mène plus bas. Indifférent aux sirènes de la mélancolie, rétif à toutes les tranquillités que procure le systématique, fussent-elles négatives, plus prompt à dissoudre le moi qu'à y chercher refuge, toujours l'humour explose le cadre dans lequel il s'insère, en descendant dans les conséquences...

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¹⁶ Sujet, Adorno est on ne peut plus clair là-dessus, qui n'est justement pas au-delà de toute objectivation : « C'est seulement parce que le sujet est médiatisé de son côté et donc n'est pas le radicalement autre de l'objet qui seul légitime celui-ci, qu'il est capable de saisir l'objectivité en général ». Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectique négative*, trad. Groupe de traduction du Collège de philosophie, Éditions Payot, Paris 2003, p. 147.

¹⁷ Ce recours au « moi fort », qui n'est pas isolé dans son œuvre, ne laisse pas d'étonner chez un penseur comme Adorno. Il invite à reconsidérer le non-rapport de deux penseurs qui ont le même âge, mais n'appartiennent pas à la même époque, Adorno et Lacan. Pour une critique de la notion d'un moi supposément fort ou faible, pour le rapport à la suggestion que cela implique, voir Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre II, Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1977, p. 54 et suiv.

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Jean-Jacques Lecercle*

Volochinov, Thackeray et l'enthymème

Volochinov

L'objet de ce texte est de mettre au travail la philosophie du langage, qui prend la forme d'une stylistique, du philosophe du langage soviétique Valentin Volochinov.

L'évocation de ce nom nécessite une brève digression. En effet, les œuvres de Volochinov ont été publiées dans les années 70, dans les pays occidentaux, sous le nom de Bakhtine et considérées comme partie intégrante de l'œuvre de ce dernier, sous forme apocryphe. Aujourd'hui, le consensus critique tend à considérer que les œuvres publiées en URSS dans les années 20 sous le nom de Volochinov ont bien été écrites par lui. Il y a deux raisons majeures pour ce revirement. La première est empirique. L'attribution à Bakhtine se fonde uniquement sur les affirmations de ce dernier et aucune preuve matérielle de ces affirmations n'a pu être apportée. Au contraire, les documents qui ont émergé depuis 1989 suggèrent fortement que Volochinov est bien le seul auteur des textes qu'il a signés : *Le marxisme et la philosophie du langage* est tiré d'une thèse que Volochinov a soutenue, et l'on a même retrouvé un rapport d'étape, où le thésard fait le point sur le développement de son travail.¹ Et il y a une seconde raison, encore plus importante. Si l'on décide avec Althusser qu'un philosophe n'est rien d'autre que la cohérence de ses thèses, alors Bakhtine ne peut être Volochinov : celui-ci est marxiste, d'un marxisme qui n'est pas une langue d'Esopé, due à la nécessité de s'adapter à l'air du temps, mais s'insère pleinement dans une tradition intellectuelle qu'il cherche à développer. Bakhtine au contraire n'a rien à voir avec le marxisme, ce dont témoigne sa *Philosophie de l'acte*, écrite dans les années vingt et restée à l'état de manuscrit :² un actualisme

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¹ Valentin Nikolaevich Voloshinov, « Report on work as a postgraduate student », in *The Bakhtin Circle: In the Master's Absence*, C. Brandist, D. Shepherd & G. Tihanov (eds.), Manchester University Press, Manchester 2004, pp. 226–50.

² Mikhaïl Bakhtine, *Pour une philosophie de l'acte*, L'Âge d'homme, Lausanne 2003 (1986).

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idéaliste de tendance mystique, qui est explicitement hostile au marxisme. Il y a donc quelque absurdité à suggérer que ces textes antithétiques ont un auteur unique : autant suggérer qu'Heidegger et Adorno sont le même philosophe.

Enthymème

L'article sur lequel je m'appuie est intitulé « Le discours dans la vie et le discours dans la poésie ».³ On y trouve le paragraphe suivant :

La situation extra-verbale n'est en aucune façon la cause extérieure de l'énoncé, elle n'agit pas sur lui de l'extérieur comme une force mécanique. Non, *la situation s'intègre à l'énoncé comme un élément indispensable à sa constitution sémantique*. Donc l'énoncé quotidien considéré comme un tout porteur de sens se décompose en deux parties : 1) une partie verbale actualisée, 2) une partie sous-entendue. C'est pourquoi on peut comparer l'énoncé quotidien à « l'enthymème ».⁴

Et Volochinov de rappeler ce qu'est un enthymème : un énoncé incomplet par sous-entendu, dont on conserve une partie « dans l'âme », c'est-à-dire par devers soi (en logique, le terme désigne un syllogisme incomplet, dont une des prémisses est sous-entendue).⁵ On voit aisément ce qu'une linguistique de l'énonciation peut tirer de la thèse ici posée. Pris en lui-même, c'est-à-dire hors situation, un énoncé est incomplet : ce qu'on tire du sens des mots qui le composent et de leur articulation syntaxique, c'est seulement une signification, pas un sens. L'énoncé hors situation est une parole morte, sa signification ne fait que décliner l'abstraction du système de la langue saussurienne. Pour passer au sens, et le succès de la communication est à ce prix, il faut redonner vie à cette parole morte en intégrant l'implicite que son insertion dans une situation concrète engage. On se souvient qu'une des techniques de Stanislavski consistait à faire répéter à l'apprenti acteur la même phrase des dizaines de fois, en produisant chaque fois un sens différent.

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³ Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtine, le principe dialogique*, Seuil, Paris 1981, pp. 181-216.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁵ Chez Aristote (*Rhétorique*, 1355a) l'enthymème est un syllogisme fondé sur des prémisses probables. C'est par la suite qu'on l'a défini comme un syllogisme abrégé.

Cette prise en compte de l'immersion de l'énoncé dans ce milieu vivant qu'est une situation a deux conséquences. Cette situation est une situation sociale. On ne peut donc se contenter du célèbre schéma saussurien de la communication, qui va d'un locuteur à un auditeur, même si, comme Culioli, on ajoute que tout locuteur est son propre auditeur et tout auditeur son propre locuteur : il y a toujours dans le schéma un troisième terme, la société. Et la seconde conséquence est que l'énoncé ne réagit pas simplement à la présence de l'auditeur (présence structurelle, qui admet son absence empirique), mais à la situation sociale, sous la forme d'une évaluation, la référence directe, sèche, n'étant que le degré zéro de l'évaluation. On se souvient de la maxime de Culioli, « 'Le chien aboie' n'existe pas » – par quoi il voulait dire non pas que cette phrase était impossible, puisqu'il venait de la prononcer, mais qu'elle relevait de la parole morte, que sa seule possibilité d'occurrence était dans des manuels de grammaire élémentaire et autre méthode Assimil, et non dans l'échange vivant.⁶ Dans la parole vivante, ce qu'on entend, c'est : « Qu'est-ce qu'il aboie, le chien ! », « Ya le chien qui aboie » ou « Les chiens, ça aboie ». Ce que Culioli reprochait à la linguistique structurale, c'est de ne tenir aucun compte de l'affect. Car l'affect, ce que Volochinov entend par « évaluation », est ce qui distingue la parole vivante de la parole morte, le sens de la signification.

Tout énoncé de la vie courante, en tant qu'il est engagé dans une parole vivante est donc porteur d'évaluations sociales. Comme elles sont sociales, n'ont pas leur origine dans les idiosyncrasies du locuteur individuel et sont largement partagées par la communauté des locuteurs, elles n'ont pas besoin d'être exprimées et restent principalement implicites. « Principalement », et non absolument, car elles laissent des traces dans le texte de l'énoncé, de deux façons. D'abord dans la forme de l'énoncé, sous la forme de marques d'implicite (implicite grammatisé de la présupposition – « Jean est grand pour un Français » dit implicitement que les Français sont de petite taille ; implicite pragmatique qui engage le calcul d'implicatures). Ensuite sous la forme de l'intonation. L'exclamation « Bien ! » en langue ne veut en effet rien dire hors contexte. Ou plutôt, sa signification (la marque d'une approbation, c'est-à-dire d'une évaluation positive) est excédée par son sens, car il y a mille façons de prononcer ce mot, avec mille nuances de sens, y compris des sens qui prennent le contrepied de la signification (une

⁶ Cf. Jean-Jacques Lecercle, « Postface », in Sandrine Sorlin, *Convictions philosophiques et plaisirs linguistiques*, Presses Universitaires du Midi, Toulouse 2016, pp. 145–157.

intonation « ironique » inverse l'évaluation). Un texte de Giuseppe Pontiggia décrit la rencontre manquée, en Sicile, de Wagner et de Garibaldi.⁷ Le héros des deux mondes est dans son train, l'inventeur de la musique moderne au balcon de son hôtel. Chacun remarque l'autre et se fait expliquer qui il est. Et tous deux réagissent à ces explications avec le même laconisme, en un seul mot, « Ah ! ». Et Pontiggia d'envisager, la langue dans la joue, les innombrables sens que peut prendre cette exclamation. Où il apparaît que l'intonation est un rapport social, car ce qui permet à Pontiggia de multiplier les interprétations pour produire une multitude de sens, c'est que ces sens sont toujours déjà énoncés dans les interactions sociales des locuteurs et que l'intonation impulsée par le locuteur individuel se situe dans cet espace idéologique collectif.

L'objet de l'article de Volochinov est d'opérer une distinction entre deux genres de discours, le discours de la vie courante et le discours de la poésie, par quoi il faut entendre le discours littéraire. La différence est due au fait que ce dernier ne bénéficie pas des conditions de la parole vivante orale, que l'intonation en est absente. Il est donc condamné, pour passer de la signification au sens, à exploiter les traces que l'intonation peut laisser dans la parole morte sédimentée et éventuellement à tenter de les inscrire. On se souvient de l'article dans lequel Gilles Deleuze expose sa théorie du style comme agrammaticalité, tangage et roulis dans la langue. Il a pour titre « Bégaya-t-il » et commence ainsi :

On dit que les mauvais romanciers éprouvent le besoin de varier leurs indicatifs de dialogue en substituant à « dit-il » des expressions comme « murmura-t-il », « balbutia-t-il », « sanglota-t-il », « ricana-t-il », « cria-t-il », « bégaya-t-il »... qui marquent les intonations ».⁸

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Et il ajoute que le romancier a pour ce faire deux possibilités, ou bien le faire (et Balzac de faire bégayer le père Grandet) ou bien le dire sans le faire, par une simple indication qui encouragera l'imagination du lecteur. Et il suggère une troisième possibilité, dont il va tirer une théorie du style, quand dire c'est faire, c'est-à-dire quand l'écrivain fait bégayer la langue : « Ce n'est plus le personnage qui est bègue, c'est l'écrivain qui devient *bègue de la langue* ».⁹ Autrement dit le

⁷ Giuseppe Pontiggia, *Prima persona*, Mondadori, Milano 2002, pp. 15-6.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Critique et clinique*, Minuit, Paris 1993, p. 135.

⁹ *Ibid.*

discours de la poésie doit intégrer en son sein, autant que faire se peut (et l'ironie de Deleuze met le doigt sur les difficultés du processus) la situation d'énonciation, ce qui fait de l'énoncé un enthymème thématisé.

Les procédés de thématisation de l'enthymème ne sont pas toujours aussi élémentaires que ceux que moque Deleuze. Voici par exemple la première phrase de *A Sentimental Journey*, de Sterne : « -- They order, said I, this matter better in France -- ». ¹⁰ Célèbre début *in medias res*, qui semble n'être pas autre chose que l'expression d'une opinion. Mais la suite immédiate montre que cette signification n'épuise pas le sens de l'énoncé, loin de là : « -- You have been in France ? said my gentleman, turning quick upon me with the most civil triumph in the world ». Ce qui, au niveau de la signification semble être une innocente demande d'information est immédiatement contredit par le reste de la phrase, qui est une tentative d'inscription de l'intonation, puisque ces énoncés rapportent des paroles vivantes, en l'occurrence une discussion, dont il apparaît qu'elle n'était pas tant irénique (expression d'opinion et demande d'information) qu'agonistique (une discussion où il s'agit de triompher de l'adversaire, d'où l'utilisation du mot « triumph »). Et de fait la réplique de l'interlocuteur-adversaire du narrateur clôt la discussion, puisque celui-ci non seulement quitte la scène, je devrais dire s'enfuit, mais fait ses valises et s'embarque le soir même pour Calais (où débute son voyage sentimental). Ces deux énoncés sont donc clairement des enthymèmes, et le passage de la signification (irénique) au sens (agonistique) se fait par inférences, tirée et du ton triomphant de la réplique (un Sterne moins talentueux aurait pu utiliser l'incise 'triumpha-t-il ») et des actions du narrateur conversationnellement défait. Le lecteur accède au sens en comprenant que l'adversaire du narrateur insinue qu'il n'a jamais mis les pieds en France, et que donc il n'a aucun droit à émettre une opinion sur ce qui s'y passe, et sur ce que les Français font mieux ou moins bien. Mais il y a plus, qui montre que l'implicite de l'enthymème est social et non individuel, qu'il relève de ce que les marxistes entendent par idéologie : pour que l'argument porte, et signe le triomphe de l'interlocuteur, il faut qu'il soit admis par les deux participants, comme relevant du sens commun, qu'on ne peut aborder un sujet de conversation que sur la base d'une expérience directe – « knowledge by acquaintance », plutôt que « knowledge by description », pour pasticher Bertrand Russell. On verra là la trace non d'un bon sens par tous partageable mais d'un sens com-

¹⁰ Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1967 (1766), p. 27.

mun idéologique, à savoir de l'empirisme qui irrigue la culture anglaise, et la réaction, que l'on jugera excessive, du narrateur, n'est que l'inscription ironique de cette pesanteur idéologique.

Mais comme tout reste encore quelque peu abstrait, il me faut travailler sur d'autres exemples.

Deux exemples simples d'enthymème

Soit l'énoncé suivant : « The cat is on the mat ». Cet énoncé, dont la signification ne pose pas de problème, ne fait pas immédiatement sens, et justifie la distinction que fait Culioli entre phrase et énoncé :¹¹ c'est indéniablement une phrase, comme est une phrase « Le chien aboie », mais ce n'est pas immédiatement un énoncé, faute d'une situation qui transformera cette parole morte en parole vivante. L'analyse de la phrase, que la linguistique structurale mène avec entrain (des constituants immédiats, un syntagme nominal sujet et un syntagme prédicatif composé de la copule et d'un syntagme prépositionnel de lieu – bref, une phrase simple et non ambiguë) ne nous dit pas qui parle, de quoi il ou elle parle, et ce qu'ils veulent dire par là. Pour passer de la phrase à l'énoncé, il faut replonger la phrase dans une situation, ou, pour parler le langage du second Wittgenstein, indiquer le jeu de langage dans lequel et par lequel il fait sens. Autrement dit, ce texte ne fait sens qu'en termes d'une interprétation, qui restituera l'intonation et les évaluations nécessaires à l'émergence du sens. J'en suggère deux et donc deux situations d'interlocution.

La première s'appuie sur la simplicité de la phrase, qui n'est pas seulement grammaticale (phrase simple, syntaxe élémentaire) mais aussi lexicale (mots monosyllabiques d'origine saxonne, vocabulaire concret élémentaire). Si l'on ajoute à cette simplicité l'assonance « cat » / « mat », on se trouve dans l'univers langagier des textes enfantins, *nursery rhymes* ou *spelling bees*, et dans l'univers discursif de langue scolaire pour l'école élémentaire, celle qui est inculquée aux enfants du peuple et dont ils devront, sauf miracle (le terme est emprunté à Bourdieu) se contenter. Vous aurez reconnu ici une allusion aux thèses de Renée

¹¹ Antoine Culioli, *Pour une linguistique de l'énonciation*, 4, Lambert Lucas, Limoges 2018, pp. 19–20.

Balibar, et à son analyse du français scolaire.¹² Le jeu de langage concerné est celui des manuels scolaires, des exercices destinés à enseigner la pratique de la phrase simple : ainsi s'explique la proximité de notre phrase avec ce chien qui aboie culiolien, dont le contexte d'utilisation est lui aussi restreint à ce genre de jeu de langage, méthode Assimil ou grammaire scolaire pour premier degré. Les deux phrases illustrent la définition barthésienne du sens de connotation (on se souvient de son célèbre exemple : *Quia ego nominor leo*).¹³ Notre phrase est un enthymème en ce qu'elle ne nous donne pas seulement la localisation du chat mais qu'elle nous dit également, et implicitement : je suis un exemple de grammaire ou je fais partie d'un *spelling bee*.

Mais notre culture nous suggère une autre interprétation. La phrase est alors un enthymème au sens le plus immédiat en ce qu'elle est inachevée. Et la fin de phrase que la sédimentation culturelle évoque irrésistiblement en nous est la suivante : « ...but I don't believe it is ». Vous avez reconnu ce que la philosophie analytique anglo-saxonne connaît sous le nom de paradoxe de Moore. Cette phrase, parfaitement grammaticale, est logiquement déficiente en ce qu'elle enfreint une maxime logique : assertion implique croyance. En affirmant par une phrase assertive (« le chat *est* sur le paillason » et non « je crois bien que le chat est sur le paillason ») je présente ma proposition comme un fait avéré, et il m'est donc impossible de déclarer que je ne crois pas à ce que je viens d'affirmer. On remarquera naturellement que la phrase ainsi complétée n'existe pas plus que le chien qui aboie culiolien : son lieu discursif est l'article ou le manuel de philosophie, et elle présente les mêmes caractéristiques de parole abstraite et morte.

Cependant, on peut suggérer une différence avec « le chien aboie ». La phrase complète fait partie de notre culture : l'énonciation de la première proposition inévitablement évoque la proposition manquante et donne à la phrase incomplète l'allure d'une citation, c'est-à-dire d'un appel dialogique au lecteur ou à l'auditeur qui est implicitement invité à compléter l'enthymème, montrant par là, dans son aptitude à reconnaître la citation, qu'il participe de cette culture commune. Et si par malheur il ou elle ne la reconnaît pas, l'enthymème prend valeur de distinction, séparant le cultivé de l'inculte, car tout énoncé-enthymème implique une évaluation sociale. Et si par bonheur le locuteur est convaincu

¹² Renée Balibar, *Les français fictifs*, Hachette, Paris 1974.

¹³ Roland Barthes, « Le mythe aujourd'hui », in *Mythologies*, Seuil, Paris 1957.

que son auditeur ou lecteur va reconnaître la citation, la phrase se prête alors à exploitation sous forme de jeu d'esprit, car cela peut être une façon habile de faire remarquer que ce paresseux de Mistigris, le matou familial, se prélassa sur le paillason au lieu de chasser les souris.

Et voici un second énoncé : « Vous êtes bien sur Radio Classique », indéfiniment répété entre deux scies musicales pour chaîne petite-bourgeoise. Encore une phrase grammaticalement simplette, dont l'intérêt principal est la présence de cet adverbe, qui la rend ambiguë.

Les linguistes se sont bien sûr penchés sur cet adverbe polysémique. Antoine Culioli, par exemple, a beaucoup écrit sur lui.¹⁴ L'analyse qu'il donne de l'adverbe, au niveau de la simple description est simple : il s'agit d'un « 'bien' de confirmation », partie d'une chaîne dialogique dans laquelle l'énoncé qui le contient est une réponse à une demande (de confirmation). On voit en quoi l'énoncé est un enthymème : il est prédiqué sur du préconstruit, anneau d'une chaîne d'énoncés qui constituent son implicite (tu te demandes si tu es sur radio Classique – je te rassure). Bien entendu, le linguiste, fidèle au principe de « un marqueur une valeur », généralise son analyse aux autres usages de « bien » (« tu lis bien des romans policiers, toi » ; « Il y a bien Jules, mais... » ; « Tu achèterais bien un petit souvenir, non ? » – tous exemples donnés par Culioli). L'opération énonciative qu'il formule, pour rendre compte de cette multiplicité de significations, se situe à un haut degré d'abstraction : construction d'une relation prédicative, parcours des possibles et choix.

Mais notre phrase de départ s'inscrit dans cette analyse abstraite de façon particulière, puisque la phrase est ambiguë et a la structure d'un mot d'esprit. Derrière le « bien » de confirmation il faut bien entendu entendre un « bien » d'appréciation, et dont il n'est pas sûr que l'analyse du linguiste rende compte de façon convaincante (au-delà des agilités de pensée). Le « bien » marqueur d'appréciation illustre la plasticité des marqueurs grammaticaux, en ce qu'il peut être utilisé comme nom (« Ça lui fera du bien »), comme adverbe (« Tu vas bien ? ») comme adjectif (« C'est un type bien »), sans parler de l'extension métaphorique dans le domaine de la propriété, qui marque bien la nature de

¹⁴ Antoine Culioli, « Valeurs modales et opérations énonciatives », in *Pour une linguistique de l'énonciation*, vol. 1, Ophrys, Gap 1990, pp. 135-56.

signe idéologique du mot (« Il a du bien au soleil »). Cela pourrait nous amener à revoir la notion de catégorie grammaticale, ou encore, comme aimait à dire Sapir, « grammar leaks » :¹⁵ la grille d'interprétation que le système grammatical impose aux phénomènes laisse ce que j'ai naguère appelé un reste.¹⁶

Mais ce n'est pas vraiment ici que l'analyse du linguiste pêche, car il n'est pas dit que les agilités de pensée (qui ne sont pas toujours des facilités) ne parviennent pas à subsumer toutes ces occurrences sous une valeur unique. Elle pêche en ce que notre phrase *refuse* l'unification sous une valeur unique : l'auteur de ce slogan publicitaire *a besoin* de la disjonction des valeurs du marqueur, il a besoin que la langue, au moins sous la forme de ce que Culioli appelle le savoir épilinguistique (savoir pratique, pas entièrement conscient, du locuteur natif, que l'on oppose au savoir métalinguistique explicite du linguiste), distingue un *bien*₁ et un *bien*₂. Ce qui peut apparaître comme un raté de la langue, une homonymie source de possibles confusions est en réalité une réussite, coïncidence faste et hasard heureux. C'est le principe du jeu de mots : c'est parce qu'il y a du jeu dans la structure que l'on peut jouer avec elle.

Je reviens à l'ambiguïté du slogan. En principe, la phrase ne devrait pas être ambiguë : il y a une interprétation saillante qui fait de ce « bien » un « bien » de confirmation. La phrase est à la deuxième personne, elle constitue donc une réponse au sein d'un dialogue, que l'enthymème m'incite à restituer. Par ailleurs, l'interprétation appréciative (« vous êtes bien (dans votre peau) »), portant sur un sentiment subjectif, s'accorde mal à la deuxième personne : je peux demander, sur le mode interrogatif, si mon interlocuteur se sent bien, je ne peux guère l'affirmer, pas plus que je ne peux décider qu'il a mal aux dents.

L'ambiguïté résulte donc d'un forçage de la langue, forçage qui toutefois n'est pas arbitraire, mais implique une situation particulière, et ici on comprend l'importance de l'intonation. Car le slogan ne fait sens ambigu que si l'intonation est celle de l'hypnotiseur (« *Relax !* »), de celui qui prend possession de votre intériorité subjective, forme d'interpellation caractéristique non seulement de

¹⁵ Edward Sapir, *Language*, Harvest, Londres n.d. (1921), p. 38. La citation exacte est : « unfortunately, all grammars leak ».

¹⁶ Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *The Violence of Language*, Routledge, Londres 1990 (2ème édition, 2016).

l'hypnotisme mais aussi de la publicité, qui est là pour me dire ce que je ressens ou devrais ressentir. On a ici une forme particulière du jeu à trois qui constitue pour Freud la structure du mot d'esprit grivois (le plaisantin prend à témoin l'intrus qui a interrompu ses élans amoureux en faisant une plaisanterie dont la femme est la victime) :¹⁷ l'allocutaire, vous et moi qui écoutons Radio Classique, est à la fois l'objet de l'interpellation, c'est-à-dire la victime de la plaisanterie (c'est bien à moi que ce discours s'adresse) et son témoin, qui n'est pas seulement interpellé comme victime, mais est complice de l'interpellation. Cette complicité, c'est à dire cette servitude volontaire qui caractérise l'interpellation par la publicité plaisante, marque un rapport social, celui qui dans a société marchande interpelle le sujet en consommateur.¹⁸

Un mot d'esprit

The Two Ronnies fut une émission célèbre de la télévision britannique, qui dura plusieurs années. Les deux comiques, Ronnie Barker et Ronnie Corbett avaient pour signature une parodie des informations télévisées, sous la forme de « brèves ». En voici une, que je cite de mémoire :

« After a prolonged investigation, a team of Irish experts have concluded that the Irish Domesday Book was indeed a forgery. »

L'objet de ce mot d'esprit est d'insister sur le caractère d'enthymème de l'énoncé : ce qui se présente en surface comme une simple assertion, porteuse d'information (n'est-elle pas ce que les anglais appellent « *a news item* » ?) ne fait sens que si l'auditeur récupère l'implicite complexe qui se cache derrière la signification de l'énoncé. Et l'on ne manquera pas de remarquer la présence d'un marqueur explicite d'implicite dialogique, l'adverbe « *indeed* », qui est comme le « bien » de l'énoncé précédent un adverbe de confirmation. Il fait de l'énoncé une réponse à une affirmation, probablement exprimée sous la forme d'une question, laquelle sert de préconstruit pour la construction de notre énoncé : « *Is it not the case that the Irish Domesday Book is a forgery ?* ».

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¹⁷ Cf. Tzvetan Todorov, « Freud sur l'énonciation », in *Théories du symbole*, Seuil, Paris 1977, pp. 361–369.

¹⁸ Anthony Galluzzo, *La fabrique du consommateur*, La Découverte, Paris 2020.

Reste à se demander en quoi l'énoncé est un mot d'esprit. On note d'abord la construction rhétorique qui retarde jusqu'à la fin de la phrase l'apparition du mot sémantiquement le plus pertinent, « *forgery* », qui prend par-là l'aspect d'une pointe, non parce qu'il est inattendu, mais parce qu'il est évident, et entre en contradiction avec le reste de l'énoncé, pastiche du langage ampoulé des « experts ». Car l'auditeur, au fil de la phrase, c'est-à-dire au fur et à mesure que l'information lui est transmise, se livre à un calcul d'implicite, et reconstitue une situation : une enquête longue (que l'on peut donc supposer complexe ou difficile), des experts pointus (le champ de leur expertise est la machine à écrire, un champ nettement délimité historiquement et techniquement), et un objet, « *the Irish Domesday Book* », que son nom même, par association avec son célèbre équivalent anglais, doit faire remonter au 10^{ème} siècle. L'anachronisme est éclatant, et le mot de la fin « *forgery* » est à la fois inévitable (c'est la conclusion que l'anachronisme impose dans l'esprit de l'auditeur) et surprenant (faut-il être idiot pour avoir besoin d'une enquête longue et difficile, menée par des experts, pour conclure que si le texte prétendument médiéval est tapé à la machine, alors c'est nécessairement un faux). Ce calcul d'implicite, que je viens d'explicitier de façon pédante, se produit bien entendu en un clin d'œil – c'est une des caractéristiques de l'enthymème que d'être immédiatement déchiffré, en ce qu'il est, au moins partiellement, grammatisé, c'est-à-dire inscrit dans des marqueurs pragmatiques et en ce qu'il relève de l'évidence idéologique qui constitue le sens commun.

Mais l'enthymème n'est pas seulement grammatical, il est aussi social. Cette plaisanterie (de goût douteux) est idéologiquement chargée, en ce qu'elle pré-suppose ce sens commun, commun aux deux comiques et à leurs auditeurs, sous la forme de la complicité du mot d'esprit freudien : s'il a fallu tout ce temps et tous ces efforts pour parvenir à ce résultat évident au premier coup d'œil, c'est qu'il s'agit du « *Domesday Book* » irlandais, et que donc les experts en question sont sans doute irlandais, c'est-à-dire stupides. Autrement dit, ce mot d'esprit est chargé d'idéologie xénophobe, que le sens commun et sa complicité ont pour fonction de faire passer pour une évidence : pour la culture anglaise (dans cette forme de l'idéologie dominante), les Irlandais sont idiots, les Ecossais pingres et les Gallois voleurs – les Anglais, eux, sont des gens normaux. On relira à ce propos la superbe pièce de Trevor Griffiths, *Comedians*, qui dénonce la pré-

gnance de l'idéologie dominante dans les pratiques discursives des *comedians* anglais.¹⁹

Thackeray, enfin

L'idée d'écrire ce texte m'est venue en lisant le remarquable livre que Jacqueline Fromonot vient de consacrer à l'œuvre de Thackeray.²⁰ Elle y pose à nouveaux frais le problème du réalisme de Thackeray. Car il est clair que Thackeray n'est pas réaliste au sens naturaliste ni même au sens de Dickens, son rival plus fortuné. Ce qui ressort des analyses de Jacqueline Fromonot, c'est que le réalisme de Thackeray n'est pas un réalisme de contenu, pour lequel le texte reflète, quel que soit le sens que l'on donne au concept de reflet, la réalité sociale, mais un réalisme de la forme. Une question se pose immédiatement : qu'est-ce donc qu'un réalisme de la forme ? Dans les termes de la stylistique de Volochinov, on dira que le texte réaliste dans son contenu reflète la réalité (il nous offre un reflet de la structure sociale dans une formation sociale déterminée et dans une conjoncture historique déterminée), tandis que le texte réaliste dans sa forme la réfracte (il représente la structure sociale indirectement, par le biais des processus de subjectivation par interpellation dans une formation linguistique et dans une conjoncture linguistique – qui est aussi une conjoncture historique – déterminées). Je précise tous ces termes.

Outre sa thèse sur le marxisme et la philosophie du langage et l'article auquel je me suis déjà référé, Volochinov a écrit une série de trois articles, qui constituent en réalité l'ébauche d'un livre, sous le titre général de « Stylistique littéraire ». Le troisième de ces articles a pour titre « Le mot et sa fonction sociale ».²¹ La thèse défendue dans cet article est que l'orientation sociale de l'énoncé joue un rôle décisif dans sa structure stylistique. Ce par quoi Volochinov entend que l'appartenance de classe du locuteur organise la structure stylistique de l'énoncé non dans son contenu mais dans sa forme, qui actualise le rapport du locuteur à la situation et à ses auditeurs. Dans un langage plus contemporain, mais toujours

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¹⁹ Trevor Griffiths, *Comedians*, Faber, Londres 1976.

²⁰ Jacqueline Fromonot, *Figures de l'instabilité dans l'œuvre de William Makepeace Thackeray*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes 2021.

²¹ Valentin Nikolaevich Voloshinov, « The word and its social function », in A. Shukman (ed.), *Bakhtin School Papers (Russian Poetics in Translation, vol. 10)*, RPT Publications, Oxford 1985, pp. 139–152.

inspiré par le marxisme, on dira que la structure pragmatique de la situation d'énonciation est une structure idéologique : qui je suis pour te dire ceci, qui tu es pour que je te dise ceci et la façon dont je peux te le dire dépendent de la position idéologique des sujets concernés, de leur mode de subjectivation par interpellation idéologique. Il y a donc un rapport entre la structure sociale, qui est une structure de classe, telle qu'elle s'actualise dans la situation d'énonciation, et les énoncés enthymémiques produits, mais ce rapport n'est pas de simple reflet, il est de *réfraction*. Voici comment Volochinov formule l'opposition entre les deux concepts :

All of reality, the entire being of man and nature are not simply reflected in a sign, but are also refracted in it. And this refraction of being in the ideological sign is determined by the crossing of differently directed social interests within the parameters of one sign collective, that is, in the class struggle.²²

Dans ce langage de la lutte des classes, il faut entendre que la structure sociale n'est pas stable, qu'elle est traversée de contradictions, que ces contradictions ne sont pas seulement reflétées dans les énoncés mais réfractées par eux, ce qui veut dire que leur énonciation est partie prenante des rapports qui actualisent ces contradictions (on reconnaîtra ici le thème marxiste classique : les classes sociales n'existent pas hors de la lutte des classes, elles en sont le produit, sans cesse recommencé). On pourra donc rendre compte de l'opposition entre les deux concepts sous la forme d'une corrélation : le reflet est à la réfraction ce que le passif est à l'actif (la réfraction n'est pas seulement une représentation mais une intervention dans l'interaction sociale) ; ce que la parole morte, sédimentée en texte, est à la parole vivante, avec son intonation et ses évaluations ; ce que la signification (qui est donnée par la parole morte) est au sens (qui est issu de la parole vivante, évaluations et point de vue) ; ce que la structure figée des classes, produit d'une mauvaise abstraction est à la lutte des classes, processus par lesquels les classes se forment et se défont.

On comprendra que le processus de réfraction ne représente cette structure sociale abstraite qu'indirectement, par le biais du processus de subjectivation par interpellation, ce qui est une façon de lui donner vie : supériorité du réalisme de la forme sur la représentation naturaliste du contenu. Le concept d'interpel-

²² *Ibid.*, p. 147.

lation est au cœur de la théorie althussérienne de l'idéologie (l'idéologie, par le biais de appareils idéologiques d'Etat interpelle les individus en sujets – elle les interpelle tous, et le processus ne rate « pratiquement » jamais). Comme j'ai consacré à ce concept un volume entier, je me permets d'y renvoyer.²³ On y trouvera une transposition des concepts marxistes de formation sociale et de conjoncture historique dans le domaine de la philosophie du langage sous la forme des concepts, par moi introduits, de formation linguistique (ce qu'on appelle une langue naturelle est une multiplicité de dialectes, sous la domination d'un dialecte standard grammatisé dans des manuels, des institutions et des médias) et de conjoncture linguistique (ces dialectes sont en concurrence et en mouvement incessant : de même que les classes se constituent dans la lutte des classes, ils se constituent dans cette lutte).

Comme tout ceci est bien abstrait, je prends un exemple thackerayen. Il est tiré du chapitre 5 du livre de Jacqueline Fromonot, « Plasticité des codes sociaux », dans lequel elle analyse longuement l'usage diégétique que fait Thackeray des formules consacrées, « *At home* » et « *Not at home* », par lesquelles le maître ou la maîtresse des lieux fait dire par son larbin au visiteur qu'il ou elle est indisponible. C'est un exemple de code social, d'étiquette, chargé de rendre plus faciles les rapports sociaux, de leur préserver un caractère irénique, en évitant, en cas de refus d'admission, de blesser le visiteur. Car la formule « *Not at home* » (dont le caractère syntaxiquement elliptique – ni sujet ni verbe – indique l'appartenance à un code fait de formules conventionnelles) peut renvoyer à trois situations : une absence réelle, une indisponibilité qui interdit de recevoir des visiteurs, mais aussi le refus de recevoir ce visiteur en particulier. La formule, dont la signification est simple et univoque prend des sens multiples selon la situation, c'est à dire les rapports entre les interlocuteurs potentiels, et elle demande chaque fois un calcul d'implicature, puisque cet énoncé est, spectaculairement, un enthymème. Dans le troisième cas en particulier, la formule est censée préserver le caractère irénique du rapport social en pratiquant ce que les Anglais appellent « *face-saving* », la prise en compte des intérêts discursifs de l'interlocuteur, ici le visiteur éconduit, pour éviter de donner au refus un caractère humiliant. Thackeray est pleinement conscient des subtilités de ce jeu linguistique et social, et il en joue avec brio dans ses narrations. Mais il va plus loin et se montre capable de l'exploiter, ce qui, comme le montre Jacqueline

²³ Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *De l'interpellation*, Amsterdam, Paris 2019.

Fromonot, est une façon de tester ses limites (et je suis ici en train de donner un contenu à la notion de « réalisme de la forme »). Elle cite à ce propos un passage des *Diaries of Jeames de la Pluche*.

Jeames est un valet de chambre qui a fait fortune en spéculant sur les chemins de fer. Une fois richissime, il s'achète une généalogie qui remonte à Guillaume le Conquérant, devient Jeames *de la Pluche*, et s'apprête à épouser « *the Lady Angelina* », fille d'un *baronet* au bord de la ruine, dont il a naturellement promis de payer les dettes. La veille de ce mariage, pour lequel la fiancée ne semble pas éprouver un enthousiasme débordant, il rend visite à la famille. Et voici, dans son langage fleuri, comment il est reçu :

There was a great bussel and distubbans in the Hall in Ill Street: which I etribyouted to the eproaching event. The old porter stared most uncommon when I kem in – the footman who was to enounce me laft I thought – I was going up stairs, - “Her ladyship’s not – not at home,” says the man; “and my lady’s still in bed” “Git lunch,” says I, “I’ll wait till Lady Hangelina returns.”
At this the feller loox at me for a moment with his cheex blown out like a bladder, and then busts out in a regular gaffau! The porter jined in, the impident old raskl: and Thomas says, slapping his and on his thy, without the least respect – “I say, Huffy, old boy! ISN’T this a good un?”²⁴

C'est le moment où, comme dit la langue anglaise, « *Jeames gets his come-up-pance* », c'est-à-dire une forme sociale de rétribution, car sa fiancée, refusant d'être vendue au plus offrant, s'est enfuie vers Gretna Green avec son cousin, le fringant capitaine.

On voit en quoi l'analyse pragmatique en termes de *face saving*, qui est irénique, est ici dépassée et exploitée. Car la réponse du larbin est à la fois littéralement véridique, puisque la demoiselle s'est envolée, et insultante, car le reste de l'échange insiste sur le plaisir qu'a le larbin à remettre son ancien collègue, le parvenu, à sa place. Autrement dit, l'enthymème social conventionnel de la formule se fait, par exploitation, c'est-à-dire par son passage de parole sédimentée morte à parole vivante, porteur d'un *agôn* social, forme de lutte idéolo-

²⁴ William Makepeace Thackeray, « The Diary of C. Jeames De La Pluche », in *The Book of Snobs*, Collins, Londres n.d., p. 255.

gique de classe par laquelle l'aristocratie rappelle à la bourgeoisie des parvenus récents avec laquelle elle est forcée de composer qu'ils n'appartiennent pas au même monde, un monde qui n'est pas seulement fait de rapports de classe et d'argent, mais aussi de civilité et de bien dire et dont l'inscription se lit dans des enthymèmes conventionnels. Nous sommes ici dans l'univers de la civilisation des mœurs de Norbert Elias.²⁵ L'ironie est que le représentant de la classe féodale, chargé d'écraser linguistiquement le parvenu, est son ancien collègue – version littérale de ce que la critique marxiste appelle habituellement un « chien de garde ».

Mais on doit aller encore plus loin, et célébrer le réalisme de la forme de Thackeray, car cette exploitation de la formule conventionnelle en dit la vérité : qu'elle n'est pas simple manière de fluidifier les rapports intersubjectifs langagiers, relevant de ce que les pragmaticiens appellent le principe de politesse,²⁶ mais inscription d'un rapport social, par le biais de ce qu'Elias appelle le « bien dire » des aristocrates, rapport qui est fondé sur la lutte idéologique des classes. En réalité, c'est tout le texte de Thackeray qui illustre cette lutte idéologico-discursive, portée par le langage grotesque du valet parvenu qui singe le bien dire de ses anciens maîtres.

Toutefois, la position est ici ambiguë. Chez Elias, ce sont les bourgeois qui cherchent à imiter le bien dire des aristocrates, à des fins d'intégration (le bourgeois gentilhomme est l'archétype de ce rapport social). Mais Jeames est un parvenu de trop fraîche date pour être vraiment un bourgeois : en sa personne c'est le peuple, plutôt que la bourgeoisie déjà cultivée, qui singe l'aristocratie, d'où la caricature. Une analyse marxiste montrera que cette position de Thackeray est une position de classe, celle du petit bourgeois, tiraillé entre sa critique des classes dominantes, dont il se sent exclu, et son besoin de se distinguer des classes populaires, c'est-à-dire d'éviter la prolétarianisation qui toujours le menace. On le voit, une fois replacée dans le contexte d'une situation vivante (même si entièrement fictive), l'expression figée se fait inscription dynamique d'un rapport de classe. Le signe linguistique est bien, comme l'affirme Volochinov, un signe idéologique.

²⁵ Norbert Elias, *La civilisation des mœurs*, Livre de Poche, Paris 1973 (1969) ; *La dynamique de l'occident*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris 1975 (1969).

²⁶ Geoffrey Leech, *Principles of Pragmatics*, Longman, Londres 1983.

Conclusion : le réalisme de la forme et la vérité

En analysant l'épisode thackerayen, j'ai utilisé un terme gros de sens, le mot « vérité » : le réalisme de la forme consiste en ce que l'artiste dit la vérité des rapports sociaux inscrits dans les pratiques discursives.

De fait, la question de la vérité a toujours été au cœur des pratiques artistiques qui se voulaient réalistes. Que ce soit sous la forme de la fidélité du reflet naturaliste, qui repose sur une conception de la vérité comme adéquation au réel, ou sous celle du « typique » chez Lukacs, qui n'est pas simple reflet du donné en ce qu'il est capable de saisir le réel émergent.²⁷ Le réalisme de la forme se distingue de ces réalismes du reflet en ce que, comme on l'a vu, il remplace le reflet par la réfraction : ce n'est pas un réalisme du contenu, image en miroir de l'objet décrit, mais de la forme, par réfraction des pratiques discursives de subjectivation. Cette substitution nous incite à reprendre la question de la vérité à nouveau frais, et Thackeray va nous aider à le faire. Car Thackeray joue en maître avec l'instabilité de la vérité littéraire, selon le gradient qui va de la vérité « vraie » du réalisme traditionnel, qui est censée être adéquation au réel, au vraisemblable, discours qui ressemble au discours qui ressemble au réel, au mensonge délibéré qu'est la fiction, mensonge paradoxal, puisque la caractéristique définitoire du mensonge est qu'il ne doit pas se laisser percevoir comme tel, pour aboutir à une forme de vérité de la fiction. On se souviendra par exemple de ce chapitre du *Book of Snobs* où Thackeray, qui a convaincu son lecteur que les snobs abondent dans toutes les couches de la société, soutient qu'il est impossible que l'on trouve des snobs dans le monde des écrivains – pendant un chapitre entier le lecteur doit interpréter chaque phrase comme disant le contraire de ce qu'elle semble vouloir dire, selon la définition traditionnelle de l'ironie.²⁸ Et l'on se souviendra aussi de cette vignette, dans un autre chapitre, lorsque Thackeray nous conte l'anecdote de l'avocat désargenté, mais heureux en ménage, qui ose inviter le millionnaire à déjeuner dans son humble demeure, lui sert un repas d'une extrême simplicité, côtelettes d'agneau grillées et pommes de terre bouillies, sans service en argent ni larbins chargés de présenter les plats, et le force, à la fin du repas, à convenir qu'il a bien déjeuné – la leçon étant bien entendu que les pratiques culinaires et les manières de table de la haute société sont des exemples

²⁷ Georg Lukacs, *Balzac et le réalisme français*, Maspéro, Paris 1967, p. 9.

²⁸ William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Book of Snobs*, chap. 16.

de pur snobisme. Et Thackeray de conclure son anecdote en s'adressant ainsi à ses lecteurs, dans une parenthèse : « *The best of this story (for the truth of every word of which I pledge my honour)...* ».²⁹ Voilà une prétention à la validité, pour parler comme Habermas, qui vise la vérité de façon particulièrement péremptoire. Mais le lecteur n'est pas dupe ; il ne peut s'empêcher de prendre cette affirmation apodictique comme une dénégation freudienne, ce à quoi l'incitent et l'exagération comique du récit (le carrosse qui amène le millionnaire chez l'avocat, dans cette rue étroite d'un quartier pauvre, est haut comme le deuxième étage des maisons) et l'onomastique thackerayenne, car l'avocat désargenté se nomme Grey, et le richard Goldmore – nous sommes dans le monde de l'oncle Picsou, c'est-à-dire le monde de la fable dont la généralisation et l'abstraction n'ont rien à voir avec une quelconque adéquation au réel, ce qui transforme la parenthèse de Thackeray en impudent mensonge. Mais la fable est grosse de potentialités de vérité morales – la vérité fictionnelle est en un sens plus « vraie » que la vérité descriptive. Sauf qu'il y a un dernier tour d'écrou, et que cette vérité fictionnelle se détruit elle-même en sombrant dans le cliché – *aurea mediocritas* contre richesse ostentatoire qui ne fait pas le bonheur.

Voilà en quoi consiste la vérité de la fiction : elle fait apparaître la nature idéologique du signe ; elle illustre la fonction de l'idéologie comme production de sujet ; elle thématise le rôle du langage dans le processus de subjectivation ; elle utilise le réalisme de la forme pour pratiquer et à la fois décrire le processus de subjectivation par interpellation. Car là est bien la leçon à tirer de l'anecdote de Thackeray : elle met en scène (dans l'anecdote) et pratique (dans la parenthèse affirmant la vérité du manifestement faux) une double interpellation : celle du millionnaire, forcé de se mesurer avec son propre snobisme, et celle du lecteur, interpellé à sa place et incité à contre-interpeller l'interpellation auctoriale. Ce n'est pas un hasard si le livre de Jacqueline Fromonot débute par un chapitre sur les modes d'adresses dans l'œuvre de Thackeray : le réalisme de la forme est un réalisme de l'interpellation.

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²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

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Photography between Affective Turn and Affective Structure

Introduction

In *Camera Lucida*, still a major reference for emerging branches of photography theory, Roland Barthes paved the way for thinking about photography in terms of affect. In this late work, marked by grief for the loss of his mother, Barthes seems to have left his earlier semiotic work on photography behind and approached photographs through “an affective intentionality” that views photographs as immersed in affective responses to them.¹ Photography theory’s recent embrace of the so-called affective turn in the humanities aims to follow the later Barthes at the expense of the kind of photography theory practiced under the influence of the earlier, semiotic Barthes.² The affective turn thus turns away not only from looking at photographs as images with aesthetic indifference, but also partially from reading them critically as meanings. Overcoming critical photography theory’s exclusion of affect thus entails a move further away from the photograph in and of itself towards the various ways in which photographs and photographic practices incite affective responses that are themselves entangled in the often complex social realities in which these affects are felt.

In this article, however, I attempt to examine the photographic affect precisely from the perspective left aside by photography theory’s affective turn. The question I will be asking is the following: Is there an affectivity of the photograph “itself”, an affectivity inscribed in its semiotic structure and the aesthetic appearance that it produces? By talking about photography “itself” and its aesthetic appearance I do not intend to return to a modernist formalism or – even worse – an academic aestheticism. In order to tackle the question asked, I will rather go back to the way photography theory, inspired by the semiotic Barthes,

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¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, New York 1981, p. 21.

² Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu, “Introduction”, in Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu (eds.), *Feeling Photography*, Duke University Press, Durham 2014, pp. 2–3.

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had already incorporated thinking about the affectivity of photography before *Camera Lucida* was even published. Specifically, I have in mind a 1978 article in *October*, in which Thierry de Duve argues that “photography is probably the only image-producing technique that has a mourning process built into its semiotic structure, just as it has a built-in trauma effect.”³ De Duve clearly distinguishes the immanent affectivity of photography from the way a photograph might affect its spectator as a result of its content (images of traumatic scenes) or personal sentimental value (photographs as substitutive objects). Rather, the affectivity built into the semiotic structure of the photograph is a result of its “indexical nature,” i.e. the fact that “the referent of an index cannot be set apart from its signifier.”⁴ The immanently affected structure of photography is thus understood semiotically in the manner proposed by the earlier Barthes. De Duve’s approach will help us move away from the focus on the (personal, even if socially contextualised) affective experiences of the spectator suggested by Barthes himself in *Camera Lucida* and often taken up by affect theory. But it will also allow us to see more clearly how the later Barthes’s own reflections on the photographic affect are conditioned by his previous semiotic focus. It is after all the specificity of photography as a medium that determines, according to Barthes, the way photographs affect us. Barthes’s affective phenomenology thus rests on a structure that is itself affected.

Yet, the goal of this article is not only to return from affective phenomenology to affective structuralism. It is also to rethink the photographic affect by shifting the focus from indexicality to another feature of photography’s structure: the way the camera captures a spatio-temporal fragment, isolated from the temporal and spatial continuum as well as the symbolic and imaginary frameworks in which the referent might be involved at the time of the shot. To a certain extent, this contradicts the direct link to the uniqueness of the referent and gives the photographic image a character of indeterminacy otherwise associated with autonomous aesthetic appearance. The aesthetics I have in mind here, however, is not the Greenbergian modernism that has often been the framework for incorporating photography into artistic discourses. Instead, I will approach the aesthetic dimension of the photographic image through Jacques Rancière’s account of pho-

³ Thierry de Duve, “Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox”, *October* 5 (Summer, 1978), p. 123.

⁴ *Ibid.*

tography within the conceptual framework of what he calls the aesthetic regime of art. The structure of photography, I will argue, produces a specific type of aesthetic appearance, which has more to do with indeterminacy than indexicality.

This brings me to the second and central question of this article: If there is indeed an affect inscribed in the photographic type of aesthetic appearance, what kind of affect is it? As suggested by both Barthes and de Duve, it has to do with dealing with loss. Even though photography is distinguished from other types of images by providing an authentication of presence, its presence is necessarily a presence of loss.⁵ The privileged relation of the photographic image to reality does not amount to the triumph of representation, but rather to a direct emanation of a past reality, evidence of “that-has-been.”⁶ This peculiar dynamic between direct presence and evident loss produces an affective polarity, with poles shifting with regard to what is lost: the referent itself or the world it belonged to. In Barthes, we can see this polarity or ambivalence as an alteration between amazement and desire, on the one hand, and grief, mourning, and melancholy, on the other. There is a similar combination in de Duve, who juxtaposes the mourning process inherent to photography (which he also characterises as melancholic and depressive) with its traumatic (or manic) side.

Barthes’s and de Duve’s accounts of photography’s affective polarity are clearly dependent on the indexical nature of photography. But what happens if we focus on indeterminacy instead? Below I will show how this move implies a different kind of affectivity of photography. First of all, indeterminacy endows photography with indifference in relation to the referent. Yet this indifference has its own effect on affective polarity. If loss is no longer tied to a unique referent, new distinctions begin to appear. Rather than amazement or trauma, which both block the process of symbolic or imaginary reinscription of what is seen, the photographic isolation of the object entails curiosity about the possible contexts or worlds this moment could have belonged to. Instead of the monolithic block of mourning and melancholy, which appear as synonyms in both Barthes and de Duve, a crucial distinction between the two conditions noticed by Freud

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⁵ See Jay Prosser, *Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2005.

⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 85–89.

can be taken into account. While mourning is always tied to a specific lost object, melancholy is a consequence of an indeterminate loss.

From index to affect

While *Camera Lucida* grasped photography through a strong new conceptual apparatus that subsequently proved to be vastly influential (especially the *studium/punctum* distinction), it simultaneously renounced any generalising theoretical ambitions, with its author claiming to be “interested in Photography only for ‘sentimental’ reasons.”⁷ As James Elkins has noted: “*Camera Lucida* is at the beginning of a flourishing interest in affect, feeling, and trauma in the art world, and that may be the best explanation of its staying power.”⁸ Yet, the affective intentionality that governs the book’s understanding of photography remains firmly attached to the direct relation between the referent and its representation. Unlike in any other system of representation, “in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*.”⁹ The causal relationship between the referent and its sign, along with the collision of presence and absence, is something that Barthes already developed in his earlier semiotic writings on photography, influencing Rosalind Krauss’s conceptualisation of the indexical nature of photography published in *October* a year before de Duve, following Krauss, examined its affective implications in the same journal. In *Camera Lucida*, published two years after de Duve’s article, Barthes drew his own affective conclusions from the photographic *that-has-been*.

While grief and mourning are most often brought up when addressing the affective side of Barthes’s book, the affect that first strikes Barthes as inscribed in the very semiotic structure of photography is actually one of astonishment or amazement (*étonnement*). The primary affective reaction to photography is not a reaction to the loss it implies (the referent is no longer what it was when the photograph was taken), but to the unique representational presence it is able to provide. Yet, the emanation of a referent that is no longer there does not bring with it the past world it belonged to. Photography, as Barthes makes clear, does not resurrect lost time:

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⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁸ James Elkins, *What Photography Is*, Routledge, New York 2011, p. xi.

⁹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 76.

The Photograph does not call up the past (nothing Proustian in a photograph). The effect it produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what I see has indeed existed. Now, this is a strictly scandalous effect. Always the Photograph astonishes me, with an astonishment which endures and renews itself, inexhaustibly.¹⁰

If it is not the nostalgic yearning for the past that introduces loss to photography's presence, how does grief come to accompany amazement as the other side of photography's affective polarity? While amazement is a consequence of making what is lost to the past present, the actual loss photography implies is less oriented towards the past than it is to the future. This is also what distinguishes photography from cinema, which might have the same "indexical" relation to reality, but does not share its arrested temporality: "Like the real world, the filmic world is sustained by the presumption that, as Husserl says, 'the experience will constantly continue to flow by in the same constitutive style'; but the Photograph breaks the 'constitutive style' (this is its astonishment); it is *without future* (this is its pathos, its melancholy)."¹¹ The loss of the past is less important for Barthes, because what is astonishing about photography is precisely that it can keep the past present. Yet, the presence that it keeps comes at a price: it does not develop further, its future is lost.

The loss of the future is what makes time a *punctum*, i.e. what truly affects us when looking at photographs. While the first part of the book looks into the apparently insignificant details in a photograph that accidentally arouse our attention, the loss of the future is what brings to light this other kind of *punctum*, which ultimately makes photography a sign of death: "It is because each photograph always contains this imperious sign of my future death that each one, however attached it seems to be to the excited world of the living, challenges each of us."¹² The way photography refers to the specific thing that has been in front of its lens also individualises our affective relations to it. A found photograph of Barthes's mother (the "Winter Garden Photograph") can thus become the central item of the book (or its central absence, since it is not reproduced).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 89–90.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

This photograph of the mother he still mourns achieves for Barthes “*the impossible science of the unique being*”¹³ and it is with this same uniqueness that death addresses itself to every one of us through the photographs we come across. Astonishment thus makes way for grief and mourning – much more than for melancholy itself, as I will argue below.

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In de Duve’s account, photography’s semiotic structure produces an affective duality similar to the one proposed by Barthes. The mourning/melancholy/grief complex remains in place (although de Duve adds depression to the list), while the positive affect of amazement that Barthes proposes as its other side is replaced by de Duve with the more negative composite of trauma and mania. De Duve also attempts to give a more precise conceptual status to both affective poles than Barthes. Following Freud, de Duve understands affect in terms of the allocation (*cathexis* or *Besetzung*) and withdrawal of libido to and from specific objects.¹⁴ But before we come to this, we should note that de Duve understands the affective duality of photography as linked to a split in its indexical nature.

In an almost dialectical fashion, de Duve understands photography as a contradiction between two constitutive and coexisting models of photography, models that are at the same time abstract (they cannot be empirically separated as two types of photography) and concrete (a clear description and examples are given of both). This contradiction is irresolvable and thus makes for a constitutive paradox of photography.¹⁵ The two models or ways of perceiving photographs are the *time exposure*, an example of which is the portrait, the funerary portrait in particular, and the *snapshot*, the prime example of which is press photography. While the time exposure is perceived as a picture, an autonomous representation, the snapshot is perceived as the pictured event itself.¹⁶ The two models engage two different relations between the referent and the image, as well as two different modes of temporality. Crucially, both are destined to miss out on what they aim for. The time exposure aims to preserve the referent, but

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¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁴ De Duve, “Time Exposure and Snapshot”, pp. 123–124.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

cannot help designate its death. Meanwhile, the snapshot actually manages to preserve an artefact of the event itself, but freezes the temporal fluency of life that it wants to convey. In turn, this fluency is captured by the time exposure as the temporality of the memory activated by the image. The time exposure and the snapshot thus fail at their own respective goals, but manage to achieve each other's: "Whereas the snapshot refers to the fluency of time without conveying it, the time exposure petrifies the time of the referent and denotes it as departed. Reciprocally, whereas the former freezes the superficial time of the image, the latter releases it."¹⁷

De Duve considers the snapshot to be traumatic, since it blocks any attempt to resolve what we see by symbolising it. The encounter with an artefact of the event renders us "momentarily aphasic" and prevents us from including it in any kind of narrative.¹⁸ The frozen movement of the event splits the present moment it attempts to capture: we are always too early to witness the resolution of what is going on in the image, but also too late to witness or intervene in the depicted situation.¹⁹ In a certain sense, the photograph brings us too close to the event, the thing itself, at the expense of the narrative context or symbolic framework the event was inscribed in. In other words, we get a hold of the object (an image of the referent as it was at a crucial moment in time and space), but lose the world it was a part of (due to the continuous nature of time and space). The time exposure, on the other hand, stimulates speech instead of blocking it. The captured moment in time encourages the unfolding of "a narrative that meshes the imaginary with the symbolic and organises our mediation with reality."²⁰ The funerary portrait or the family photo album activate our memory and help us reconstruct periods of the portrayed person's life. They thus help us to regain the world in the context of which the photograph was taken, but at the price of the referent, which the photograph consigns to death. As such, the time exposure lends itself to what Freud called the work of mourning: the photograph functions as a substitutive object that ultimately helps us accept the loss and reinvest our libidinal energy into other objects. It is in this sense that "there is something like a mourning process that occurs within the semiotic structure

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 119–121.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

of the photograph.”²¹ The primary opposition between trauma and mourning is then generalised by de Duve as the “unresolved oscillation between two opposite libidinal positions: the manic and the depressive.”²² In the conclusion of the text, he simply equates mourning with melancholy and depression, even though he quotes Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia”, a text that explicitly deals with the difference between the two conditions it mentions in the title.

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For both De Duve and Barthes, the affective polarity of photography ultimately tips to the side of loss as the primary factor. The opposite resolution is also possible, of course, as testified to by, among others, Shawn Michelle Smith’s discussion of F. Holland Day’s photography through the Barthesian affective intentionality. Emphasising desire instead of grief, Smith argues for “a punctum of pleasure”²³ to supplement the *punctum* of death. By unveiling the queer dimension of Barthes’s conceptual framework, Smith shows how the indexical nature of photography allows one’s desire to “find a beyond that is proximate, an absence that is present, something desired that can be attained – and that is the ecstasy of photography”.²⁴

Another version of the ecstatic *punctum* is proposed by Serge Tisseron in his psychoanalytic account of photography as not only an image but also a practice. Stepping away from the indexical nature of photography, Tisseron argues that photography theory should shift its focus from the “that-has-been” of the represented object to the “that-was-lived” of the photographer.²⁵ Taking a picture not only freezes a moment in time, cutting it off from the continuity of the world, but also affirms the connection between the photographer and the world in a moment of ecstatic participation.²⁶

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 124.

²³ Shawn Michelle Smith, “Photography between Desire and Grief: Roland Barthes and F. Holland Day”, in: E. H. Brown and T. Phu (eds.), *Feeling Photography*, p. 43.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁵ Serge Tisseron, *La mystère de la chambre claire: Photographie et inconscient*, Flammarion, Paris 1996, p. 60.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

Yet, tipping the affective balance from grief to bliss – as Smith and Tisseron do in different ways – is not the only way to challenge Barthes’s affective affinities. In his book-length confrontation with *Camera Lucida*, James Elkins argues that Barthes’s *punctum*, for all its emphasis on grief, misses what is truly painful about photography, namely its “non-humanist, emotionless side.”²⁷ Elkins replaces the combination of realism and affective phenomenology that governs Barthes’s dealings with photography with what could be branded an impersonal materialist approach. What photography reproduces is not so much the reality of our experience of the world but all the material details that we otherwise ignore. If we look beyond the represented figures and situations that present themselves as meaningful to the spectator, what we see in a photograph is a collection of material details of little interest, the indifference of matter. Photographs show us “something about the world’s own deadness, its inert resistance to whatever it is we may hope or want. Photography fills our eyes with all the dead and deadening stuff of the world, material we don’t want to see or to name.”²⁸ Elkins thus proposes a more radical shift: instead of balancing the photographic experience between grief and astonishment, he presents it as an experience of the world’s indifference to the subject’s affective investments. By this kind of intrusion of peripheral details, the notion of the *punctum* is expanded but also made impersonal and thus completely undermined with regard to Barthes’s definition.

From indeterminacy to indifference

The impersonality of peripheral details is at the centre of another account of photography that progresses through a critique of Barthes. For Jacques Rancière, photography’s ability to register all sorts of material details that can lend themselves to potential apprehension as a *punctum* is not only a specificity of the photographic medium that sets it apart from art, but also what makes photography a part of the modern aesthetic revolution. In this sense, the aesthetic regime of art, which started to emerge even before photography was invented, was already “photographic”. Due to its rejection of traditional hierarchies of noble and ignoble subjects and the higher and lower genres and styles that correspond thereto, it could treat anything as significant within the self-sufficiency

²⁷ James Elkins, *What Photography Is*, p. xi.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

of aesthetic appearance. Photographs can thus be considered art “according to the aesthetic logic, because they do not owe anything either to the quality of their subject or to any artistic addition meant to raise them from their mediocrity. They owe it only to themselves. They are the testimony of a glance directed at the right time at the right spot to catch what is in front of it.”²⁹ The significance of the insignificant detail thus exceeds the meaning assigned to it by Barthes, but also suggests another kind of affectivity.

In his essay “The Pensive Image”, Rancière argues that Barthes’s opposition between the *studium* and the *punctum* is a deeply flawed one, since both poles tend to collapse into a short circuit.³⁰ Looking at Alexander Gardner’s *Portrait of Lewis Payne*, Barthes defines the *punctum* as “he is going to die.”³¹ Yet, as Rancière rightly points out, there is nothing in the picture itself that could tell us that the man in the photograph is sentenced to death. One could still argue that for Barthes any photograph is a sign of death, which entails that the death sentence of Lewis Payne is not necessarily what makes the spectator be affected by his death. But this would not change the fact that the *punctum* of time and death presupposes the indexical relation between the image and the person photographed. The photographic affect is thus “an affect produced directly on us by the body of the one who faced the lens.”³² The direct line between the unique being that we see in the photograph and the way it affects us, Rancière suggests, lets *studium* back into what is supposed to be pure affectivity beyond knowledge.

For Elkins, Gardner’s *Portrait* is, “just to be literal about it – an image of scratches and scrapes on iron sheets, with a figure interposed.”³³ Along with the figure, the whole drama of human finitude is dissolved in the indifferent matter of the background. For Rancière, on the other hand, this dissolution happens within the figure itself. What we see in the photograph is not the determinate

²⁹ Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Z. Paul, Verso, London 2013, p. 209.

³⁰ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. G. Elliott, Verso, London 2009, pp. 107–132.

³¹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 96.

³² Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 113.

³³ Elkins, *What Photography Is*, p. 117.

unique being, but a “tangle between several forms of indeterminacy.”³⁴ Nothing in the photograph can tell us that the man is sentenced to death, but even if we knew that, we could not penetrate the thoughts hiding behind his pensive gaze. Rancière uses his own example, a portrait by Rineke Dijkstra, to show that the presence of the photographed figure in general is “that of the ordinary being, whose identity is unimportant, and who hides her thoughts in offering up her face.”³⁵ Such indeterminacy defines the image as “pensive”, not only because we are unaware of the portrayed person’s thoughts, but because thought in the image ceases to be linked to the story of the unique being. The image is pensive because it “contains unthought thought, a thought that cannot be attributed to the intention of the person who produces it and which has an effect on the person who views it without her linking it to a determinate object.”³⁶ The immanent thought of the image emerges precisely where the relation between the creator, the referent, and the spectator’s response is interrupted.

Instead of focusing on the indexical nature of photography, Rancière emphasises another leitmotiv of photography theory, namely the way photography captures a framed moment, cut off from the continuum of time and space. As Sigfried Kracauer pointed out (in reference to a well-known passage in Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* in which the narrator sees his grandmother as in an unflattering snapshot), photographs are fragments, whose meaning remains undetermined as they are isolated from the symbolic, imaginary, or affective contexts in which they were taken.³⁷ Their referents now remain objects that have lost their worlds, although this does not necessarily make them ruins. Rancière enables us to see indeterminacy in a more productive light: instead of its lost contexts, which it was supposed to express, we can see the image as a self-sufficient aesthetic appearance, as a sensory event in its own right.

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This does not make the photographic image any less realistic, however. With its focus on the ordinary and the marginal, ignoring the traditional hierarchy of subjects and genres, realism, for Rancière, is a founding pillar of the aesthetic regime. The aesthetic indifference that emanates from the indeterminacy of the

³⁴ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 114.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

³⁷ Sigfried Kracauer, *The Past’s Threshold: Essays on Photography*, trans. C. Joyce, Diaphanes, Zurich 2014, pp. 73–74.

photographic image is not a result of aesthetisation, but of the impersonal gaze of the camera that indifferently registers what is in front of the lens. This is also why, as Rancière recalls, Walker Evans could cite Flaubert as a major influence on his documentary photography. The aesthetic quality of realism in literature or photography is not a matter of “an artistic addition to the banal,” but, on the contrary, of “a deletion: what the banal acquires in them is a certain indifference,” achieved by the removal, from what they portray, of “what makes it the mere expression of a determinate situation or character.”³⁸

What are the affective consequences of the move from indexical uniqueness to the indeterminacy of impersonal life? Do we end up dissolving both astonishment and grief in plain indifference? As I have discussed elsewhere, Rancière follows Hegel in showing how aesthetic indifference does not entail an absence of affect but is affective and affected in its own right.³⁹ Artworks confront us like the blessed gods of Olympus, Hegel claimed, blessed precisely in their complete indifference to the mortal world. Yet, as Rancière points out, Hegel rediscovers such bliss in the pensive gaze of a figure portrayed by Raphael and the delight of beggar boys in Murillo’s genre paintings.⁴⁰ The indifferent appearance, even of insignificant realistic figures, thus generates its own affectivity.

But if mania transforms into this kind of blissful or pensive appearance, what should we make of its traumatic side? In the essay “The Intolerable Image”, which appears in the same book, Rancière repeats his argument against the direct connection between the referent of the image and its affective power, which is often presupposed by the discourse surrounding politically charged photography.⁴¹ In this context as well, Rancière considers the effects of indeterminacy. Discussing Sophie Ristelhueber’s landscapes of conflict-torn areas, he praises the photographs for shifting the focus away from the emblems that most directly express conflict, to the landscapes where the conflict can be seen without anticipating the meaning and effects of the image: “In this way, she perhaps effects a displacement of the exhausted affect of indignation to a more discreet

³⁸ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, pp. 118–119.

³⁹ Rok Benčín, “Art Between Affect and Indifference in Hegel, Adorno, and Rancière”, *Filozofski vestnik* 40 (1/2019), pp. 165–182.

⁴⁰ Rancière, *Aisthesis*, pp. 21–37.

⁴¹ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, pp. 83–105.

affect, an affect of indeterminate effect – curiosity, the desire to see closer up.⁴² This affective shift does not make the image any less “real”. For Rancière, it is a way of politically activating the very pensiveness and indifference of aesthetic appearance instead of relying on the transfer of a political message through the direct line between intention, referent, and reception.

From mourning to melancholy

What remains to be seen is what the indeterminacy of photography entails for the other side of its affective polarity. What happens to the affective block of grief, melancholy, mourning, and depression that more or less merge together in Barthes and especially de Duve? Saying that he ignores any difference between these negative affects would nevertheless be unfair to Barthes, especially considering his remark in *Camera Lucida* about his inability to turn his grief into mourning.⁴³ Indeed, Freud presents melancholy as unsuccessful mourning, the inability or refusal to detach from the lost object. This is the reason why Jay Prosser claims that melancholy instead of mourning (corresponding to Freud’s distinction) is the central photographic affect in *Camera Lucida*.⁴⁴ But there is a perhaps more crucial difference between mourning and melancholy identified by Freud, which comes to light precisely with respect to the either determinate or indeterminate nature of the loss that has caused the condition. In mourning, the lost object is determined and unique, while in melancholy it is no longer apparent to the subject what has even been lost. Even if the determinate lost object that induced the condition can be identified, the melancholic still does not know what he or she has lost with that object.⁴⁵ From this perspective, melancholy is no longer defined only by the inability or refusal to give up the lost object due to its irreplaceable uniqueness. It is also distinguished from mourning by the nature of the lost object, which is now marked by radical indeterminacy. From this perspective, the focus on the unique being makes Barthes’s approach foreign to melancholy. The shift from indexical uniqueness to indeterminacy thus enables us to account for the affective difference that mattered to Freud

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 104. See also Rok Benčin, “Art Between Affect and Indifference”, pp. 181–182.

⁴³ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 90.

⁴⁴ Prosser, *Light in the Dark Room*, p. 23.

⁴⁵ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV*, trans. J. Strachey, The Hogarth Press, London 1957, p. 245.

but became blurred in affective accounts of photography. Grief and mourning are affects related to a specific lost object, the unique being that emanates indexically through photography. Melancholy and depression, on the other hand, are affects of indifference, not only in relation to the world seen under the sign of the lost object, but also in relation to the lost object itself, which becomes indeterminate.

Taking this into account, how are we to understand the shift from indexicality to indeterminacy in terms of photography's paradoxical structure theorised by de Duve? To recall, the snapshot aims to capture the flow of life only to obtain a seemingly artificial artefact cut off from temporal and spatial continuity. Time exposure, on the other hand, manages to capture its object as it wants it, but only to immediately consign it to death, which in turn enables the spectator to reminisce and commemorate the past. While the snapshot aims at capturing the world but provides a worldless object, which causes trauma and mania, the time exposure aims at capturing the object but ends up reconstructing a world whose central object is lost, inducing mourning, melancholy, and depression. Both sides, however, produce their effects based on indexicality, the image's relation to the unique referent, be it a snapshotted moment or an exposed being. If we focus on indeterminacy instead of on indexicality, however, the affective ambivalence reverses its poles with regard to the snapshot and the time exposure. As we have already seen, portraits or landscapes whose identity is unimportant are pensive exposures that make us wonder about the worlds they might have been taken in. Outside the family album, where no specific past to be reconstructed is anticipated, memory makes way for curiosity and imagination. With their self-sufficiency as appearances, they are not signs of depression, but radiate an affected indifference as pensiveness or bliss.

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Snapshots, on the other hand, can be seen as melancholic insofar as they capture moments of worlds at the point of bifurcation. We can see the captured moment, but we do not know exactly what world it was taken in. Yet, instead of a manic attempt to capture the real movement of the exact world in question, an attempt doomed to fail, we can see it as a melancholic desire for the possible worlds which this moment is simultaneously opening and closing: opening because the moment – as artificially isolated by the photograph – is infused with potentiality, and closing because we have no access to these potentialities and know that most of them necessarily remain unrealised. What makes snap-

shots melancholic is therefore the way they are cut out from their worlds, i.e. the symbolic and imaginary frameworks that provide the multiple contexts in which these moments could be made meaningful. But the loss of these specific contexts to which the referent belonged can also be seen as a gain: the true melancholic lost object is the indeterminate possible worlds to which the moment, isolated by the photograph, could have belonged. The possible worlds evoked by the photograph may be lost, but are obviously also generated by melancholy: they only exist as a fiction for the melancholic gaze.⁴⁶ Yet, such fictions are only made possible by the indeterminacy of the photographic image itself, its immanent pensiveness.

In contrast to melancholy, depression – in terms of photography – could be understood as the complete failure of such a fictional gaze, the inability to reconnect the meaningless image to anything symbolic or imaginary. This is what happens to Proust’s narrator when he sees his beloved grandmother the way a photographer could have seen her: as “a dejected old woman whom I did not know.”⁴⁷ Elkins’s insistence that what photography actually shows is matter, disturbing in its indifference, could be understood as a generalisation of this “depressive” way of seeing photography.

Conclusion

This article started as an attempt to retreat from the affective phenomenology proposed by Barthes and taken up by the affective turn in photography theory to what – following de Duve, but also Barthes himself to a certain degree – could be called the affective structuralism of photography. This allowed us to move beyond the content of photographs and the affective conditions of their creation and reception to the affectivity inscribed into the very structure of photography as a medium. Yet, we proceeded to challenge the assumption common to both the earlier and the later Barthes: that the photographic affect is both structur-

⁴⁶ Here, I am relying on Giorgio Agamben’s argument on the imaginary nature of the lost object in melancholy. See Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. R. L. Martinez, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1993, p. 25.

⁴⁷ Marcel Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebook03/0300411.txt> (last accessed: 30 November 2020). I discuss Proust in relation to photography from a more “melancholic” perspective in Rok Benčin, “Proustian Developments: The World and Object of Photography”, *SubStance* 46 (3/2017), pp. 16–30.

ally and phenomenologically determined by its indexical nature, the direct link between the image and the uniqueness of its referent. Instead of focusing on indexicality, we have thus followed the implications of another characteristic of the photographic image, its indeterminacy, which is a consequence of the way the camera captures a moment and isolates it from the temporal and spatial continuum as well as the symbolic and imaginary frameworks that could otherwise provide the referent's contextual meanings. This shift in focus alters the affective spectrum that can be discerned within the structure of photography. Beyond the astonishment, trauma, and mania associated with the reappearance of a specific referent in photographs, it allows us to see in it a certain indifference, characteristic of pure aesthetic appearance in which ties with the referent are cut. Such indifference, as we have seen, is itself affected, either as the pensiveness of the incomplete or the bliss of the self-sufficient. On the other side of the spectrum, it allows us to distinguish between mourning and melancholy, the former being linked to an identifiable lost object that left an indexical trace in the image, while the latter's loss is of an indeterminate object that evokes the possible worlds it might have belonged to.

Breaking the straight line from index to affect thus taps into a different kind of affectivity within the photographic structure. This way, Barthes's emphasis on loss is not countered by moments of ecstatic desire or participation in the world, but by a different kind of loss. If the loss is not of a determinate object or world, it becomes productive in the sense of producing fictions of what the loss might have been. Yet, the point is not to redeem potentiality as a value in and of itself, but rather to see it actualised in worldless objects and objectless worlds that disrupt the narrative temporality that assigns objects to their proper worlds and worlds to their proper objects.

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The Truth of the Work of Art: Freud and Benjamin on Goethe¹

Benjamin on Goethe

The truth that concerns Walter Benjamin in his essay “Goethe’s Elective Affinities”, written in the early 1920s, is above all that of love.² Goethe’s novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* from 1809 tells the story of, as Benjamin put it, the “disintegration” of the marriage and the lives of Charlotte and Eduard, a couple of the German nobility.³ This disintegration is catalysed by the arrival to their estate of two additional characters, first the Captain, Eduard’s friend from youth, and then Otilie, Charlotte’s foster niece; an arrival that, as in a chemical reaction, leads to the reconfiguration of their natural affinities.

After initially feeling a strong homosocial attachment to the Captain, Eduard becomes infatuated with Otilie; while Charlotte, herself drawn to her niece, begins to desire the Captain. Under the spell of these new affinities, the host couple conceive a child, Otto, with the features of the guests. Otilie assumes a maternal role with respect to the child, and later accidentally drops him from a boat. The baby drowns.⁴ Unable to bear the guilt, Otilie starves herself to death and is soon followed to the tomb by Eduard, leaving Charlotte to deal with the aftermath of everyone’s destructive tendencies.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 11th meeting of the International Society for Psychoanalysis and Philosophy, SIPP-ISPP: The Truths of Psychoanalysis-held at Södertörn University, Stockholm, 2 May 2019. Initial reflections were shared at the workshop Benjamin: Aesthetics, Politics and the Philosophy of History, University of Gothenburg, 14 December 2018. I thank participants of both events for their comments.

² Walter Benjamin, Howard Eiland, and Michael W. Jennings (eds.), *Selected Writings: Volume 1*, Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, MA 2004, pp. 297–360.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

⁴ Marie Delcourt’s analysis of the theme of exposure in *Stérilités mystérieuses et naissances maléfiques dans l’Antiquité classique*, Liège, 1938, could shed light on this element of the novel, namely, the sacrifice of a child who does not resemble its parents and is as such monstrous.

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In Benjamin's reading, however, it is not this turn of events that illustrates the vicissitudes of love. Love for him appears in its true form in a redoubling of fiction. That is, in a novella Goethe inserted about two-thirds into the novel: "The Curious Tale of the Childhood Sweethearts."⁵ This is a story, told by a visitor, of children of neighbouring families who grow up together as playmates and are expected by their parents to one day marry. Since they are much alike, however, their relationship is also one of violent rivalry. As they grow into adulthood the boy goes away to make a successful career in the military and the girl, who stays, is engaged to a sought-after suitor.

When the boy, on leave, returns home and meets the girl again, a natural affinity once more brings them close. Although mutual, the sentiment only represents a problem for the girl. With marriage as her only career prospect, she becomes obsessed by her re-found passion. The boy, on the other hand, has other ambitions to occupy him. Eager to return to them, he organises a yacht trip for the girl, her fiancé and the parents of the engaged couple as an engagement and farewell gift. Just as they are traversing a particularly difficult passage, the girl jumps into the current in order to kill herself and punish the boy for his indifference. The boy, who was commanding the ship after having taken over the tiller from a sleepy elderly captain, jumps after her, and finds her body lifeless. The ship they have abandoned seems to head for disaster.

Yet the narrative now transitions, almost seamlessly, into a utopia.⁶ The boy spots a house inhabited by a married couple, brings the girl's naked body to the shore, and manages to revive her. They unite in an embrace and are given the wedding attire of the local couple to clad themselves. When the party left on the ship arrives to the scene, unharmed, they find the youth dressed for marriage. The novella ends with the childhood sweethearts asking for the elders' blessings. In light of this vision, the affinities portrayed in the framing narrative appear, to Benjamin, to be mere semblances.

⁵ "Die wunderlichen Nachbarskinder". For the sake of consistency I will use the title that appears in the English translation of Benjamin's essay.

⁶ I thank Gisle Selnes for bringing my attention to the motif of shipwreck as doorway to utopia. See Selnes, Gisle, "Shipwreck and Utopia in Colonial Spanish America", in *Nowhere Somewhere: Writing, Space and the Construction of Utopia*, ed. José Eduardo Reis and Jorge Bastos da Silva, Editora da Universidade do Porto, Porto 2006, pp. 55–67.

Indeed, a sketch of Benjamin's argument can be traced by the oppositions he constructs between the novel and the novella. While the couples in the novel bring about their own ruin through the illusory freedom to make choices, the lovers in the novella are redeemed by a decision. While the couples in the novel are ruled by fate, the lovers in the novella transcend their fate through character. While the former can only achieve harmony by sacrificing their lives in atonement for their guilt, the latter, by risking their lives, achieve immortality. And so on.

In the contrast between the framing narrative and the story within the story, Benjamin finds the difference between immanence and transcendence that appears to redeem the writer. For Goethe – as possessed as he might have been in real life by the mythic forces of his reactionary strivings for security and worldly power, and as limited as he might have been by his erotic inhibitions, by his fear, indecisiveness, and superstition – still carries out in his work a struggle to disentangle himself from the same forces. It is this struggle that, according to Benjamin, makes a work of art genuine.

The downside is that true love becomes that which can only be realised in death. The action that precedes the union of the lovers in the novella is the girl's attempted suicide. That Benjamin himself understands the miraculous resurrection and marriage that follows as belonging to yet another layer of fiction – a messianic moment – is hinted at by his concluding words in the essay: "Those lovers never seize the body. What does it matter if they never gathered strength for battle? Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope."⁷

Thus the oppositions Benjamin outlines do not represent a real conflict but merely an inverted reflection.⁸ Namely, the two faces of a fantasy of femininity as the death drive: one masochistic – Otilie; the other sadistic – the girl. Are these women, like the lovers in the novella, not mirror images of each other? The recursive structure at the core of Benjamin's redemptive reading does not

⁷ Walter Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities", in *Selected Writings: Volume 1, Walter Benjamin*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2004, p. 356.

⁸ Here I have in mind the distinction Kant draws in the *Critique of Pure Reason* between a dialectic or real conflict and an analytic contradiction. See Monique David-Ménard, "Kant et le négatif", in *Deleuze et la psychanalyse: L'altercation*, PUF, Paris 2005, pp. 153–173.

resolve this specular trap but replicates it, which may account for the suffocating tone of the essay.

A healthier approach to fiction is exemplified in the novel by the character of Charlotte, who, after listening to the story of the “Childhood Sweethearts,” recognises in it embellished elements of a true story involving the Captain and a neighbour of his whose destiny we ignore. She, as a mature woman, has witnessed enough shipwrecks to know that hope is better invested in contingency than in utopia. Yet Benjamin at this point seems too occupied in chastising her to be able to notice.⁹

Freud on Goethe

In “A Childhood Recollection from Dichtung Und Wahrheit” (1917), Freud ventures an analysis of Goethe from an anecdote that appears in the first few pages of the writer’s autobiography.¹⁰ It is Goethe’s earliest memory. Little Johann Wolfgang is playing kitchen with miniature crockery pots and pans that had been bought for him and his younger sister as toys. Then, “since this seemed to lead to nothing,” he gets the idea of throwing one out onto the street and is “overjoyed to see it go to bits so merrily.” Encouraged by a group of neighbours, he throws another and then another, and then goes to the kitchen table and begins to throw all the real crockery that had just been acquired at the fair along with the toys. No adult stops him until it is too late.

The story is told from the point of view of the mature man, who recollects having often been teased by these neighbours, “three orphan sons of the magistrate,”

⁹ Benjamin’s picture of the “angel of history,” who wants to “make whole what has been smashed,” can be read as his later rewriting of the scene in which Charlotte reflects on being shipwrecked on dry land, in the beginning of Chapter Ten of *Elective Affinities* – chapter that contains the novella – now from the point of view of little Johann Wolfgang as portrayed by Freud. I turn to this portrait in the next section of the essay. See “On the Concept of History”, Benjamin, Walter, Howard Eiland, and Michael W. Jennings (eds.), *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, MA 2006. pp. 389-400. (p. 392.)

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, “A Childhood Recollection from Dichtung Und Wahrheit”, in Sigmund Freud, James Strachey and Anna Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XVII (1917–1919)*, Hogarth Press, London 1973, pp. 145–156.

to carry out these sorts of pranks.¹¹ Goethe's narrator speaks insistently of how fond these neighbours/orphan brothers were of little Johann Wolfgang, how interested they were in him, how much they loved and encouraged him, which makes this episode resonate with that myth Freud had placed as the origin of society in *Totem and Taboo* four years earlier: the primal horde of brothers. In fact, this childhood memory can be read as a primal scene of initiation into society conceived as a brotherhood through a violent act that is at the same time an attack on the private, feminine world of the home, the *domus*.

Although the narrator tries to hide the lasting consequences of this unbridled destructiveness beneath the manic enjoyment of its spectators, Freud is attentive to its serious effects. This "mischievous trick with damaging effects on the household economy, carried out under the spur of outside encouragement, is certainly no fitting headpiece for all that Goethe has to tell us of his richly filled life," says Freud before he goes on to claim that in some way it is.¹²

What Freud does in the rest of the essay is to compare Goethe's tantrum first with an identical one recounted by one of his male patients, then with a similar one recalled by another male patient, and finally with two similar cases, a male and a female, reported by a female colleague of his. Both of Freud's patients were impaired in their capacity to love and the second also suffered from "embitterment against women." These cases, Freud concludes, "establish without further analytic effort that the bitterness children feel about the expected or actual appearance of a rival finds expression in throwing objects out of the window and other acts of naughtiness and destructiveness."¹³

In Freud's interpretation, Goethe's cathartic scene is part of a drama of sibling rivalry. Through biographical information, Freud concludes that the memory could have coincided with the birth of one of Goethe's siblings, Hermann Jakob, who, like four other ones, would die in infancy, him at the age of six. Little Johann Wolfgang would like to throw his brother out of the window to keep his mother's attention all to himself, but he cannot, so instead he smashes his

¹¹ Cited in Freud, "A Childhood Recollection from Dichtung Und Wahrheit", p. 147.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

toys as “a ‘magic action’ by which the child (Goethe as well as [Freud’s] patient) [gives] violent expression to his wish to get rid of a disturbing intruder.”¹⁴

Freud denies that the episode of jealousy might have something to do with Goethe’s sister Cornelia, fifteen months Goethe’s junior, who was his playmate and would live until the age of 27. “This slight difference in age,” says Freud, “almost excludes the possibility of her having been an object of jealousy. It is known that, when their passions awake, children never develop such violent reactions against the brothers and sisters they find already in existence, but direct their hostility against the newcomers. Nor is the scene we are endeavouring to interpret reconcilable with Goethe’s tender age at the time of, or shortly after, Cornelia’s birth.”¹⁵

After thus discounting Cornelia, however, there are two siblings whose births Freud considers as perhaps having coincided with Goethe’s childhood recollection: Hermann Jakob, born when Goethe was three and a quarter years old, and Katharina Elisabetha, born when Goethe was about five years old. As if to underline the arbitrary nature of the choice, Freud comments: “Both ages come under consideration in dating the episode of the throwing out of the crockery. The earlier is perhaps to be preferred; and it would best agree with the case of my patient, who was about three and a quarter years old at the birth of his brother.”¹⁶

It is true that a baby of fifteen months is not likely to play in this manner, yet this same argument should apply for Johann Wolfgang’s usual playmate Cornelia. If Goethe, as Freud suggests, was three and a quarter years old when this episode occurred, his sister would have been around two years old. While not impossible, it is more likely that miniature pots and pans would have been bought for children who were slightly older. If one considers Goethe not alone but usually playing with his younger sister, it makes more sense to place the scene when Goethe was around five and his sister Katharina Elisabetha was born.

Charles Kligerman suggested that Freud’s exempting of Cornelia as a possible object of jealousy might act as a screen for the memory of Freud’s own lost next

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 151, my emphasis.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

younger brother Julius, born eighteen months after him.¹⁷ We might, however, also recall Freud's interpretation of his Dream of the Botanical Monograph that links his love of books and artichokes to the game of destroying a book of colour plates he played with his eldest sister Anna: "I was then five years old, and my sister not yet three, and the picture of us children blissfully pulling this book to pieces (*like an artichoke*, leaf by leaf, I must add) is almost the only clear memory of this period of my life I still retain."¹⁸

Now, considering the similarity between the scenes of children playing at destroying, it could also be the case that Goethe's earlier age is preferred by Freud only so as to conceal the agreement with his own age in this memory of playing with Anna.¹⁹ Conversely, Goethe's childhood recollection, with its sibling axis represented by the "orphan brothers," could, on the other hand, be read through Freud's memory of sharing with his sister Anna the pleasures of destruction, as Goethe's screen memory of a similar situation involving his own sister. For we may ask: Where was little Cornelia while Johann Wolfgang smashed the crockery pots and pans that were bought for both to play with? Should one not conclude from her absence that the destruction of *their* toys was also an act of hostility against her? Or could she have been present? Could a "construction in analysis," to use the concept Freud turned towards at the end of his life, restore the sister to the primal scene of destruction?²⁰

Both Freud's and Goethe's scenes are part of a larger narrative of how an oeuvre is born as a reparatory response to a catastrophe in early childhood. As Goethe says, "the damage was done, and to make up for so much broken earthenware

¹⁷ Charles Kligerman, "Goethe: Sibling Rivalry and Faust", *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* (4/1984), p. 558.

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. Ritchie Robertson and Joyce Crick, Oxford University Press, New York 1999, p. 131.

¹⁹ That this is an allusion to masturbation is made clear by Freud. See Alexander Grinstein, "Freud's Dream of the Botanical Monograph", *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 9 (1961), pp. 480-503, (pp. 500-501). For a different yet compelling interpretation of this memory, cf. Diane O'Donoghue, "'Lingua Flora': Deciphering the 'Dream of the Botanical Monograph'", *American Imago*, 62 (2, 2005), pp. 157-177.

²⁰ See "Constructions in Analysis" in: Freud, Sigmund, Anna Freud, James Strachey, Alix Strachey, and Alan Tyson, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XXIII (1937-1939)*, Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, London 1964, pp. 255-269.»

there was at least an amusing story.”²¹ Goethe introduces this memory through the light note of the brothers who teased him about this until they died, yet omits to describe the reaction of the women, who were presumably the ones most concerned with the crockery that was to last for a time.

Freud associates his bibliophilic passion and his habit of reading whole monographs as a student to this episode, both as a rebellion against his father’s instruction to tear the book apart, and as a continuation of its sadistic component in the act of devouring books, tearing arguments apart. Yet the question of the female playmate and companion in this activity, present/absent from this primal scene of intellectual passion, needs to be put into a context of gender inequality in which sisters sacrificed their education for that of their brothers.²²

Siblings

Juliet Mitchell speaks of how her work with male hysteria led her to pay more attention to siblings. That is, to look for the dramas of love, hate, incest, and murder that characterise human experience laterally along the axis of peers/neighbours/equals, rather than vertically along the hierarchical and generational axis of parents and teachers.

In *Siblings: Sex and Violence*, she argues that the experience of having or imagining that one could have a sibling, so far shared universally, is one that poses a fundamental threat to our existence.²³ Not only, as Freud argues in his note

²¹ Cited in Freud, “A Childhood Recollection from Dichtung Und Wahrheit”, p. 148.

²² In this light, one could add a layer to the interpretation of the childhood memory of stealing a little girl’s bunch of dandelions in Freud’s 1899 paper “Screen Memories” published the year after Freud had the Dream of the Botanical Monograph. Here, the sexual meaning given by Freud, i.e. a desire to deflower, can be read as a screen for the envy of a female peer’s intellectual talent. We recall that the little girl, in tears after being despoiled by the two boys, is given bread by a peasant woman in compensation. This is coherent with the rest of the interpretation, where Freud speaks of the passion for study that absorbs him at the time of seeing this girl, his cousin, again at the age of twenty when he is at University. Then, the analyst’s voice in the dialogue suggests that the flowers symbolise the student’s impractical ideals, and the bread a bread and butter occupation. The meaning of this memory might be the wish that the women of his generation, whose opportunity to develop their intellectual talents were snatched away by their male peers, get something delicious in compensation, such as the pleasures of maternity.

²³ Juliet Mitchell, *Siblings: Sex and Violence*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2003.

on Goethe, is it a question of losing the exclusivity of the mother's gaze, but it is about this loss translating, for the child, into an outright risk of annihilation. Our degree of hysteria, in her theory, results from the way we negotiate this trauma. The opposite poles in the health spectrum are the (healthy) ability to understand seriality – i.e. that there is space for others who are similar yet different – and the (pathological) experience of life as being about killing or being killed. “Hysterics,” says Mitchell, “protest that someone standing in the same place as themselves [in the same generation, social group, etc.] eradicates them unless they can eradicate this other first.”²⁴

If a sibling is an intruder, however, she or he also offers the possibility of a narcissistic extension of the self. “Her Majesty the Baby” expects the sibling to be “more of herself,” says Mitchell. Thus, in the sibling drama, “the ecstasy of loving one who is like oneself is experienced at the same time as the trauma of being annihilated by one who stands in one's place.”²⁵ Like the hysteric, Mitchell says, “the sibling loves what he hates.”

This allows us to specify the vision of true love that Benjamin identifies in the novella. The love therein is certainly sibling-like and the lovers charming hysterics, even if this similar pathology has dissimilar consequences for the boy and the girl: it makes him rapidly attain worldly success, while it makes her unsuitable for marriage. The couple are also, as we said, ferocious rivals. Benjamin hardly mentions the violence that is in question in the history of these neighbours where the girl once almost tears the boy's eyes out. The narrator is clear in that the girl is the only competitor that nature assigned the boy and that this partly explains the boy's complacency at her engagement to someone else, as a welcome opportunity to rid himself of a rival. At the same time, the girl's, to use Benjamin's term, “courageous decision” to cast herself into the dangerous current for the sake of true love, is described by Goethe in a less charitable fashion:²⁶

She determined that she would die to punish the once hated, and now so passionately loved, youth for his want of interest in her; and as she could not possess

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁶ Benjamin, “Goethe's Elective Affinities”, p. 332. Benjamin only uses the term decision to describe the action of the lovers, in plural: “both dive down into the living current [...],” thus erasing the important chronology of events and the asymmetry of their actions.

himself, at least she would wed herself for ever to his imagination, and to his repentance. Her dead image should cling to him, and he should never forgive himself for not having understood, not examined, not valued her feelings toward him. "This singular insanity accompanied her wherever she went."²⁷

Are we to conclude from this that all true love is sibling-like, or is it rather that that which Benjamin identifies as true love is Goethe's hysterical fantasy? That a sibling trauma structured Goethe's love life seems suggested by the poem "Warum gabst du uns die tiefen Blicke" (1776), dedicated to Charlotte von Stein: "Tell me, how we're bound in such a knot? / From an old existence we were sharing? / You're the wife, the sister I forgot?"²⁸ Both Benjamin and Freud cite the line "Ach, du warst in abgelebten Zeiten / Meine Schwester oder meine Frau."²⁹

"We do not see," says Mitchell, "when a man identifies with his sister along narcissistic lines. Yet he can still hate her and wish her dead and love her and want her incestuously – this is surely a familiar scenario in many a problematic marriage?"³⁰ For all her identification of the diagnostic blindness, however, Mitchell seems to believe that the solution lies in reconfiguring love along vertical, Oedipal lines, rather than horizontal ones. Does the problem, however, not also lie in this not seeing, that is, in the difficulty, for both men and women, of recognizing, accepting and sublimating their love and hate for women, not only as mothers/daughters, but also as sisters and peers?

Goethe's recollection of smashing crockery might thus have more to do with sisters than Freud was willing to admit and as such might be related to the story of the lovers in the novella.³¹ The author casts the sister from the boat yet is able to bring her lifeless body to a redeemed life in a marriage in heaven. In the novel, Nanny, another sibling-survivor, throws herself from a window, breaking all

²⁷ Johann W. Goethe and Nicholas Boyle, *Selected Works: Including the Sorrows of Young Werther, Elective Affinities, Italian Journey, Faust*, A.A. Knopf, New York 2000, p. 304.

²⁸ Goethe, Johann W. *Goethe: Selected Poems*. Suhrkamp/Insel Publishers Boston, Cambridge, MA 1983, p. 61.

²⁹ See "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", in *Selected Writings*, Volume 4, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", in *Selected Writings*, Volume 4, p. 338. See Freud, "The Goethe Prize", in Sigmund Freud and Neil Hertz, *Writings on Art and Literature*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1997, p. 258.

³⁰ Mitchell, *Siblings*, p. 149.

³¹ As well as to Freud's earliest passion, and favourite flower, i.e. the artichoke bloom.

her bones, and is miraculously reconstituted by contact with the corpse of her adoptive mother, Otilie, with whom she posthumously reconciles. The novella offers a lateral reconciliation, the novel a vertical one. Benjamin saw the ideal of romantic love in the novella. Yet both are predicated on the sacrifice of a sibling. For however true love in the novella might have rung for Benjamin, in it, as in the frame, there is still only room for one.

Can there be another script for love among equals? Mitchell seems to offer the outline of a theory of lateral castration, which she sometimes calls, playing with Lacan, the “law of the mother.”

The sibling experience organizes narcissism into self-esteem through accepted loss – through a mourning process of the grandiose self, the ‘death’ of His Majesty the Baby. This is the necessary acceptance that one is ordinary, which does not mean that one is not unique [...]. Without this gradual and never fully established transformation of the self, the distress and disruption of the anti-social child or the maladies of madness are on the cards.³²

Goethe’s writing, like Freud and Benjamin’s readings of it, in different ways, still advance this infinite transformation. In the case of Benjamin, his essay on the *Elective Affinities* as well as a later biographical sketch explicitly attack the “man of genius” approach to Goethe of the Stefan George circle. By comparing the child Goethe to other patients, first his own and then those of a colleague, Freud seems to pronounce, with foresight, Juliet Mitchell’s “law of the mother” on little Johann Wolfgang. That is, to assign each child a place within the group that is not mutually exclusive with the others, to say there can be “space for one who is the same and different.”³³

This not only becomes the key to an insightful reading, but makes Freud partake in the same “sibling experience” by corroborating his findings with those of a peer, and importantly, a woman. Such gesture is perhaps echoed in Freud’s choice in his speech accepting the Goethe prize in 1930 to adapt the theme proposed to him of “his inner relations as a man and scientist to Goethe” to one that, as he put it in his letter to Dr Alfons Paquet, would defend his peers, the

³² Mitchel, *Siblings*, p. 205.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

analysts, “against the reproach of having offended against the respect due to the great man by the analytic attempts they have made on him.”³⁴ Freud staged his defence, however, by recalling that the truth of the work of art, like the truth of the artist, is a secret.

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³⁴ See Freud, “The Goethe Prize”, p. 257.

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Politics and Mathematics

Articles in the section that follows were edited by Jelica Šumič Riha

Denisse Sciamarella*

A topological reading of Ernesto Laclau

Pitagora: *La regola sta al principio.*

Eco: *Ma trasporti questo atteggiamento nella vita sociale e politica. Cosa ne nasce? Una visione aristocratica e conservatrice. Non a caso Lei ha dovuto fuggire da Crotona, perché il partito democratico vedeva nella Sua scuola un centro di pensiero aristocratico e reazionario. Nella vostra fiducia nelle leggi eterne del mondo voi pitagorici non potevate comprendere la mutazione, [...] che la realtà nasce anche dal dolore, dalla lotta, che l'armonia è un punto d'arrivo, sempre provvisorio, ma guai a considerarla un punto di partenza, definitivo.*

Pitagora: *Dunque non hai capito.*

U. Eco, Pitagora¹

Introduction

Ernesto Laclau asserts that the category of ‘relation’ is central to his analysis, and that this distinguishes his approach from other contemporary theories. In his own words, “Alain Badiou, for instance, sees set theory as the terrain of a fundamental ontology. Given the centrality to set theory of the notion of extensionality, however, the category of relation can, at best, play only a marginal role.”² The centrality to topology of the notion of relation³ suggests that a topological reading of Laclau may be fruitful. This work is an attempt to relate Laclausian categories and topology from the particular perspective of the theory of dynamical systems. Such theory has instability as its central category, but in order to study instability, dynamicists resort to topology. The categories of

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¹ Umberto Eco a Pitagora, *Le interviste impossibili*, Bompiani 1975, available at: <http://www.giutor.com/doc/pitagora/eco-pita.html>.

² Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London and New York 2005, p. 68.

³ Jean Ladrière, *El reto de la racionalidad, La ciencia y tecnología frente a las culturas. Ediciones Sigueme*, Salamanca/UNESCO, Paris 1978, p. 31.

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relation and instability are therefore simultaneously central to the marriage between topology and dynamics.

The methods used to build a topological structure associated with a system's dynamics are developed in the so-called "topological program".⁴ This work constructs an analogical correspondence between concepts of the topological program and the main categories in Laclausian theory. The possibility of drawing a parallel between such disparate areas of thought relies on the fact that both approaches constitute efforts to describe structures resulting from an articulatory practice. The starting point is, in both cases, a series of disaggregate elements. A remark is necessary before we embark on this task. The analogy is not intended to reduce theoretico-political categories to a mathematical scheme, or to postulate the topological program as a Laclausian *matheme*. The aim is to outline a two-way relationship between the two conceptual fields that leaves neither of them unaffected. If the analogy unfolds a productive set of theoretical affinities, these may both lead to alternative formulations of some problems in political theory, and contribute to deconstructing the nature, conception, and uses of mathematical tools.⁵

This article is organised as follows. An introduction to the topological program is provided in Section 1. Section 2 is devoted to the premises of the analogy. Conceptual correspondences are presented in Section 3. The productivity of the analogy is discussed in Section 4.

Section 1. Topology and Dynamical Systems

A dynamical system is a system whose evolution is dictated by rules⁶ which, in the more general case and by their mathematical form, combine determinism

⁴ Robert Gilmore and Marc Lefranc, *The Topology of Chaos: Alice in Stretch and Squeezeland*, Wiley, New York 2002. The spelling "program" will be used herein for the sake of consistency.

⁵ Blaise Pascal and Henri Poincaré are some of the precursors in this effort.

⁶ The rule predicts the evolution of the system. More precisely, it predicts the evolution of certain variables that are assumed to characterise the system. A physical pendulum oscillating within a plane, for instance, is a system that can be described using two variables: position and velocity. In the example of the pendulum, the rule can be derived from consideration of the forces that act upon it. How many variables are needed to adequately describe a problem? This depends on the problem. Once the variables are chosen, how the problem is to be attacked is defined, and this limits what can be said about the system to what can be said

with unpredictability. The theory of dynamical systems proposes a set of mathematical tools to study the phenomena governed by these kinds of rules (non-linear rules). Given an evolution rule, initial values are chosen for the variables describing the system and the rule is used to compute the values of the variables that determine the subsequent states⁷ of the system. For the case of nonlinear rules, predictability becomes difficult for one reason: an astonishingly small difference in the initial value chosen for a variable makes the system evolve in a considerably different way. This is how unpredictability enters the scene without opposing determinism. A future state fails to be predicted not because there is no rule governing the system, but because the rule gives rise to radically different results for slightly different initial values. In order to avoid unpredictability, infinite precision is needed in the knowledge of the initial state and in the application of the rule. But this infinite precision is generally unavailable, not only in the case of experimental data, but also for numerical computations. A tiny difference that can make the system evolve in remarkably different manners is exponentially amplified by the mathematical nature of the rule that governs the system, hindering predictability in the long term. The error that is inherent to every measure or numerical computation brings “the contingent in the necessary.”⁸ In the field of dynamical systems, this property is known as sensitivity to initial conditions. When data are generated with a nonlinear rule, the data present a seeming disorder. In other words, the rule governing the data is not transparent when the data are examined directly, but is concealed. This is why dynamicists talk about *unveiling* an *underlying* dynamics from data of this type. And this is why it is of interest to learn, for a time series of experimental data presenting this seeming disorder, if there exists – or not – an underlying deterministic dynamics. Notice that the finding of an evolution rule for such a system will entail an understanding of the mechanisms involved in the behaviour of the system. Scientific knowledge is not restricted to prediction.

about the variables. If the pendulum has a fixed length z and moves within a plane, position and velocity are sufficient. Variables are also called state variables or dynamical variables.

⁷ A system is in a given state when the ensemble of variables that characterises it adopts a value. To correctly define the state of a pendulum with variable length, for instance, values should be assigned to three variables: position, velocity, and length. If the length cannot change, the length is again a parameter and the state of the system is defined by assigning values to two variables: position and velocity.

⁸ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Verso, London and New York 2001, p. 114.

The topological program devises methods to unveil the type of organisation underlying a data series. The starting point is a time series associated with the phenomenon that one is attempting to understand. The rule is not known in advance, but it is tacitly supposed to exist. In other words, the system is supposed to be deterministic. The first step in the analysis consists in representing the data in a mathematical space, called phase space, in which time is implicit and in which each point stands for a state of the system. Notice that this space does not have a predetermined dimension. Its dimension depends on the number of significant variables in the problem. Representation in phase space⁹ does not focus on when exactly the system visits a certain state, but on whether there are privileged states to which trajectories tend to evolve, if there are sets of states that are forbidden, and so on. Representation in phase space breaks with the synchronic-diachronic dichotomy.¹⁰

When the system evolves from a starting point representing its initial state, it visits a sequence of states, leaving a trace in phase space called a trajectory, as shown in Fig. 1. A trajectory in phase space is a line that is read in the direction in which time evolves. This direction is indicated with an arrow. If the rule that governs a system is known, the rule can be used to compute trajectories in phase space. Trajectories that obey a certain rule do not circulate freely. Their route is dictated by the rule that governs the dynamical system.

⁹ Phase space is a geometrical space that enables a representation of the states of the dynamical system. Each point in phase space corresponds to a value of the variables that characterise the system, i.e. each point in phase space stands for a possible state of the system that is defined with those variables. It could also be called 'state space'. In the case of the pendulum, phase space can be constructed using two coordinate axes. One for the position of the pendulum (x) and one for the velocity (y). In this case, phase space has two dimensions just because two variables are enough to identify a state of the system. If we consider the length z as a variable, we would need three coordinate axes (x,y,z). The phase space dimension is determined by the number of variables that define a point (a state of the system) in phase space. Phase space therefore depends on the number of relevant variables of the problem. Let us stress that phase space is a mathematical space that has nothing to do with physical space.

¹⁰ Phase space provides neither a photograph of an ensemble of variables, nor a film of successively ordered events. If a system recurrently visits a zone in phase space at different times, a dense cloud of points will be found in this zone. It is a mathematical space that focuses on the representation of dynamical states.

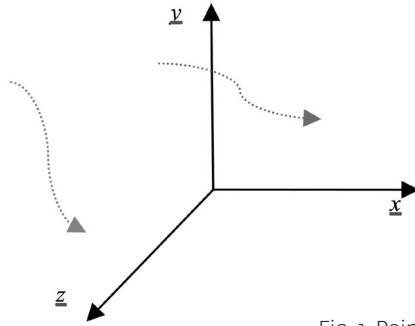


Fig. 1. Points forming trajectories in phase space for sequences of values for variables $x(t), y(t), z(t)$ as they evolve in time (t) for two different initial states.

In order to illustrate what a privileged state in phase space looks like, let us imagine a trajectory ending up in a point. This means that the system has visited a certain number of states and reached a state from which it no longer moves. This state is called a stationary state. If this point attracts trajectories to it, this point is a privileged point in the system, to which the system tends to evolve. The point is said to be an attractor of the system. An attracting point absorbs trajectories in phase space (Fig. 2a). In the same manner, one can imagine repellers, i.e. states in phase space from which the system escapes (Fig. 2b). These privileged states structure trajectories in phase space. Sometimes there are groups of states that play this role. A limit cycle, for instance, is an attracting set of points in the form of a closed curve. Systems that converge to a limit cycle are systems that attain a stable and periodic (cyclic) behaviour (Fig. 2c).

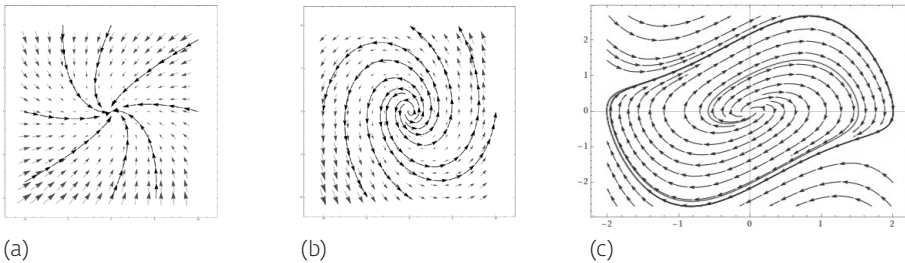


Fig. 2. (a) attracting fixed point; (b) repelling fixed point; (c) attracting limit cycle.

When a trajectory falls into an attractor, it is clear that even if the system is slightly pushed away from this state it tends to fall back into it. An attractor attracts the points that lie in a certain basin of attraction in phase space. Why is this description in terms of attractors useful? Dynamical systems in the physical world tend to be dissipative, i.e. change tends to cease unless there is a force that is permanently acting upon the system. In those systems in which an acting force and dissipation coexist, the system tends to evolve (after a transient) to some kind of typical behaviour that is illustrated by attractors in phase space. Of course, several attractors can coexist in phase space for a given system. The evolution of trajectories is in this case conditioned by the basin of attraction in which trajectories are born.

Let us suppose that there is only one variable available for measurement. The starting point of the analysis is a time series. This variable may not exhaust the number of variables that are necessary to define a particular state of the system. In such case, there exist mathematical criteria for deciding the minimum dimension needed to host the data, and there are recipes to build supplementary series from the data. Once the time series have been embedded in phase space, clouds of points or states are obtained.

Let us consider the example in Fig. 3. The cloud of points comes from a representation of the pressure values recorded by a microphone when a speaker pronounces the sound /a/ in the first vowel of the Spanish word 'casa'. Two supplementary series are generated to achieve an adequate representation in phase space, which is three dimensional in this case. The result is shown in Fig. 3b.

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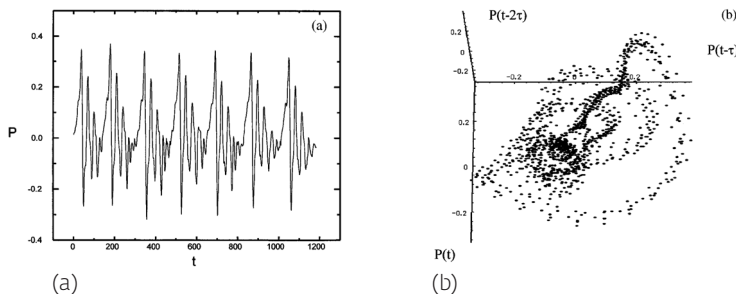


Fig. 3. Example of a time series (a), embedded in phase space (b).

The next step is to construct, from this cloud of points, a sort of skeleton or model kit that articulates the points, according to the manner in which they are organised. This ‘manner’ is not geometrical but topological: what defines the skeleton is not the location of the points in the cloud, but the structure organising the cloud of points. Such a skeleton has been named a *template* or *branched manifold*. The term *branched manifold* makes reference to the fact that the skeleton usually takes the form of a structure of connecting branches. This structure can have isolated pieces that are not connected to the others; it can also be of one piece (one connected component). Each piece can contain branches, disks, holes, torsions, etc. The template is thus the graphical representation of a series of structural properties, which are topological in nature.

But how can this skeleton be reconstructed from the disperse points representing the states visited by the system? One of the methods to construct the skeleton¹¹ uses a procedure that is quite straightforward.¹² A sort of mask is constructed covering the points displayed in phase space. This mask is built piece by piece, as shown in Fig. 4. The first step in the method consists in gathering points within cells or patches that will gradually cover the cloud of points. Points are grouped in cells provided there is a certain ‘local affinity’ or equivalence, which is defined in geometrical terms.¹³ Scattered points distributed in the cloud are arbitrarily chosen as ‘nodal points’ (Fig. 4a), which will nucleate nearby points around them. How many points should be nucleated around a nodal point to form a cell? As many as the affinity criterion allows to gather. If

¹¹ Denisse Sciamarella and G. B. Mindlin, “Topological Structure of Chaotic Flows from Human Speech Data”, *Physical Review Letters* 82 (7/1999).

¹² The method of branched manifold analysis through homologies is presented in Denisse Sciamarella and G. B. Mindlin, “Unveiling the Topological Structure of Chaotic Flows from Data”, *Physical Review E* 64 (3/2001). Before this work, alternative approaches were based on knot theory. These were not applied to the mask (the manifold) where the data lie, but to a prior reconstruction of orbits approximating the trajectories described by the data. The reconstruction of orbits is difficult if the time series is noisy, as in Fig. 3b. Approaches based on knot theory have the additional drawback of being limited to cases in which the dimension of phase space is lower than or equal to three, since knots fall apart in higher dimensions.

¹³ In the method, the affinity criterion is expressed geometrically in the following manner. The group of points in a cell must be a good approximation of a hyperplane of dimension d in a space of dimension n .

the number of points per cell around the nodal points is sufficiently large, cells start overlapping, as sketched in Fig. 4b. This favours concatenation between cells. The points linking cells are called vertices. Each cell can now be labelled using a sequence of vertices, numbered in Fig. 4c. Notice that cells are polygons that do not necessarily adopt the form of the points that are gathered to constitute a given cell, but this does not matter, because even if the criterion applied to the points to construct the cells is geometrical, a given cell is not a geometrical approximation of the points, but a topological approximation of the structure in which the points are inscribed. This point will be central to the analogy: cells represent groups of points without coinciding with the points, or with the frontier points, or with the trajectories that the points are supposed to make up.

Together, the cells constitute a cell complex. The complex inherits the structure of the embedded data regardless of the individual trajectories, which are not even reconstructed. The equivalential bond between points operates locally, ignoring the trajectory to which the point belongs, and by virtue of a criterion that is ultimately arbitrary: the laxer the criterion, the greater the affinity between the points and the higher the chances of conforming to a one-component complex. This ‘loss of memory’ of the individual trajectories is not destructive. The cell is transparent and makes up a parallel structure, which is constructed to express the logic of an organisation related to a particular dynamics. It is clear that if the criterion is too rigid or too strict it will hinder the construction of the complex. Nodal points are also arbitrary: a different collection of nodal points may lead to a different distribution of cells.

The model kit resists this variability because the aim is to reconstruct the underlying topology. Once the vertices are labelled with numbers, the labels can be used to denote paths along the complex. One of the paths of Fig. 4c, for instance, is obtained with the cyclic sequence: 1,2,6,9,19,12,5,1.¹⁴ A chain is any sequence of elements of the cell complex. In this case, the cell complex has 0-cells (vertices), 1-cells (lines), and 2-cells (polygons). Sequential chains are important

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¹⁴ Vertices are also called 0-cells, and chains of vertices are called 1-cells. Chains can also be formed with sequences of cells, e.g. $\langle\langle 2,3,7,6 \rangle, \langle 9,8,7,6 \rangle, \langle 10,8,9,11 \rangle\rangle$, called 2-chains. The number in 0-cell or 1-chain denotes the dimension of the element of the complex. A 0-cell is a point, while a 1-cell or 1-chain is respectively a segment or sequence of consecutive segments. A 2-cell or 2-chain is a polygon or sequence of concatenated polygons, respectively.

because the organisation of the complex is provided by the manner in which cells are connected to other cells.

In order to determine the topological properties of the complex, another equivalential relation is needed. This equivalential relation is called homology. It allows the determination of in how many non-redundant ways the complex can be visited, so that the holes, the number of bands or handles, and the number of enclosed cavities (if there are any) come out. Two paths are equivalent when one can be continuously deformed into the other. Unlike the criterion operating to constitute connected cells in a complex, the criterion for deciding if two chains of the complex can be continuously deformed into each other is neither arbitrary nor geometrical: it is equivalential and topological. The equivalential logic that enables the construction of the cell complex, with its arbitrary character,

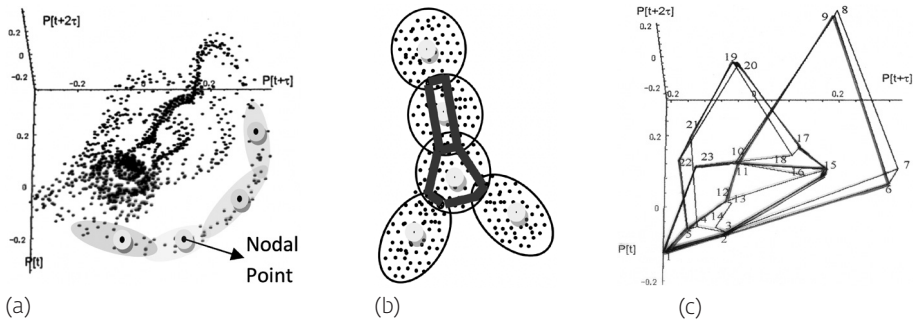


Fig. 4. From the cloud of points to the cell complex.

differs from the equivalential logic that unveils the organisation of chains. It is the combination of both that finally leads to the articulatory skeleton organising the plurality of sites in phase space.

Once the cell complex is obtained, it can be characterised in a “layered” way by answering these questions: How many connected components does it have? How many inequivalent loops can we draw on it? Does it enclose cavities? The answers, which can be calculated using algebraic topology, are the topological

properties of the cell complex. These properties lead to the template through the computation of the homology groups.¹⁵

Homology groups code structural information.¹⁶ If we go back to the example of the acoustical pressure, homology groups yield the structure that articulates the data of our example. These paths are the three inequivalent loops that articulate this structure, and that can be used to design the template. If we label the complex in Fig. 4c as complex K, the result can be written as follows: $H_0(K) = [\langle 1 \rangle] \sim Z^1$ (we have a 1-piece structure); $H_1(K) = [L_1, L_2, L_3] \sim Z^3$ (with three inequivalent loops or branches, the three cycles in Fig. 4c) and $H_2(K) \sim \emptyset$ (no enclosed cavities). It can also be noted that there is a torsion in cycle L_2 ($T(K) = \langle 2, 3 \rangle$). The three inequivalent cycles make up two bands or branches, which reconnect

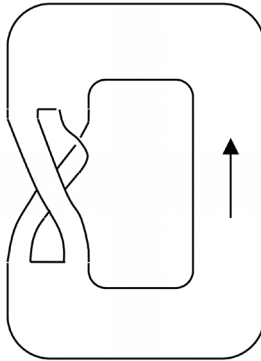


Fig. 5. Template corresponding to the organization of the data in Fig. 4c.

¹⁵ Homology groups are a series of layered sets that condense the information on how the plurality of points is articulated in the topological structure. The set at level 0 (usually labelled H_0), which condenses information on 0-cells, indicates the number of connected components of the structure. The set at level 1 (labelled H_1) contains the information on the number of non-redundant loops that can be constructed using 1-cells. The set at level 2 (labelled H_2) indicates the number of enclosed cavities through the non-redundant paths that can be constructed with 2-cells, or polygons. The example of Fig. 4c makes us stop at level 2 because the cell-complex does not have 3-cells or polyhedra (the manifold is locally bidimensional).

¹⁶ Here are a few examples of different topological structures in terms of homology groups. The cylinder has one component in H_0 , one element in H_1 , and 0 elements in H_2 . The torus has one component (one connected piece) in H_0 , two components (two inequivalent loops) in H_1 , and 1 component (one enclosed cavity) in H_2 .

in a central disk, with a torsion in one of the two branches. The corresponding branched manifold or template is shown in Fig. 5.

The reason why topological properties are interesting is that data associated with the same rule lead to the same topological structure. The template therefore shows how the data are organised in phase space under the action of the underlying deterministic rule, outlining an “*ordre dans le chaos*.”¹⁷ Topology classifies manifolds¹⁸ in a qualitative manner, ignoring deformations that do not introduce (or remove) holes or cuts.¹⁹ What does topology identify in an object? Topology identifies disconnected components, holes, enclosed cavities, and so on. It does not identify sizes, distances, or continuous deformations.

Going back to the example in Fig. 3, suppose that the speaker is asked to repeat the word several times. If the rule governing the pressure time series does not change as the speaker repeats the word, the geometrical distribution of the cloud of points may change, but the topological structure organising the skeleton should still be that of Fig. 5. The template structuring the data is said to be an invariant,²⁰ a topological invariant. Dynamical systems can therefore be classified according to their topological structure, so that unveiling the topological structure amounts to unveiling the governing rule. The topological program is a guide leading from the data to the rule.

A few remarks are necessary. First of all, the mathematical procedure for obtaining the template from the data is not unique: several methods have been proposed. The method we have outlined above has the particularity of applying the concept of homologies to the ‘mask’ in which the data lie. Homology is

¹⁷ Pierre Bergé, Yves Pomeau and Christian Vidal, *L'ordre dans le chaos: vers une approche déterministe de la turbulence*, Hermann, Paris 1988.

¹⁸ A manifold is a mathematical space that on a small enough scale resembles the Euclidean space of a specific dimension, called the dimension of the manifold. For instance, the surface of a sphere is a manifold of dimension 2, because on a small enough scale it resembles a plane.

¹⁹ Topologically, a sphere and a plane are different objects. But topology would not distinguish a slightly deformed sphere from one that was not deformed. A sphere and a cylinder, for instance, are topologically different, because it is impossible to deform one into the other, unless two lids are cut from the sphere or glued to the cylinder.

²⁰ The concept of invariance has been extremely fertile in physics. A classic example of an invariance principle is the conservation of energy.

an equivalence relation between the elements that constitute the cell complex. Secondly, the topological properties obtained in the application of the topological program are data dependent. This means, on the one hand, that results are not always reliable: they can even be deceptive if the data series is too short, for instance, or if it is too noisy. Thirdly, the rule that is attained through the topological strategy does not exhaust the possibilities regarding the behaviour of the system. The topological program describes a dynamics that is encrypted in the data under analysis, but it does not encompass the totality of mechanisms governing the system from a meagre series of data. More precisely, the mechanisms that will be unveiled by the topological strategy are those that are contained in the data. If the data series is enlarged, the template may be altered. Topological changes in the template may have different origins: a variation in the parameters²¹ involved in the rule generating the data, a change in the mathematical form of the rule, or the necessity to add variables hitherto disregarded. In short, the template is just the manner in which the data under analysis are articulated in a space that has been conveniently defined to host the dynamics of the data. The template condenses a *relational* necessity²² which differs from the *natural* necessity of the system that it partially represents. Topology provides an invariant expressing a relational necessity that, in the case of deterministic systems, can be used as a guide towards the natural necessity expressed by the rule.

Section 2. The premises of the analogy

Let us examine on what grounds the concepts of topology applied to dynamical systems can work as analogues of the main Laclausian categories.

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First of all, Laclau and Mouffe maintain that the social order cannot be understood as an underlying principle.²³ This would represent an obstacle if our aim was to apply the topological program to data of socio-political origin, because

²¹ Parameters can be thought of as variables that are supposed to remain constant for the system. Parametric studies typically show that the template remains the same for certain ranges of parameter values. It is in the jump from one range to another that a change in parameter values may create or delete branches in the template.

²² Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Verso, London and New York 2001, p. 154.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

the goal of the program is to unveil an underlying rule. Nothing prevents, in fact, the application of the topological program to socio-political data, but undertaking this task implies either that there is or that there can be an underlying principle in the inspected data. Moreover, the choice of the time series for the analysis (e.g. the evolution of the human poverty index developed by the United Nations in a certain region and time interval) pre-identifies the type of underlying principle that is being looked for. But this is not what is being proposed in this work, which is analogical and not mathematical. The connection between the topological structure and the mathematical rule is only the last step of a method that otherwise deals with the problem of converting a cloud of states representing a dynamics into a skeleton. The last step can be taken if the system is deterministic, and is successful as long as the elements excluded from the analysis remain dynamically irrelevant. In Laclausian terms, the last step is suturing,²⁴ inasmuch as it transforms a fixation that is partial and open into a fixation that is closed and complete. It is a reasonable step for dynamacists in search of models, but an undesired leap in post-fundamentalist political theory. It can therefore be advanced that the analogy will take up conceptual elements of the method leading from the disperse data to the topological structure, leaving out the leap from topology to determinism, in the assumption that there is not, and there cannot be, an underlying principle of the social. Assuming that there is an underlying principle of the social is condescending to the metamorphosis of a hypothesis into a prescribing principle. In order to illustrate the dangers of establishing a principle of the socio-political through mathematical models inspired by the theory of dynamical systems, the reader is referred to other texts.²⁵ In short, the topological program is not invoked as an analytical tool of data of socio-political origin. Nor is it suggested that the logic of the political should be, for some mysterious reason, topological in nature. The analogy does not attempt to reduce the gap separating a social problem from a deterministic problem.

²⁴ The concept of suture is taken from psychoanalysis. Hegemonic practices are suturing in as much as they attempt to complete the incompletable. According to Laclau and Mouffe, such a closure of the social is impossible.

²⁵ For a case study on the concept of model in politics, see Amilcar O. Herrera, et al. *¿Catástrofe o nueva sociedad? Modelo Mundial Latinoamericano*. Centro Internacional de investigaciones para el Desarrollo, Agencia Nacional de Investigación y Desarrollo, Santiago de Chile 2004.

Secondly, the analogy is possible as long as we are ready to sacrifice a number of characteristics that are attributed by default to the naturalist paradigm. Laclau and Mouffe maintain that the type of objectivity constructed by the discourse of the natural sciences sets limits that exclude the notions of metaphor, analogy, metonymy, or contradiction. The naturalist perspective is therefore considered to be incompatible with the theoretical development that follows. But is this so? Are all the toolboxes, in the Foucaultian sense of the expression, developed by natural scientists or mathematicians unproductive when used in an unprescribed manner? This proposal is based on the belief that unprescribed uses are not always infertile, and that thought is not ordered in sealed compartments. Blaise Pascal, who promoted the mixture of heterogeneous sources, asserted that there can be harmony where we do not expect to find it, and there can also be fusion problems in the homogeneous.²⁶ Other authors have raised and analysed questions concerning the contingency of the *a priori*, the problem of language mediation in the naturalist paradigm, of partialness in formal languages, or of mathematics and metaphor.²⁷ Using a ‘language’²⁸ is a practice that can be compared to accepting the perspective of a picture. Taking concepts of two ‘languages’ and mixing them, or setting them face-to-face, as two mirrors, can produce perspective effects that may appear as strange, but that are not necessarily unfruitful, especially if we believe, with Pascal, in the possibility of harmony between irreducible perspectives.

Thirdly, let us mention a few points that seem to favour the formulation of the analogy. One of these points is the defence put up by Laclau as to the compatibility of a partial order with the absence of an ultimate principle.²⁹ The topological program is, after all, a strategy for searching for an organisation that is conditioned by a series of choices relative to the representation of a system in phase space. This organisation can be altered, as mentioned before, in a series of manners, which have been typified. Another point has to do with the character of the program, which is not topological *tout court*. It is already a marriage

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²⁶ Maurice Caveing and Évelyne Barbin, “Les Philosophes et les Mathématiques”, *Raison présente* 123 (1997).

²⁷ Vladimir Tasić, *Mathematics and the Roots of Postmodern Thought*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001.

²⁸ Whether mathematics is or is not a language is a controversial issue. See, for instance Jean Petitot-Cocorda, *Morphogenèse du Sens*, PUF, Paris 1985, p. 19.

²⁹ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 114.

between topology and dynamics. The topological structure is a structure constructed not in physical space, but in phase space, and as a consequence it is associated with the deployment of a dynamical behaviour. The categories in Laclau's theory aim at a description of fixations that are representative of certain processes. Last but not least, there is a series of terminological coincidences between Laclausian theory and the topological program that invite this analogical exercise. The concepts of *equivalence*, *chain*, and *nodal point* are central to the construction of the template through homologies, and they are also central to the Laclausian conception of a popular identity. The concept of *regularity in dispersion*³⁰ may redirect to the mechanisms leading to the emergence of topological invariants in nonlinear systems, in which regularity and dispersion coexist. Dispersion is present through the sensitivity to the initial conditions, which makes nearby initial conditions diverge after a certain time. Regularity is present by a certain recurrence in phase space, where motion is eventually bounded. These two 'contradictory' mechanisms – dispersion and contraction – force nearby trajectories reaching maximum separation to begin to approach each other again.³¹ The fundamental idea of the topological program is that the regularity and dispersion processes, applied in a non-periodic manner, provide a sort of *partial fixation*.³² Topology provides the embodiment of this partial fixation. Fixation is partial because the topology invariance can be subverted by an *exterior*³³ constituted by all that is left out of the analysis: the disregarded variables, the mechanisms that are not expressed by the data series, etc.

Fourthly, let us make a few remarks concerning the usage of topological concepts in non-mathematical texts. If Laclausian categories are constructed in view of some of the philosophical ideas introduced by Lacan, a legitimate question is whether the 'affinity' between topology and Laclausian categories is somehow 'inherited' through Lacan, who does appeal to topology. Our analogy

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

³¹ These opposite tendencies are reconciled by operating in different directions, and this explains why there is no chaos (no complex, long-term unpredictable behaviour) in two-dimensional phase space. The third dimension is necessary for divergent trajectories to be squeezed back without self-intersecting. See, for instance, Pierre Bergé, Yves Pomeau and Moniques Dubois-Gance, *Des rythmes au chaos*, Editions Odile Jacob, Paris 1994, p. 118, or Gilmore Robert and Marc Lefranc, *The Topology of Chaos: Alice in Stretch and Squeezeland*, p. 127.

³² Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 113.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

is not based on Lacanian references to topology. If it were, the analogy would be conditioned by pre-established connections, or by the kind of usage that Lacan makes of topology.³⁴ Lacan borrows from topology a series of specific objects, such as the torus, the Möbius strip, and the Klein bottle. These objects are particular topological structures, and, as such, they are examples of the many possible results of the application of the topological program. But the parallel drawn in this article is not rooted on the topological objects themselves, but on the conceptual elements leading to the construction of a topological organisation. It is on the topological program as a method (and not on its possible results) that the analogy is built. Therefore, if there is a Lacanian influence underlying this affinity, it can probably be traced back to more general questions. The use of topology in Lacan may be seen as motivated by the inadequacy of the opposition interior-exterior to pose certain problems. The irresolvable interiority/exteriority tension is central to Laclau's arguments, and it can also be seen as essential to the preservation/subversion of topological invariance in phase space. Let us recall that the topological structure is always threatened by an exterior.³⁵

Before we move on to the terms of the analogy, a last comment may be pertinent as to the mathematical character of the topological program. Being mathematical, the program does not restrict its application to a particular kind of data: the origin of the data need not be specified for the program to be applied. But if this is so, what exactly delimits the context, the original terrain, of the topological program? The terrain is delimited by the operating rules underlying the practice of the program. Some of these rules are explicit: for instance, the program applies to deterministic systems.³⁶ To allow for the analogy, the topologi-

³⁴ Lacan appeals to mathematics as a formal system of writing capable of transmitting integrally, without remainder, a piece of psychoanalytic knowledge [*un savoir psychoanalytique*]. Alain Badiou, another author that takes up some of Lacan's concepts, and whose works contain mathematical inscriptions, does not operate in Lacan's way. He "seeks to capture the power of mathematics for the sake of a conceptual development." Alain Badiou, *The Concept of Model: An Introduction to the Materialist Epistemology of Mathematics*, ed. and trans. Zachary Fraser and Tzuchien Tho, re.press, Melbourne 2007, p. xi.

³⁵ In this sense, it is a mathematical object that could be described, to borrow Rorty's expression, as radically contingent. Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, Verso, London and New York 2007, p. 118.

³⁶ The transparency of tacitly operating rules in mathematics has been analysed by several authors. It has been held that, if formal language suppresses the ambiguity of ordinary lan-

cal program must be taken out of context at least in this sense. This contextual displacement can be compared to the change of focus carried out by Freud from the mystery of the form: “the ‘secret’ to be unveiled through analysis is not the content hidden by the form (the form of commodities, the form of dreams) but, on the contrary, the ‘secret’ of this form itself”.³⁷

Similarly, the analogy is focused not on the mystery *behind* the form of the data in phase space (the governing rule), but on the mystery *of* this form and its construction, on the articulatory mechanisms of a structure representing an *open* dynamics.³⁸ The contextual displacement can be virtuous if the interest in topological invariants is exclusively guided by cogitation on the concepts of articulation and instability on the same relational playground. A certain distortion of the original tools is associated with the contextual displacement, since these tools are not used to *calculate* or to *unveil* an unknown, but to *reflect* upon certain politico-philosophical categories. Such a distortion will affect, for instance, the status of some of the elements of the topological program. In the original terrain, the template is a concept with a quasi-ontological status that stands independently of the method designed to unveil it, while the concepts of cell, chain, nodal point, equivalence, and homology are concepts with a methodological status. This distinction will not survive once the contextual displacement is operated. Cell, chain, nodal point, equivalence, homology, and template will have the status of conceptual tools allowing for an arrangement [*agencement*]³⁹ of Laclausian categories.

guage, this is achieved at the price of preserving a particular kind of ambiguity: generality. Henri Poincaré asserted that we inevitably operate with certain mathematical prejudices, and that many notions (and the notion of identity is an example) are in fact pre-logical (they are motivated but not well-founded). These beliefs underlie every rational practice and constitute its unstated condition of possibility.

³⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London and New York 2006, p. 1.

³⁸ *Open* is used in the sense introduced by H. Poincaré. Objects that are impredicatively defined (invoking the reference to a totality) are never immutable or fixed. They are *open* because their identity is not present in them but maintained or supported by a nominative operation.

³⁹ This expression is borrowed from Alain Badiou, who asserts that the effects of the philosophical text owe their force and duration to the mere arrangement [*agencement*] of concepts. Alain Badiou, *The Concept of Model*, p. xi.

Section 3. Analogical correspondences

Discourse

The category of *discourse* is conceived by Laclau as a complex of elements in which relations play a decisive role.⁴⁰ The fact that objectivity and relation are synonymous is a principle that may also apply to phase space. Phase space is a field of representation that functions as an open relational complex between a number of state variables that are defined as pertinent. It fixes, at least provisionally, what will and will not be spoken about. The relations that cannot be represented in phase space are a result of an exclusion. The exclusion has practical reasons relative to the type of description that is attempted. Objects in phase space are therefore “threatened” by all that has been excluded, in an exclusion that is constitutive. Phase space is the primary terrain for the constitution of objects, and it is therefore the analogue of Laclau’s “precarious totalising horizon,” the “failed totality” necessary to start speaking about something.

Discourse is described by Laclau as being “split between the particularity which it still is and the more universal signification of which it is the bearer.” Phase space can also be thought of in these terms, and these terms lead to the concept of *hegemony*. Hegemony is defined as the operation by which a particularity bears a totalising signification. Borrowing this definition, we could say that we talk about phase space by virtue of a hegemonical operation.

The term *moment* is used to refer to the differential positions insofar as they appear articulated within a discourse.⁴¹ These definitions let us establish two initial conceptual pairs for our table of correspondences: the first one is the pair discourse-phase space and the second one is moment-state.

⁴⁰ “Discourse is the primary terrain of the constitution of objectivity as such. By discourse, as I have attempted to make clear several times, I do not mean something that is essentially restricted to the areas of speech and writing, but any complex of elements in which relations play the constitutive role. This means that elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it. Thus ‘relation’ and ‘objectivity’ are synonymous.” Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London and New York 2005.

⁴¹ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 105.

Demand

The minimal unit of analysis in Laclau's theory is the socio-political *demand*⁴² and the scope of his theory is aimed at consideration of how demands are articulated. In our parallel, let us tentatively associate *demand* and *trajectory*. A trajectory in phase space is just the path defined by a series of sequential states. The construction of topological objects in phase space is meaningful insofar as the topological object holds bundles of trajectories in phase space that are articulated together. The trajectory can therefore be seen as the minimal unit of analysis for topological organisation. Cross-relating the terms of the analogy, a *demand* will be born under the form of a trajectory that initiates a path in phase space.

What happens to a demand when it is satisfied? "A fulfilled demand ceases to be a demand."⁴³ If the pair demand-trajectory is kept, we should be able to decide when a trajectory ceases to be a trajectory. If there exists a point in phase space that attracts trajectories that are born in different initial points covering a region in phase space, this point ends up absorbing the trajectory. This absorption makes the trajectory disappear. What happens to a system whose evolution is described by a trajectory that is absorbed by a point? It reaches a stationary state. We can imagine a group of initial states in phase space. After a transient, there is a state (a point) that is chosen as the definite dwelling. This point is called an attractor. But attractors are not always points. They can also make up closed curves in phase space. In such cases, the stationary state achieved by the system is not a single state but a closed sequence of states.

To proceed with the analogy, let us take a step further and associate the achievement of a *stationary* state with the *satisfaction* of a demand. The transient walk of the trajectory before it is absorbed by an attractor is the analogue of the time interval during which a demand is still only a *request*. "If the demand is satisfied, that is the end of the matter."⁴⁴ Otherwise, the trajectories persist in phase space without being absorbed. This persistence turns demands into claims and trajectories into recurrent trajectories, i.e. the trajectories associated with this recurrence and with the impossibility of reaching a stationary state function as the analogue of the unsatisfied demands. Let us consider a system for which all

⁴² Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 224.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

trajectories find, after a certain transient, their attractor. An example of such a system could present several point attractors distributed in space, without barriers impeding the encounter between the trajectory and the dwelling that hosts it. This situation is the analogue of a society in which “any social need should be met differentially; and there would be no basis for creating an internal frontier.”⁴⁵ But what happens if an attractor transforms into a repeller, thus separating a certain group of demands from their satisfaction? This inaugurates clearings or voids, delimiting frontiers in phase space. Why? Not because trajectories cannot transit these regions, but because after a certain transient, none of them will survive in them. These voids delimit regions in phase space and define borderlines or frontiers. Internal frontiers are the first of a series of necessary preconditions for the emergence of populism.

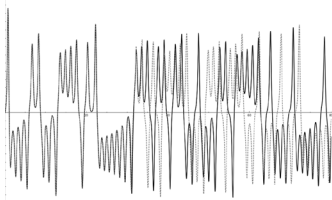
The theory of dynamical systems provides tools to describe bundles of trajectories distributed in surfaces with branches and holes, trajectories that never become stationary, even if they never abandon a bounded region of phase space. This region that attracts trajectories without making them stationary is called a *strange attractor*.⁴⁶ It is an attractor because it is a set towards which trajectories evolve over time, but it is ‘strange’ because trajectories evolve in a recurrent but non-periodic manner, without ever repeating themselves.

The most famous example of a strange attractor is perhaps the Lorenz attractor.⁴⁷ The rule that governs the Lorenz system is a nonlinear rule with three state

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁴⁶ These attractors are more complex than a point, a surface, or a volume in phase. Their particular feature is that they form geometrical objects with a non-integer dimension. A point has dimension 0, a curve has dimension 1, a surface has dimension 2, but a strange attractor is a geometrical object that is, for instance, more than a curve but less than a surface.

⁴⁷ The rule that governs the Lorenz system is a rule that can be derived from a simplified version of the laws for natural convection in the atmosphere. The Lorenz attractor is a paradigmatic example of a system in which the capacity of prediction is hindered. This is illustrated with the time series of the plot below.



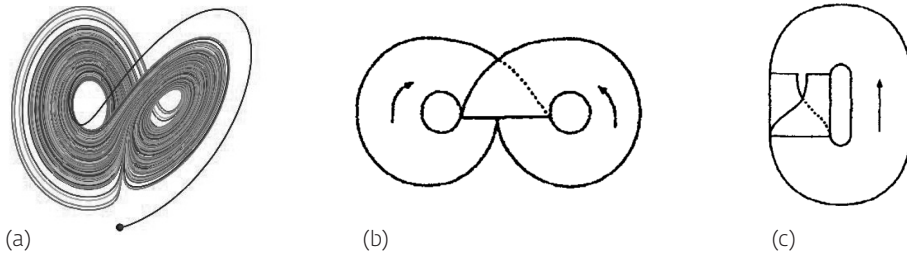


Fig. 6. (a) Trajectories in phase space generated with the Lorenz system. (b-c) Two alternative but equivalent forms of representing the model kit of the strip within which trajectories circulate.

variables: phase space is therefore three dimensional. Trajectories computed with this rule generate an object that is shown in Fig. 6a, with trajectories circulating in a sort of ribbon or strip, making up a locally bidimensional manifold. The strip *circumscribes* the trajectories but does not *coincide* with them. It is a sort of holder or container, which may be represented graphically with the mod-

The plot shows two-time series for one of the three state variables of the Lorenz system. These time series are obtained using the Lorenz rule. Both time series start at time zero, with x values that are almost identical. The difference between both x values amounts to 0.000001. During the first time period (which lasts about 15 seconds), the evolution of the state variable x coincides for both time series and we can only see a single red curve. This poses no problem for prediction. But for a certain time the series that were coincident become drastically different, as if they had nothing in common. A prediction beyond the first 15 seconds with this rule will therefore fail. The rule is known but the rule does not suffice to predict the long-term behaviour of the system, due to sensitivity to the initial conditions. This kind of behaviour, illustrated here by the Lorenz system, is called chaotic. There is no consensus on a formal definition of deterministic chaos, but the term 'chaotic' is used to refer to deterministic phenomena described in terms of variables that vary in a particularly irregular fashion in time and space. It is known that a chaotic behaviour is constructed through the action of two basic (and opposed) mechanisms in phase space: stretching and squeezing. Stretching is connected with the property of sensitivity to the initial conditions. Squeezing is associated with the fact that variables adopt values within a limited range of values in phase space. For instance, in meteorology, pressure and temperature are variables that adopt values within a certain range in the atmosphere. When both mechanisms are simultaneously present, diverging trajectories in phase space end up approaching each other in the long run. An imperfect regularity results from the combined action of these two opposed mechanisms of dispersion and contraction, producing the '*mille feuille*' object of Fig. 6a.

el kit shown in Figs. 6b and 6c. Both model kits are topologically equivalent. The first version resembles the attractor in Fig. 6a, but the strip can be continuously deformed until it coincides with the second version.⁴⁸ The model kit in either (b) or (c) is the template of the Lorenz system.

The first important point to retain from this example is that trajectories that coexist with a strange attractor are distributed in phase space, forming bundles that can, however, be confined or inscribed in the structure that articulates them. The second important point is that trajectories trapped in a strange attractor move in a disorderly manner that does not appear to be generated by a rule, even if this is the case. But the structure in which the trajectories move can be of help to unveil the rule, when it is not known in advance.

The trajectories coexisting with a strange attractor can be conceived as unstable orbits that never close upon themselves to form a periodic orbit. We can think of a strange attractor as a set that hosts trajectories without absorbing them. Why does it host them? Because there is an object in phase space with well-defined topological features that contains them. Why does it not absorb them? Because stationarity is never reached.

Laclau remarks that the lack of fulfilment of a demand can take the form of a downright rejection – as in the case of a repeller expelling a trajectory from its zone of influence – but it can also take the form of an unstable equilibrium between satisfaction and rejection.⁴⁹ This intermediate situation between satisfaction and rejection is comparable to the particular situation encountered by a trajectory that coexists with a strange attractor. These trajectories change permanently but within certain limits, and these limits preserve a mathematical form that is well described by topology. In the field of dynamical systems, we say that there is topological invariance and we associate this invariance with the dynamical properties of the rule governing the system. The strange attractor maintains its topology unless the system suffers radical changes (through a parameter variation, through the incorporation of dynamical ingredients that were absent, or through the inclusion of previously excluded variables). Within

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⁴⁸ Recall that the transformation process of one version into the other only forbids discontinuous actions such as cutting or welding.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

the apparent disorder of trajectories that never settle to a stationary state, there subsists an order of a higher level: the level of the topological structure organising the trajectories.

But how can we jump from the level at which there is disorder – the level of the trajectories – to the level at which there is order – the level of the template? By establishing an equivalential relation at the level of the trajectories. The establishment of equivalential relations between demands is the second precondition for the emergence of populism.

What kind of equivalential relations are introduced in the topological program? In the first place, a local equivalence is practiced on nearby states, enabling the grouping of stretches of trajectories that admit a local⁵⁰ common inscription, provided certain criteria are met.⁵¹ What comes out of the establishment of this local equivalential relation? A number of organised cells representing stretches of grouped trajectories, constructed around nodal points. This local equivalence leads from the trajectories to the template.

The Laclausian equivalential chain between demands presents trends that are similar to the equivalential bond constituting a cell in the cell complex. The more extended the equivalential relation, the laxer the criterion that is applied to constitute it. The arbitrary nature of this criterion has an analogue in the emptiness of the signifier:⁵² the laxer the criterion, the emptier the signifier. Another trend that admits an analogical translation is the ontological function overriding the ontic content.⁵³ The fact that nearby trajectories have nothing in common when they are followed out of the region of interest does not interfere with the inscription of their common stretch around a nodal point to form a cell. The ontological need to be unified under a signifier (or to be grouped under a criterion having an arbitrary common reference) is stronger than the ontic difference between demands (or mutually diverging trajectories). The method

⁵⁰ The equivalence between the states in the cell is local because their continuation out of the cell can be completely different, but this does not matter.

⁵¹ This local inscription can be seen as the analogue of a “levelling instinct”, *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁵² “A signifier like ‘workers’, for instance, can, in certain discursive configurations, exhaust itself in a particularistic, sectional meaning; while in other discourses – the Peronist would be an example – it can become the name *par excellence* of the ‘people’.” *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

that we are describing does not even attempt a reconstruction of the trajectories from the disperse points corresponding to the available data. And this is not attempted because the identification of the trajectories does not matter to the reconstruction of the topological structure. The focus is on how disperse states are articulated in phase space, independently of the trajectories to which these states might belong.

The demands that enter into an equivalential relation with other demands are called *popular demands*. The construction of the cell complex in the topological program provides an image of the Laclausian equivalential process. Popular demands have their analogue in trajectories admitting an inscription within a cell complex. The analogy is even respectful of the fact that “equivalence does not attempt to eliminate differences.”⁵⁴ The cell does not replace the trajectories, it does not coincide with them, nor does it make the trajectories coalesce into a unique trajectory; the cell is an object that can be imagined as overlying or supporting different trajectories when certain criteria are met.

The topological program admits a second type of equivalential relation. It is an equivalence relation that operates upon the cell chains that can be defined along the cell complex, i.e. at the level of the structure supporting the initially disperse states and contributing to the determination of the topological properties of such structure. This equivalence relation between chains is termed homology and it leads to the recognition of the number of connected components, of inequivalent loops, of enclosed cavities, etc. This stage of the topological program can be seen as the third and last precondition for the emergence of populism: the unification of the various demands into a stable system of signification.⁵⁵

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Institutionalism

Let us turn back to the case in which phase space is populated with non-strange attractors. These attractors play the role of institutional forms satisfying isolated (democratic) demands. And isolated trajectories (democratic demands) are all alike in the sense that all of them lie in the basin of attraction of an attractor that will, sooner or later, capture them. This ‘homogeneous’ scenario can be considered the analogue of the institutionalist totality.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

Populism

Moving away from this scenario, let us imagine that repellers inaugurate interior frontiers and that the homogeneity mentioned above is broken. Laclau speaks of a fractured space, of a division into camps. But how is this division created? Who creates it? How is space effectively fractured? Does the break admit representation in phase space? If not, how can it be read in terms of the analogy? The borders of the manifold in which trajectories coexisting with a strange attractor move are frontiers between zones of phase space where there *are* trajectories and zones of space which are *empty*. However, these empty spaces are not representative of the action that empties them. In the case of a deterministic system, the “power” that “creates” these voids is legislated by the rule governing the system. These voids may be created in phase space by changing the mathematical rule that governs the system. But who produces the changes in the rule? The natural answer is “the system.” But the terms “rule” and “system” are often used interchangeably. A distinction can, however, be made between the system generating the data and the rule that models it. The system can unexpectedly exhibit a behaviour that is not prescribed by the rule that was supposed to describe it. This makes the model that is expressed by the rule inadequate and calls for a re-adjustment of the rule. The system therefore exceeds the representation of its behaviour in phase space, and constitutes ‘something out there’ that may force the modification of the representation that is initially chosen as appropriate. This is what creates the fracture in the original context.

But what about the fracture as a political category? The dynamics of the system has borders delimiting voids in phase space, but if we ask about the action behind the void, our relational playground (phase space) remains voiceless. Let us consider an example: let us imagine that we describe a physical system in which two elastic masses collide periodically against each other under the action of certain forces. Let us suppose that we choose one of these masses and that we represent the velocity and position of this mass in phase space. A collision with the other mass may be modelled using a nonlinear term in the mathematical rule (a saturation term). This nonlinear term produces the effect of stopping the mass that we are looking at (the mass that plays the role of *our* system). *Our* mass cannot visit certain areas of phase space due to the action of this saturation term. But this forbidden region in phase space inaugurated by the saturation term in the rule does not tell us if the mass is drastically stopped in its motion at a certain position because it is colliding against another mass, or if

this periodical stop is caused for another reason. The reason is beyond what can be expressed in *our* representation frame. In terms of the analogy, we can say that the concrete actions that are responsible for the existence of unsatisfied demands do not constitute part of the partial totality in which the demands move. Emptiness is the only visible effect in the relational playground to which meaning is restricted. This allows us to say, with Laclau, that the fracture we are dealing with is a purely negative object. “The void points to the absent fullness of the community.”⁵⁶ The holes or fractures in phase space are also a negative representation of a positive action exerted ‘out there’. These actions are represented in phase space as regions expelling trajectories, regions where stability or long-term survival becomes impossible. But if there is objectivity only within a certain representation frame, what happens with objects that are constituted in different frames? Is there a possible encounter between such objects? This point will be taken up when we discuss the category of heterogeneity.

Let us move onto the second precondition for the emergence of populism. The transition towards the populist identity consists in the establishment of an equivalential bond between demands. In the parallel we are developing, this equivalential bond takes place with the establishment of a local equivalence relation that enables the inscription of temporally bounded demands into a cell. As expected, the field of the trajectories that are inscribed into a cell is not a “neutral terrain.” The “uneasy alternation between cold and warm” demands in Laclau⁵⁷ is the analogue of the contradictory processes of dispersion and contraction leading to a topological invariance.

The inscription within an equivalential chain “gives the demand a corporeality which it would not otherwise have. It ceases to be a fleeting, transient occurrence, and becomes part of [...] a discursive/institutional ensemble which ensures its long-term survival.”⁵⁸ We have seen how this inscription leads to the template, the skeleton articulating originally disperse states. The template expresses the long-term survival of the trajectories inscribed in the complex. This long-term survival is expressed in terms of topological invariance. But the par-

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⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

ticular topology of the template represents something on its own: a particular class of articulation, a particular class of dynamics.⁵⁹

This makes the template hypostatic in the following sense. Once constructed, the template stands by itself and does not coincide with the time series that was used to unveil it. The template expresses a property of the system; it represents what survives in the long term if the system is well described by the data. In a way, the time series data is like Wittgenstein's ladder, which can be dropped after climbing. The template overrides the particularistic trajectories and produces meaning⁶⁰ by itself. This hypostasis realises the third and final precondition for the emergence of populism.

Empty signifier

Lacan holds that the concepts of signifier and articulation are consubstantial, that all that is presented as articulated is the signifier, and at the same time, that the signifier secretes a remnant which it cannot signify. In this sense, every articulation is a failed articulation. We have already discussed in what way phase space is a failed totality. We have already mentioned that phase space exists when we deliberately choose some variables that are considered significative and that will therefore "construct meaning."⁶¹ This is in line with the manner in which Laclau defines the term *system*: a system is a failed totality that constitutes a horizon.⁶² The excluded categories cancel their differences through an equivalence that holds between all that is excluded. The system can signify itself as a totality at the price of obliterating (or putting between brackets) the differential nature of what is left out. But all that is obliterated or ignored at a certain time scale or period may not be insignificant at every time scale or peri-

⁵⁹ "The 'people' does not act as a clearing-house for the individual demands, for it is transformed in most cases into a hypostasis which starts to have demands of its own." *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁶⁰ This meaning is more general than the particularistic trajectories, but it is still particular: it is a particular kind of articulation, with a certain topology.

⁶¹ Phase space is the analogue of the "zero point of signification which is nevertheless the precondition for any signifying process." *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁶² "The systematicity of the system is a direct result of the exclusionary limit, it is only that exclusion that grounds the system as such." Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, p. 38.
 "Any system of signification is structured around an empty place resulting from the impossibility of producing an object which, none the less, is required by the systematicity of the system." Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 40.

od. If “totality now becomes the name of a horizon and no longer of a ground,”⁶³ phase space is also a horizon rather than a ground and is therefore something of the order of an *empty signifier*.⁶⁴

Let us focus on the cell complex. In the departure context, the cell complex is a methodological element that is built to unveil a topological structure. The popular identity is the analogue of the template. But to determine the topology of the template, the moment of the cell complex construction is critical. The method depends on a performative criterion; different criteria will produce different templates and the success of the program relies on a good choice of this criterion. We have mentioned that the constitution of cells and equivalential chains relies on certain arbitrary criteria, by virtue of which the range of the equivalential process is decided. If the topology of a cell complex depends on a criterion, the method may lead to false rules. This ambiguity is problematic in the original context (since the rule is the scope of the topological program), but in the context of political theory this ambiguity is desirable. In the topological program, the cell complex is methodological, while in the analogy the complex is a constitutive element, with a role that is determinant for cementing the articulation. In other words, while in the original terrain there is a correct template that the method may or may not adequately capture, in the analogy the template does not pre-exist the complex but is legitimately constituted through it.⁶⁵

The cell complex mediates between the clouds of disperse elements and the possibility of constructing the template. The analogy is better tuned if this mediation is seen as a nominal operation. The name operates as a pure signifier, as a structuring element without proper content. The performative operation by which the cell brings about the unity of disperse elements is done in the name of a criterion which cannot be deduced, it has to be defined. The unity of the template is a retroactive effect of its constitution through the criterion leading to the cell complex. This criterion is a relation between universality and particularity, between a particular content in phase space (points distributed in a certain manner) and the universal function embodied by the criterion. Arbitrariness is involved both when phase space is constructed and in the passage from the dis-

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⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

perse points to the topology that organises them. The structuring dimension (of signification) and the arbitrary (or affective) dimension⁶⁶ converge in the construction of the template and in the construction of the popular identity.

Antagonism, dislocation, and heterogeneity

According to Laclau, demands may receive the structural pressure of rival hegemonical projects. In the analogy, this occurs for instance when a bifurcation is created in a template so that a single branch opens up into two branches. Trajectories close to the bifurcation will receive the ‘structural pressure’ of rival branches.

In the original terrain, topological changes in a structure can originate in three increasingly radical ways: through variation of the parameters of the rule, by a change in the form of the rule, or by a change in the definition of phase space. Dynamicists call events that do not involve a redefinition of phase space *perestroikas*. Phase space reformulation is necessary if the change is manifested, for instance, through the inclusion of previously excluded variables. This distinction between the different manners that may originate structural instability in a template has an almost direct translation into the Laclausian concepts of antagonism, dislocation, and heterogeneity.

Antagonism and dislocation are *perestroikas*: they do not involve a reformulation of the discursive inscription. Frontiers play the role of antagonistic relations, and its possibilities of displacement and modification are affine to dislocation. The concept of social heterogeneity, instead, has a type of “exteriority” with respect to the field of representation that is analogous to the most radical change, implying phase space reformulation.⁶⁷

The notion of exteriority, however, remains problematic. In the paragraph devoted to populism, it was mentioned that frontiers and voids in phase space have an appential exteriority. An antagonism may induce the bifurcation of a branch into two branches. But the *exterior* whose correlate is the void between the separated branches operates *inside* the scheme through the mobility of the frontiers of the topological structure. These voids structuring the template intro-

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

duce an element that functions as the internal negation of the pseudo-totality constituted by phase space.⁶⁸

Immanence and transcendence are interwoven in the portrait developed by the analogy. The void opened by the repeller has an apparent exteriority: it can be seen as the correlate of the “intrusion” of something external that operates *in* phase space causing changes in the topological structure.⁶⁹ These voids are mobile, since the borders of the branches move to allow for a bifurcation. Laclau uses the category of “floating signifier” to refer to the logic of the displacements of the frontiers. The empty signifier (represented in the analogy by the process allowing for the nucleation of points in cells) takes for granted the presence of a stable frontier, while the floating signifier does not.⁷⁰ The distinction is only analytical, since both empty and floating signifiers are complementary categories that participate in the construction of the popular identity. Empty signifiers are involved in the reference to a partial fixation, while floating signifiers⁷¹ allow for the mutability of these partial fixations. Similarly, the organisation of holes and borders fix a topological structure, and *perestroikas* allow for the mutability of this organisation.

Section 4. Conclusions

Ernesto Laclau has rescued the term populism from its pejorative condition. The theory of dynamical systems and topology are fields that have rescued the value of ‘the qualitative’, making it compatible with mathematical tools that seemed restricted to quantification. This work restores the value of ‘the analogical’ to apply tools borrowed from the naturalist paradigm to categories of philosophical order.

⁶⁸ “The multiple presence of the heterogeneous in the structuration of the popular camp is that the latter has an internal complexity which resists any kind of dialectical homogenization. Heterogeneity inhabits the very heart of a homogeneous space.” *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁶⁹ This intrusion is the analogue of the “heterogeneous other” that is dialectically irretrievable in the emergence of an antagonistic frontier. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁷¹ “The ‘floating’ dimension becomes most visible in periods of organic crisis, when the symbolic system needs to be radically recast.” *Ibid.*, p. 132.

‘The political’, seen as an undecidable game between the floating and the empty, has an analogue in ‘the topological’ in the structuration of a dynamics.⁷² The conjunction between topology and dynamics has an exponent in the so-called topological program. This work proposes an *analogomorphism* between the concepts of the topological program and the categories that Laclau defines to articulate the dissatisfaction of demands and the construction of the popular identity. The term analogomorphism is coined here to refer to an ensemble of relationships between terms of two disparate fields, in which the relationships have a heuristic function, and in which the contextualised role of the terms in the original fields can be denatured or transformed by the “*mise en relation*.”⁷³ In this analogomorphism, the topological program is invoked as a toolbox in the Foucaultian sense of the term. The contextual displacement is hermeneutical, the key being the identification of a trajectory with a demand, and the identification of a *stationary* state with the *satisfaction* of a demand. The analogy is not based on borrowing mathematical inscriptions or symbols, but on the common articulation of an ensemble of concepts. This differs from the usage of mathematics implemented by other authors, such as Jacques Lacan or Alain Badiou.

In the original context, the mathematical tools of the topological program are used to construct a skeleton that articulates trajectories in phase space. Here it is argued that the concept of phase space involves the category of hegemony, and that the topological skeleton can be related to the category of “people.”

The template has a structure that is topological in nature; it is defined in terms of the number of holes, enclosed cavities, branches, etc. Substantial (qualitative) changes in the system’s behaviour affect the topology of the template: enclosed cavities are modified, branches bifurcate, holes appear or close, etc. The concepts involved in the program can be divided into three groups:

- those involved in the representation of the dispersion of elements available before the construction of the template;
- those concerned with the manner in which the template is constructed from the dispersion of elements;

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁷³ The connections between the terms need not be exhaustive or bijective.

- those necessary to describe the different possibilities regarding the mutation of the topology of the template.

The concepts in the first group admit a correspondence with the categories of discourse, demand, difference, and institutionalism. Those in the second group are related to the categories of frontier, empty signifier, equivalence, and populism. The concepts in the third group function as analogues for antagonism, dislocation, and heterogeneity.

The template, constructed over a series of methodological steps, is the analogue of the popular camp. Its corporeality is translated in terms of topological invariance. The methodological steps play a central role in the analogy. The concept of template in the analogomorphism is denatured in that it no longer condenses a dynamics that must be unveiled, but a dynamics that is built provided the inscription criteria that cement the articulation operate conveniently. The arbitrariness of these criteria is also essential to the analogy. We could assert that there is a constitutive link between the template-people and the trajectories-demands that articulate it. This link expresses both its strengths and weaknesses. The template is a partial fixation, an open invariant that can be subverted, with subversion conditions that take the form of an alteration of frontiers or of a radical reformulation of the discursive space.

The analogomorphism can be used as a guide to gain insight into several questions that are not discussed in this article. One of them is the distinction between equivalence and homology, i.e. between the equivalential bond at the level of the cell and the equivalential bonds at the level of the complex, in terms of political theory.

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Naturally, the type of analogical work proposed in this article need not be restricted to the topological program. Nothing prevents invoking other concepts of the naturalist paradigm with a similar strategy. For instance, the concept of *coherence*, used in physics to denote certain correlation properties between magnitudes (waves, atoms, magnetic dipoles, etc.), could be proposed, in principle, as a concept with some relationship to the category of hegemony. However, when a physical system attains a coherent state of some kind, the order is directly introduced at the level of the differences. A collective action achieved by a set of individuals could be read as a coherent action in the physical sense of the term, but

in this case the coherence, the convergence in the arrangement, the order in the action, is attained by cancelling differences. The equivalential logic that builds the topological structure expressed in the template is an order of a different kind. Order and disorder coexist without disturbing each other. Moreover, not only do they coexist peacefully, but they support each other. Let us remark that if we force an order upon the trajectories-demands, disorder disappears and we fall back into the institutionalist limit: trajectories become stationary and demands encounter satisfaction. The analogy with the template is appropriate because the template is not a physical force that orders trajectories into a structure, but rather a sort of containment frame. The template hosts trajectories without dissolving their differences. Differences are sheltered by virtue of an arbitrary criterion that we have related to the affective dimension. Topological invariance, the “*ordre dans le chaos*,” is a product of the coexistence of non-coincident levels: the level of the trajectories or demands, and the level of the template or the people. At the level of the trajectories, differences and disorder persist. The dynamical order that is expressed by the template is not directly or ostensibly present at the level of the trajectories and in this sense it is more discursive than phenomenological, as much as the template is ‘more mathematical’ than ‘physical’. The notion of coherence is therefore more akin to the notion of a general consent, while the notion of equivalence in the topological program allows for an order without convergence, without consensus, without *coincidentia*.⁷⁴

‘The popular’, ‘the qualitative’, and the ‘analogical’ have a pejorative charge that this text has attempted to overcome by showing the fertility of an exercise that is not limited to a mere parallelism, since it opens up a transfer process of notions, methods, and images. The procedure naturally raises the question of the justification of such an affinity. It also highlights the importance of not reducing an analogomorphism to an isomorphism.⁷⁵ Every analogy is ultimately dialogical and the construction of the analogy unfolded in this work implies a pre- and re-interpretative work, both of the dynamico-topological concepts as well as of Laclausian categories. Analogomorphisms can be put to work in

⁷⁴ Perhaps the difficulty in harmonising categories such as multitude in Toni Negri and hegemony in Ernesto Laclau can be traced back to the difference between the concepts of coherence and equivalence, in physics and mathematics, respectively.

⁷⁵ Some of the flaws of Alain Badiou’s effort to build an ontology inspired by set theory could be the result of forcing an isomorphism there where an analogomorphism would be more natural.

political theory to complexify certain political notions, to pose some theoretical questions diversely, or to increase the precision of the manner in which alternative theories proceed. On the other hand, mathematical or physical concepts can profit from analogomorphisms in a genre that can be seen as a deconstructive reflection of scientific practices that are often engaged without consideration of the latent notions with which they operate, those notions that Henri Poincaré once termed *mathematical prejudices*.

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The Real and Semblance in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis

Articles in the section that follows were edited by Jelica Šumič Riha.

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Hegel's *Entäußerung* – Notes on the Kenotic Actualisation

Beginning with an inhibition

The preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* provides the reader with an instruction on how the pages that follow are *not* to be read. Hegel famously begins by rejecting the assumption that a preface might summarise the content that follows and might indicate in advance the aims of the book that follows. He rather insists on the contrary, namely that an apparent result does not exhaust the “real issue,” and declares an indicated “aim” to be nothing but a “lifeless universal.”¹ The “real issue,” on the contrary, is stated by “carrying it out” and the result is not only the entirety of the thought that has been carried out, but the entirety plus its development.²

The preface, which is, as the title says, “on scientific cognition,” does immediately block our spontaneous understanding, according to which ‘science’ brings about and is summarised in ‘results’.³ Furthermore regarding this blockage, we cannot expect that the preface might provide us with some information beforehand, that it might outline and condense the most important and central results or enumerate the most pressing aims of this complicated and long book that lies before us. Hegel refuses to give us that orientation which we expect from a preface, and we should be warned: that kind of orientation which gives us facts to follow will also not be handed in at some later point; we should rather expect a crisis of orientation as a result of the pages that follow.

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If the preface is not the correct place for a summary, then any beginning or any final paragraph of a chapter will not be able to do so either. We have to anticipate that we will perhaps not find a single passage in the entire book that

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977, p. 2.

² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

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would provide us with the safety of a brief summary, a point to rely on, and a starting point for an understanding to continue its work. Thus, we will have to go through the entire book, will have to read each single paragraph and page, and at the end we will have to make an attempt at understanding the totality of the thoughts and their development, which might have to fail. But if this attempt cannot lead to a result, which we might transmit or retain as knowledge – as in claims like “Hegel’s basic thesis is...,” – then into what are we being led?

An instruction on how a book is not to be read is not yet an instruction on how to read it. But, at the same time, this instruction seems dubious when its consequences are considered, and it makes us wonder if we do not perhaps have to read the text in the regular way, despite Hegel’s insinuation of its impossibility. Who would stop reading at this point? Would we not have to say that our problematic is exaggerated, because even if Hegel refuses to summarise the content of his book into aims (and their realisations), is not a sort of summary always necessary in any single passage, in fact in every single sentence? Is not some kind of an aim always implied in the act of thinking and writing, even if Hegel does not want it to be this way? How could philosophy proceed if it were not one by one? And does not this necessity – to go one by one – imply the basic structure of aim, method, and result?

Of course, the direction we are aiming at can already be sensed, although we have not yet indicated it as such: it seems we are aiming at the question of speculation, which Hegel defines as overturning the linear causality of spontaneous thought. And our spontaneous reading continues as if it were evident that we will grasp the speculative content. But before we get to this result, we should emphasise a different problem, coming along with the declared impossibility to fixate aims and results. Not only is there a problem of how to continue reading, but before this there is a difficulty of beginning: in our spontaneous understanding, we would assume, at least, that every passage, every sentence can be understood as referring to something before its own beginning; every passage, every sentence carries something further and thus refers backwards and forwards. If we do not find a fixation of what is being said, a fixed meaning, then we are not given a point of departure, and consequently we have to understand that our reading will have to grasp a development without any beginning at all. No passage, no sentence will begin anew, and no passage, no sentence will provide an interruption, a summary, a stopping point. Everything has already

begun before it began. But if there is no beginning, we might also argue that we cannot read anymore, for we are not able to move forwards or backwards within the text. There appears an impossibility to read along the lines of our usual customs and practices.

But, of course, this is not the entire story. As we actually do read the preface, we do follow the path marks of fixations, we follow along one sentence, in which we grasp a meaning, to the next. The difficulty of the beginning is not an actual difficulty, for we can simply read. We can be pragmatists. But in this case we might still not be out of trouble: we will have to realise, later, that the actualisation of this impossibility works against us, from the beginning on; it unfolds itself, all the while we are following Hegel's propositions, one by one. It is indeed what Hegel wants us to do, to walk stubbornly into this trap. For it is Hegel's point that the impossibility of our familiar forms of reading unfolds only if we read. This is famously described in the notion of the "speculative exposition,"⁴ which Hegel contrasts with our usual approach to a regular proposition. The speculative, dialectical movement of a proposition, which consists of an "internal inhibition" and a "return of the essence into itself," cannot be found as an element of the regular phrase itself; it is neither its regular meaning, nor is it a signified content.⁵ Rather, it takes place *as* and *in* the movement of the proposition itself. And philosophy needs to present this movement and to enunciate it:

The sublation of the form of the proposition must not happen only in an *immediate* manner, through the mere content of the proposition. On the contrary, this opposite movement must find explicit expression [...]. This return of the Notion into itself must be *set forth* [presented, "*dargestellt sein*", J.V.]. This movement which constitutes what formerly the proof was supposed to accomplish, is the dialectical movement of the proposition itself. This alone is the speculative *in act*, and only the expression [enunciation, "*Aussprechen*", J.V.] of this movement is a speculative exposition [presentation, "*Darstellung*", J.V].⁶

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⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40. For the German concepts, which I indicated in brackets, see Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes, Werke, Vol. 3*, Frankfurt am Main 1986, p. 61.

The immanent difficulty is that the “philosophical” exposition of the speculative movement will be irreducible to a regular proposition, although it needs to be enunciated. We will have to think and understand a different kind of enunciation. However, we see that we will find our way by reading one sentence after another, and it is in this very process that something else takes place, something that demands to be enunciated. Will we find it in the subsequent proposition? The concatenation of propositions continues in a regular way, but we cannot inscribe the speculative moment as the content into the proposition that follows.

Where we start, then, is a moment of deception, inhibition, disorientation. Something is going on, though, which tells us that our regular understanding is inhibited. But we are also inhibited from moving backwards, to a preceding proposition, as we are inhibited from moving forward. We are not only blocked in our reading, but we have entered a space of disorientation. Jean-Luc Nancy has linked this troubling structure of the preface to the structure of the *Aufhebung*, which seems to pave the way from the regular to the speculative proposition, but proves, as it were, to be presupposed and suspended at the same time. “Another grammar” is announced⁷, Nancy writes, but the transition from our usual grammar to the speculative grammar, the *Aufhebung* of the regular grammar, is missing, while it remains presupposed: what takes place within the proposition seems to refer to its conceptual presupposition, for then we would know how to read the speculative moment, but as it is not given, “*presupposition*” and “*positing*” become one.⁸ We read, but we have to read differently:

Dispossessed or unsettled in this manner, we will be reading, or be writing, nothing else but the gap [écart], the displacement that produces this disruption in Hegel’s text – or, if you like, this alteration in the course of which the necessity of another grammar, of another proposition, is being proposed. We must, without any further warnings, since the entire system of warnings has just revealed itself to be useless, read these *others*, or this *other*, in Hegel, which is to say, of course, read Hegel *otherwise*, and finally, to come (back) to our ‘object,’ read or write *otherwise* the *Aufhebung*.⁹

⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Speculative Remark (One of Hegel’s Bons Mots)*, trans. Céline Surprenant, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA 2001, p. 17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

To read otherwise is to write the trace of the sublation. The entire process refers back to the necessary presentation of the speculative moment – the *Darstellung* – which cannot be considered as given as a propositional content, but becomes rather a “matter of grasping,” as Nancy puts it with reference to the German *‘fassen’*.¹⁰ Reading/writing is a process of “plasticity,”¹¹ and thus it entails a moment that is not purely reducible to a juxtaposition of operations, but is a moment of something taking place within the text, within us, reading it. The presentation is actually an actualisation that defines a constellation of time and space, including the reader and the text, but building up beyond them. The “speculative *in act*,”¹² and the need to enunciate it, lead us to a “voice,” Nancy adds a little later, but it is neither Hegel’s voice nor our voice as readers, but a voice in which “*it speaks [ça parle]*.”¹³ Reading, writing, speaking, hearing: each of the moments is marked by a deferral; we read the other in Hegel, and thus write, but write a movement, not a proposition, and also hear the enunciation of the speculative, but surely not with our ear; neither do we hear it as a speaking voice.

The presentation becomes a scene: but in this scene we find two parties involved. The other, which speaks, and another, in which, through which, it is enunciated. Thus, we will ask whether this voice finds an embodiment outside of the plain text. The voice needs to enunciate itself, but it can only do so by passing through another in which, through which, it is embodied and again dispossessed. The voice would thus enunciate itself only by transcending itself and becoming an other. On the propositional level, we might assume that this voice must be Hegel’s, but it can only make itself heard by passing through our reading body. But let us assume something else: it is the voice of the text, which needs to be written, and actualises itself by reappearing as the voice of a different text. Does reading Hegel demand to be written? And if so: What could be the methodological model for such a self-transcending actualisation? There is one candidate that we would like to propose here, namely the model of kenosis. Kenosis, meaning literally a process of self-emptying, describes Jesus’ letting go of the divine attributes and becoming a human being, as well as becoming receptive to God’s will. What we have in mind for the Hegelian scripture is a

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹² Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 40.

¹³ Nancy, *Speculative Remark*, p. 33.

radically secularised transposition of kenosis as self-emptying: Hegel's texture as voiding itself and externalising itself in different textual bodies. Let us, as a preliminary attempt, develop the outlines of such a model.

Disappearances and their appearances

To take up the thread of the preface again, and to link it in another manner to the appearing voice, we can say that, in order for the speculative to arise, not only does the propositional content have to cede its place, but the speculative voice can also only arise once we do not take it simply to be Hegel's voice. What is happening here cannot simply be referred back to the physical appearance of Hegel; rather, something else is taking place. Even though we might argue with Hegel that it is rather spirit that unfolds itself by means of philosophy, the book is nevertheless a physical entity, drafted, written, published by an author who is also present as an arguing, explaining, questioning voice within the text. However, this does not imply that Hegel is present in the book at any moment. What should be recognised is rather how Hegel prepares an appearance, then an organised disappearance of this author from within the text. We begin with an absent author: the inhibition to move backwards from within the propositional content crosses out the figure of the author. What we will have to watch out for is the moment of his appearance.

But let us go back to the text. So, even if Hegel has not yet appeared, we can at least figure out what he wants, for he does not hesitate to announce what cannot be called but the aim of the pages that follow: namely, to bring about the *Darstellung*, the presentation. This is stated right at the beginning of the preface, only that at this moment, at the beginning, we would not yet know what this is meant to be in a proper sense: "To judge a thing that has substance and solid worth is quite easy, to comprehend it is much harder, and to blend judgement and comprehension in a definitive description is the hardest thing of all."¹⁴ Therefore, we have to stick to "the real issue,"¹⁵ *der "Sache,"*¹⁶ and we have to stick to it even against the apparent "specific difference" of the thing, which is

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¹⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁶ Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 13.

only its “limit” (“*Grenze*”).¹⁷ We have to stick to the thing, not only judge it, but also grasp it (“*es zu fassen*”), and then the “most difficult of all is” to unite both and unfold its exposition.¹⁸

It is thus clear that before we know exactly what to make of the ‘grasp’, the exposition is the critical point, because, as we know from our previous discussion, this presentation excludes any meta-language in terms of aims, results, or summaries. We might also say that the presentation has to fall in line with the aims, results, and summaries of its own process. In this sense, as a form of its content, the presentation becomes totalised. *Darstellung* is not an unregulated presentation, not some – however regulated – imitation; rather, *Darstellung* leads us to the question of the system. Hegel addresses the ‘*Sache*’ that needs presentation, relatively quickly and directly, as “truth,”¹⁹ which can only be given within a scientific system.

At this point, we get into the first internal circuit or the first internal loop, for Hegel – we keep ‘Hegel’ as a name, which will need explanation at a later point – now distinguishes his endeavour from the endeavours of the thought around him. He assumes that the attempt to understand the concept as the “true shape of truth”²⁰ sets him in opposition to the current streams of philosophy. Two moments form these currents of philosophy, one is the will to expose the absolute according to the “wealth of material and intelligibility,”²¹ while the other one is the formalist abyss of the “night in which all cows are black.”²² Some lines before Hegel criticised an understanding of the “absolute” as something to “be felt and intuited,”²³ so that we can infer intuition and feeling on one side, and formalism on the other: Scylla and Charybdis, between which it is the task of the philosopher to keep a grip on the thing. It is especially the tendency towards the absolute as an intuition and a feeling that is an expression of a spirit which has

¹⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 3; Hegel, *Phänomenologie*, p. 13.

¹⁸ “*Es zu fassen*” (in the German edition p. 13): Miller translates this as “comprehend it,” see footnote 14.

¹⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

lost its essence. But in the formalist abyss it is not different – something is lost in the current of philosophy.

“Besides,” Hegel argues, “it is not difficult to see that our own epoch is a time of birth and a transition to a new period.”²⁴ He understands his time to be a time of change, a time in which the spirit is about to change. The announcement of a change is the announcement that something new begins, it is the announcement of a new beginning. From this point on we might be able to shed some light on the question of the beginning. But we might also be able to gather some evidence about Hegel’s role, his disappearance and appearance, as it is clear, although only rhetorically at this point, that the new beginning will not be without Hegel and his philosophy. The novelty of ‘our’ time is announced in the midst of the critique of the current forms of philosophy, their enjoyment of abstraction or their limitation to the realm of experience, and thus the new time could be understood to come with a new philosophy. It is difficult not to hear this voice.

However, Hegel takes a different approach, again. He declares that the new begins with an immediate moment, the new begins with the immediacy of a concept.

But this new world is no more a complete actuality than is a new-born child; it is essential to bear this in mind. It comes on the scene for the first time in its immediacy or its Notion. [...] The onset of the new spirit is the product of a widespread upheaval in various forms of culture, the prize at the end of a complicated, tortuous path and of just as variegated and strenuous an effort. It is the whole which, having traversed its content in time and space, has returned into itself, and is the resultant *simple Notion* of the whole.²⁵

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Thus, it is the concept where the new begins – the concept into which everything that has been has returned. The concept summarises, condenses, and integrates everything that has been into its form. These two moments have to be taken together: the concept summarises the shapes of the “various forms of culture,” but as such, as a summarising notion, it does also mark the beginning of something new. This concept, which returns to itself in the process of its unfolding,

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

marks the point at which change begins. The change begins with a concept that is rich and vast, as it comprises the past, but in its appearance this concept is like a “flash,” it strikes us within a single moment. “The gradual crumbling that left unaltered the face of the whole is cut short by a sunburst which, in one flash, illuminates the features of the new world.”²⁶ We might also say that the presentation, the *Darstellung*, which is given by the concept – its form – changes its own vast and rich content into something new.

We are reminded of our trouble from the beginning. The change which Hegel announces is a change that does not begin by opening something new in a strict sense, but rather by giving a form to the things that have been happening, to the past. Of course, Hegel does not mention the novelty as such, he only speaks of a transition. But even if change does not refer to the radical outbreak of something new, a transition implies a change, and a change implies the question of novelty, or at least the question of a significant difference.

Once again we are dealing with something that has already begun, and the change that occurs is not a change inflicted by something new, but the change has begun with the contraction of the old for itself. The view backwards marks the beginning of a view forward: but the form of the concept, which hits us like a flash, is, however, only a moment of the transition; it is, we could say, *only* a beginning of a beginning, but has not yet gained its full actuality. The transition consists of something old coming to be for itself in a concept, which has not yet unfolded itself completely, and thus, the concept, the turning point has no beginning and no end, no point to pin down that something new has arrived, and thus no real point to be declared, no point of declaration. But – to reread Hegel’s remark: “Besides, it is not difficult to see that our own epoch is a time of birth and a transition to a new period.”²⁷ Now we can see that this remark in all its rhetorical casualness – “besides” – is a moment of the appearance of Hegel, whom we have to suspect to be the point of decision within the concept. Maybe Hegel is just the point within the concept – and the concept at stake here is the concept of science – the point at which the transition is marked by an inner difference that distinguishes the old from the new. The turn of the times, a turn

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

towards science, unfolds its movement through the body of Hegel, and Hegel's body speaks.

Let us take a look at the 'thing' again. Opposed to the current streams in distinction from which Hegel situates his own project, he claims that "everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*."²⁸ A "living substance,"²⁹ Hegel explains, is one in which negativity is inscribed. The inscription of negativity is not only the inscription of difference, but as the inscription of difference, it is also the negation of this symmetrical relation between difference and its other; thus, it is not only difference, but also a "self-restoring sameness,"³⁰ a living substance is different and indifferent at the same time. It is here that Hegel comes back to the aim and to the result: "[...] the True [...] is the process of its own becoming, the circle that presupposes its end as its goal, having its end also as its beginning; and only by being worked out to its end, is it actual."³¹ And further: "Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a *result*, that only in the *end* is it what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature, viz. to be actual, subject, the spontaneous becoming of itself."³²

And of course, Hegel is aware that we might have understood him differently at the beginning, and he immediately admits that "it may seem contradictory" to understand the absolute as a result, and we might add that it is also difficult to understand why a specified aim which he rejected at the beginning is now explicitly posited as the very beginning.³³ However, Hegel argues, the beginning, "as at first immediately enunciated" is "only the universal," and uttering a universal point of beginning does not at all exhaust its content.³⁴ But this beginning is necessary: we need a point of beginning, a concept; and even more, the beginning is a single word such as, for example, 'the absolute'. Only such a single word can express the immediate beginning: "Whatever is more than such a word, even the transition to a mere proposition, contains a *becoming-other*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

that has to be taken back, or is a mediation.”³⁵ We begin with a purpose, and have to follow its unfolding; the “realized purpose” is the self as “unrest” and becoming, which by its development unfolds itself as a self and returns to itself as an immediate beginning, and thus falls into “rest,” it is itself.³⁶ The self is rest and unrest. But rest by itself, as we have seen, is a difficult thing to achieve. It can only be rest as the unrest that remains with itself, “tarrying with the negative,” says Hegel, “is the magical power.”³⁷ Hegel has appeared, and he does not appear as the limit between the old and the new; rather, he appears within the concept as its inner split, and he externalises this split to the external form of a split between the old and the new.

Hegel tells us that the method for establishing this circle is speculative thinking. And it is in the same preface that we find an explanation of not only speculative thinking, but precisely of how to read speculative thinking. He says it very explicitly: “What, therefore, is important in the *study* of *Science*, is that one should take on oneself the strenuous effort of the Notion.”³⁸ What we have to *read* is the concept, and we have to read it from the beginning. But the concept is the interruption of representational thought. What philosophy will have to give us, then, what Hegel will have to give us, *is* the concept. To understand Hegel’s insistence on the concept in this context, we need to follow the comparison he builds up between “speculative thought,”³⁹ which is the translation of “*begreifende[s] Denken*,” comprehending thought, and something that is translated as “ratiocinative thinking,”⁴⁰ and which in German is the “*räsonnierende Denken*.”⁴¹ To simplify things, we may allow ourselves to understand comprehending thought as speculative thought, as the translation suggests, and we will abbreviate “ratiocinative thinking” as representational thought.

In the latter then – in representational thought – we find the presupposition of a subject: representational thought negates or affirms a thing. It either says this is nothing, and then the negation is a moment not of the thing, but of the “empty

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Hegel, *Phänomenologie*, p. 57.

‘I’ that negates the thing.⁴² Or it affirms something, and then the argument posits a subject and relates the predicates to it. Either, or: a subject is presupposed, and the actual thing or no-thing depends on the subject. Speculative thought operates differently: here, the concept incorporates the negativity and “presents itself as the *coming-to-be of the object*.”⁴³ In the movement of the concept, we again find an interplay of unrest and rest.

“In this movement the passive Subject itself perishes; it enters into the differences and the content, and constitutes the determinateness, i.e. the differentiated content and its movement, instead of remaining inertly over against it.”⁴⁴

One has to be careful here not to read too fast. It is the motionless subject of representational thought that breaks down and is now integrated into distinctions and into the content. At this point, Hegel has already carried out what he will subsequently explain: speculative thought is not opposed to representational thought, but the former takes place within the latter. How then does speculation operate within representational thought? Something happens to representational thought, and this event is even twofold. At first, rest turns into unrest, or is even overcome by unrest. Where there was a motionless subject, i.e. the empty I or the subject of a proposition, we now receive a concept that is in motion and connects the former subject with the former content into one form. But then, second, a certain movement of representational thought is stopped and finds itself limited. While representational thought was free to pass from one predicate to the other and from one content to the other, the content is now bound to the self; it is only the content of this self. What was treated as a general predicate by representational thinking becomes a moment of the concept for speculative thinking. And when representational thought takes the liberty of going beyond the thing, by negating predicates or moving on to another content by means of the same predicates, this continuous progression along the chain of predicates is “checked in its progress,” once the predicate has turned into a moment of the substance.⁴⁵ It is within the proposition of representational thought that thinking receives a “counter-thrust.”⁴⁶ The subject, supposedly immobile, finds itself

⁴² Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 36.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

sublated in the predicate; and now, as the predicate has become the “whole and the independent mass,” thinking is “impeded by this weight” and stops moving freely.⁴⁷ Hegel concludes:

Formally, what has been said can be expressed thus: the general nature of the judgement or proposition, which involves the distinction of Subject and Predicate, is destroyed by the speculative proposition, and the proposition of identity which the former becomes contains the counter-thrust against that subject-predicate relationship.⁴⁸

We might want to pause here once more, since we have been going through the circle a second time. And even if we recall that we are not allowed to pause, or rather that a pause is a kind of illusion, we nevertheless stumble about this summary, which irritates, impedes our reading simply by the attempt to “formally” express “what has been said.”

We might, first of all, understand this sentence as an expression of the appearance of speculative thought. Speculative thought appears within thought, and it appears as the consequence of an inner blockage, produced by the movement of the sentence itself. It is representational thinking itself that provokes the appearance of speculative thinking. Nothing seems too difficult about this formal reconstruction. Speculative thought appears, and it is a body of weight that blocks the superficial sliding of representational thought. We might even understand that with the appearance of speculative thought we recognise the volatility of representational thinking, which runs along the predicates, shifts from one content to another, without ever changing its own form. Representational thinking is a technique involving the disappearance of thought, while speculative thought fosters the appearance of thought.

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But we should distrust our understanding and be on guard. Where precisely does speculative thought appear? If it is brought about by the counterpunch, what is the body of speculative thought? What is the materiality of this crash? Once again, it seems to suggest itself that speculative thought appears in the process of reading. ‘Reading’ names the movement of the sentence as a real-

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

ised movement, and thus if there is an appearance of speculative thought, it appears in the movement of reading, which finds itself impeded – formally – in its process. We read and stumble, we speculate. But this is only a prelude to the problem. If the appearance of speculative thought can be expressed formally, and if it can be done in such a manner that speculative thought appears as an interruption of this formal sentence, then it might not be necessary to write speculative philosophy: the speculative might be a potential of the proposition itself. Is not any – regular – proposition formed by the combination of a subject and a predicate?

But on the contrary, Hegel seems to understand the philosophical proposition to be a proposition of a singular speculative weight at which the study of science aims, and this aggravates the difficulty, for the speculative moment cannot be referred to the reading of a sentence alone. Something is there, materially. Once the speculative impact of a sentence is linked to philosophy, something else comes into play. This something else might be called ‘writing’, but then again ‘writing’ might be an imprecise metaphor; at least it opens the door to a series of questions: Who is writing, what is being written, and how something is written that may or may not be read?

What appears above all on the scene is again Hegel. We are no longer talking about the speculative moment in general; rather, we are talking about the speculation within a philosophy signed by Hegel. Hegel refers speculation to philosophy, but nevertheless addresses the reader: the indicated turmoil of the speculative moment within a sentence might be the reason, he says, why philosophy is often considered incomprehensible.⁴⁹ But now, once the speculative proposition is taken as a philosophical proposition, it all of a sudden turns into something other than what we thought before, when we understood the speculative as a quality of the proposition as such. The relation in which we find the speculative emerge is no longer the relation of the representational proposition to itself, its body is altered.

The “philosophical proposition,” Hegel writes, is first of all a proposition, a grammatically ordered proposition. The “usual attitude” of the reader follows

⁴⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 39.

the sentence in reading it and proceeds as it is used to.⁵⁰ “But the philosophical content destroys this attitude and this opinion.”⁵¹ No longer is it about the speculative proposition impeding the grammatical structure of the sentence, but it is rather philosophy impeding the opinion, and presumably it is also about philosophy held down by the flux of the opinion. Held down by the eyes of the reader: the disoriented opinion of the reader is led to the experience that the meaning has to be something else. “[A]nd this correction of our meaning,” Hegel concludes, “compels our knowing to go back to the proposition, and understand it in some other way.”⁵²

Philosophy is the moment in which the speculative concept appears, and before we get back to Hegel as the site of this appearance, we might have him disappear for a moment. However, we have to move further, for we stumble over this moment, in which we read that the speculative concept can be grasped in some other way. We stumble, we could say, because we had understood that the speculative moment appears when the representative sentence is impeded, and now the speculative moment, as a philosophical moment, can be grasped, even formally be grasped. For this reason, we have to take a look at that which is grasped, namely the concept.

The concept, as we saw, presents the coming-to-be of the object, or put differently, the object's becoming. In its specific formation, the concept will find its place within the unfolding of spirit. “With this, the Phenomenology of Spirit is concluded. What Spirit prepares for itself in it, is the element of [true] knowing. In this element the moments of Spirit now spread themselves out in that *form of simplicity* which knows its object as its own self.”⁵³

We see that the true concept expresses a form of the ‘reconciliation’ of the knowledge of itself with the knowledge of the thing, or in other words, the true concept expresses a form of the reconciliation of the self-consciousness with its consciousness. This is the story of a long development. The precarious moment at which we have to take a look is the moment at which the self-con-

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 21–22.

consciousness already knows that the knowledge of the thing is its own knowledge. The self-consciousness has understood that the consciousness of something is brought about by itself, but it still treats this knowledge of itself as if it were the knowledge of something. Here we find, so to speak, the last attempt to keep speculation under the flux of opinion. The concept has already taken in its own movement, but still treats it as if it were possible to understand itself by means of a regular phrase, as a subject that has its predicate.

This specific form of the concept, Hegel argues, disappears, dissolves, but it disappears in again another specific form, in which it turns to become the true concept. The distinction between the “determinateness” and the “fulfilment” of the concept vanishes, and it turns into a concept that “has attained its realization.”⁵⁴ This overcoming of the distinction between the two sides of the concept develops into two different forms: on the one hand, it is realised in the spirit as “the self-assured Spirit that acted,” and on the other hand it is realised in the spirit in the form of religion.⁵⁵ What we receive, in the end, is a concept in which its determination and fulfilment are intrinsically linked, and we find this in two shapes of spirit – the active and the religious spirit.

The moment of the active spirit, which possesses the active concept, will be unfolded in the book we are going to read as an apprenticeship novel, in which the spirit passes through the ethical world, alienation, enlightenment, and finally freedom and terror as its final diremption. In religion then, on the other hand, spirit appears as inactive, as a form of a not-actual, pure knowledge of the essence. In religion, Hegel argues in the final chapter of the *Phenomenology*, on the absolute knowing, spirit “won for consciousness the absolute content as content or, in the form of *picture-thinking*, the form of otherness for consciousness.”⁵⁶ “Picture-thinking” is the translation of “*Vorstellung*”⁵⁷, but the explanation of it being “otherness for consciousness” makes it clear that what we are talking about is representational thought. If we allow ourselves to cause a short circuit, we see that representational thinking and its proposition, which is to some extent the regular proposition, has necessarily something religious

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⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 483.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 484.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Hegel, *Phänomenologie*, p. 580.

about it. And philosophy, as the coming-to-be of speculation, operates on and in, destroys, and impedes the religious proposition. But we will come back to this, once Hegel reappears.

But before that, let us outline the last step of the development of the concept. “This last shape of the spirit [...] this is absolute knowing”⁵⁸ – content understood in the form of the self, thus realising the concept and remaining within the confines of the concept. Absolute knowing is the appearance of spirit in the form of science – science that exhibits the becoming of the concept. At this moment, once the development of the concept has come to an end, and has, in science, found itself as the content of its own form, the concept appears in a paradoxical way. The concept does appear, but it disappears at the same time. The concept appears in the form of science only after the representational thought of religion has been overcome.

The science of the concept has a specific point of its appearance “in time and in the actual world,” it only comes to be once spirit gains “this consciousness about itself.”⁵⁹ But the unfolding of the concept in time is twofold, or split: it is a timely and spatial unfolding of something non-temporal, of something that withdraws from time and space. As the timely and spatial unfolding, the science has not only a specific moment in the time and space in which it comes to be, but it also has a prehistory. It is the substance of the concept, which exists beforehand, before it gains itself. In actuality, the substance of the concept is already given, before the concept comes to its own actuality or to its full existence. But as this substance is the concept which unfolds itself, as the concept is the knowledge of its own becoming in time, Hegel can draw the following conclusion: “Time is the Notion itself that *is there* and which presents itself to consciousness as empty intuition [...]”⁶⁰

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Time is the concept, insofar as the concept unfolds itself in time; it is a stretch in time, which begins its development as the one-sided concept in itself, existing already as the substance, and unfolding itself in the knowledge of itself, thus returning to itself, getting to know itself. The concept is time as an actual circle,

⁵⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 485.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 486.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 487.

returning to its own beginning and grasping this beginning as its essence. But the concept is not only time, time is also, one could say, a concept: it is represented, as Hegel says, to consciousness as empty intuition, but the non-temporal aspect of the concept becomes clearer in the continuation of the quote. Hegel continues: “[...] for this reason, Spirit necessarily appears in Time, and it appears in Time just so long as it has not *grasped* its pure Notion, i.e. has not annulled Time.”⁶¹

The pure concept, appearing in time and space, annuls time; it makes time disappear. It does not only represent time in some kind of analytic fashion, deprived of any spatial and temporal conditions, but it also actively annuls time. The concept appears in time and as such, and within time and space, it actively causes time to disappear. The concept is time: the concept is the appearance of time as its own disappearance. Maybe we should even go so far and also follow the implication that it is not only time that annuls itself, but also the concept, as the concept *is* time – the concept appears as its own disappearance. What we are left with, then, is the pure appearance of a disappearance. If Hegel is the body through which the concept speaks, he also disappears with the concept.

Kenosis

How can we understand this organised disappearance, which is an appearance as disappearance? Some pages later in the chapter on absolute knowing, to which we have jumped, Hegel reminds us that spirit is neither the pure inwardness of the self-consciousness, nor immersion into the substance. Rather, he says, “Spirit is *this movement* of the Self which empties itself of itself and sinks itself into its substance, and also, as Subject, has gone out of that substance into itself, making the substance into an object and a content at the same time as it cancels this difference between objectivity and content.”⁶² It is, in other words, a movement that emerges between the one and the other, but as a movement it has already overcome the opposition between immersion and self-emptying. Spirit empties itself out and immerses itself in this way into the substance, and spirit goes from substance to subject by way of self-emptying. Thus, it comes back to itself only as a difference, in a doubled movement. Therefore, as spirit returns to

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⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 487.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 490.

itself with a difference, the actual movement of spirit is not the immersion, but it is the result of the movement of its own self-emptying: “[...] the power of Spirit lies rather in remaining the selfsame Spirit in its externalisation [...]”⁶³

The German term for ‘externalisation’ here is “*Entäußerung*”⁶⁴, and at this point we should take a look at this peculiar notion. In German, *Entäußerung* is linked to the *Äußerung*, the enunciation, and therewith cannot be separated from language and its specific movement to bring something onto the outside. But what is more, Hegel uses the word *Entäußerung*, which is Luther’s translation of the word *kenosis* in the letter of Paul to the Philippians. We might assume that Hegel is aware of this, as he uses the term several times in the description of God becoming man in the body of His Son.⁶⁵

But instead of sliding into this theological abyss, let us only emphasise that the self-emptying of the spirit, the self-emptying as its actual force, needs to be seen in a different light. Science, which comes to be at a specific point in time and space, is the form of spirit that remains “selfsame in its self-emptying,” as Hegel said. Spirit, then, in the form of science, is a shape that remains selfsame within its own movement of self-emptying. The singular point, which we might emphasise here, is that in the *Phenomenology* the notion of the *Entäußerung* is not that clearly detached from the theological notion of the *kenosis* as it might seem. For we should not forget that spirit, in the shape of science, follows on what has already been there in the form of religion. In the form of religion, spirit is already there, as a content, or put differently, in the form of representational thinking. Spirit, in the shape of the science of the concept, is nothing but the *kenosis* of what has already been there in its substance, namely spirit in the form of religion. In this lineage, it would be better to understand *Entäußerung* as *self-emptying*, as Dubilet proposes, following Pinkert.⁶⁶

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Hegel, *Phänomenologie*, p. 588.

⁶⁵ For the instances in which Hegel refers directly or indirectly to *kenosis*, as well as for a different and important take on this question, see Alex Dubilet, *The Self-Emptying Subject, Kenosis and Immanence, Medieval to Modern*, Fordham University Press, New York, NY 2018, pp. 92–147, here especially pp. 96 – 97.

⁶⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 96.

There are two elements to be found in the process of *Entäußerung*: the element of externalisation, turning something inside out, and the moment of letting go, changing and becoming other by letting go. Spirit changes by letting itself go and thus turning into the site of its own change, but spirit also externalises itself: as we saw, spirit unfolds its change in time and space. Finally, spirit enunciates itself, if we add the third implication of the *Entäußerung*.

Let us return to the appearance of Hegel, regarding whom we have seen how he disappears: within the concept that annuls time, also Hegel has to disappear. The science of the concept reaches beyond the book, it reaches beyond the phenomenal actuality of the *Phenomenology*, and within the concept the development of the concept comes to its annulation. Let us return to Hegel at the beginning of the book, to the Hegel who has not yet appeared, and of whom we only know that he will disappear. And let us return then to the proposition and its speculative moment, which unfolds itself within a proposition, because the usual opinion finds itself impeded in its attempt to understand the sentence. We saw that Hegel understands the speculative proposition to be a proposition of philosophy. Hegel admits that the speculative moment cannot take place solely within the proposition itself, in an immediate form, but it needs to be enunciated, *geäußert*: But this voice, as the voice in which it speaks, what is it other than an externalisation? And is not this voice the sound of the letting go of the regular proposition? Philosophy, then, does not express the speculative as if it were a content that could be expressed in a regular way, but philosophy creates a site at which the speculative can find its voice – which is nothing other than the externalised realisation of spirit's change.

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Hegel presents himself as the one capable of creating a site for the expression of the speculative moment of thought, and thus we would by now not only have a definition of philosophy, but also a description of Hegel's role within philosophy. The master of the site. However, any moment of the construction, of the development of spirit, will in the end be sublated within the absolute knowing, and the absolute knowing, once it appears, eradicates any form of a general description of how a certain content would have to be treated. This is to say, as the split of the concept, Hegel is a disappearing master.

An obvious problem arises here, which is taken into account by Hegel himself. The problem is: Is not any presentation of the speculative moment a presentation

that will rely on sentences in which we will find a subject and a predicate? Does not philosophy always disappear under the flux of regular propositions? In the preface, Hegel at first refutes the case of “the ordinary proof,” in which any reason or proof given demands a further proof of this proof.⁶⁷ In opposition to this, the speculative proposition, Hegel argues, is of a completely different nature.

As regards the dialectical movement itself, its element is the one Notion; it thus has a content which is, in its own self, Subject through and through. Thus no content occurs which functions as an underlying subject, nor receives its meaning as a predicate; the proposition as it stands is merely an empty form.⁶⁸

But this inscription of the speculative moment into the site of the concept does not give us an answer to the original question, namely how the speculative moment of the proposition can be presented in such a manner that it does not again disappear within the regular norms of regular propositions. The speculative difference seems to disappear, and again Hegel appears. At the dangerous moment in which the entire speculative project risks breaking apart, Hegel appears. But how? First of all, we have to see that, in a strict sense, there cannot be an answer to this question. If the speculative moment appears within ordinary propositions or in ordinary thought and needs a presentation, for it would otherwise be indistinguishable, the question has to be whether it is possible to give a presentation to this difference by the use of ordinary propositions. And as necessary and legitimate this question is, there cannot be an answer thereto. For the answer is in itself speculative, and it cannot be given within a formula, it cannot be written within the logic of the ordinary proposition. However, it seems we have somehow been able to read it, at least we attempted to think about it. Where did we read it? What did we read? – *We read Hegel*. And this is the reappearance. It is here that Hegel reappears: at the moment in which the speculative proves to be elusive, Hegel is the *form* in which it is bound and finds its site. Hegel is the speculative moment.

But ‘Hegel’ then is no longer the name of an author. Rather, Hegel’s philosophy appears in space and time, and although the site of the speculative moment is found in Hegel, Hegel is what is externalised, enunciated. Not simply within

⁶⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 40.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

us, as readers, but rather in other written and dispossessed forms, forms that apply Hegel to itself, in space and time. But as they do so, they externalise Hegel and foster Hegel's self-emptying, and thus actualise the concept of science and annul the time in which it develops. They write and are Hegel's kenosis. Marx, for example.

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Truth between Semblance and the Real¹

From the outset the relation between semblants and psychoanalysis was marked by a profound ambiguity. The birth of psychoanalysis, by introducing a new kind of knowledge, that of the unconscious, provoked a tremendous shake up of the moral and social ideals of the epoch, which Lacan in his later teaching qualified precisely as semblants in order to highlight their fictitious character in relation to what really matters to the subject: the real of jouissance and its grappling with it. The precious indications of the function of semblants as a barrier, a defence against the real of jouissance, can be found in Freud's article, "‘Civilised’ Sexual Morality", in which he brings to light the antagonism between the semblants of civilisation and the real of the drive, and its devastating repercussions: "Experience teaches us that for most people there is a limit beyond which their constitution cannot comply with the demands of civilisation. All who wish to be more noble-minded than their constitution allows fall victim to neurosis; they would have been more healthy if it could have been possible for them to be less good."²

Freud was indeed the first to identify the symptomatic value of the modes of enjoyment as a mark of civilisation's discontent. In fact, according to Freud, sexuality as such can only be conceived as a symptom of civilisation itself. While criticising the ruthlessness of the cultural demand, which involves a repression of drive-jouissance, Freud points out that the growing difficulties of the sexual relation resulting from "the domination of a civilised sexual morality" can lead only to a promotion of 'other modalities' of sexual practice: "It is not difficult to suppose that under the domination of a civilised sexual morality the health

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² Sigmund Freud, "‘Civilised’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness" (1908), trans. by J. Strachey, SE, vol. 9, p. 191.

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and efficiency of single individuals may be liable to impairment and that ultimately this injury to them, caused by the sacrifices imposed on them, may reach such a point that, by this indirect path, the cultural aim in view will be endangered as well.”³

Once the social dimension of the symptom has been established, Freud goes on to remind the psychoanalyst that he has the ethical duty not only to disregard prejudices imputable to the sexual morality of his time, i.e. to detach himself from the cultural demands that society imposes on the individual, but also to expose these ideals diffused in society through prohibitions as being nothing but semblants.

Lacan continues in this vein, taking up Freud’s idea of the intimate relation between the mode of *jouissance* and the semblants of the civilisation and the role of psychoanalysis in guiding the subject through the evolution of the semblants of civilisation since the mutation of the Other of civilisation leads to a modification of the form and usages of *jouissance*: “Psychoanalysis has played a role in the guidance of modern subjectivity, and it would not know how to support it without organising it in accordance with the movement in science that elucidates it.”⁴ Indeed, what place falls to psychoanalysis when the social Other itself strives to inscribe the modes of *jouissance*, that precisely which Freud already considered to be symptoms of civilisation, while assuring them a wholly new legitimacy, and promoting the rules instituting the norms of their integration?⁵ With the decline of the Other there is no instance to prevent “our *jouissance* going off track”, as Lacan puts it. As a consequence, “our mode of *jouissance*”, takes “from now on ... its bearings from the ‘surplus-*jouissance*’”⁶.

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To inscribe contemporary modes of *jouissance* in the current context of the social bond, that is to say in an epoch in which the figure of the Other and its ideals are declining, it is necessary to account for the substitution which has oc-

³ *Ibid.*, p 181.

⁴ Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis”, in *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink, W.W. Norton & Company, New York/London 2006, p. 235.

⁵ Éric Laurent, Jacques-Alain Miller, « L’Autre qui n’existe pas et ses comités d’éthique », *La Cause freudienne* (35/1997), pp. 3–20.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Television. A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, trans. D. Hollier, R. Krauss, and A. Michelson, W.W. Norton, New York, Longon, 1990, p. 32.

curred at the level of the instance which situates jouissance in the social bond. There are two ways in which jouissance can be situated: by setting up the agent of castration, the second way, on the contrary, involves the investment of the remainder, the stopper/plug of castration, what Lacan termed the surplus-enjoyment, *plus-de-jouir*. It is precisely at this level that Lacan's remark that "our jouissance... takes its bearings from the 'surplus-jouissance'"⁷ takes on its full value. What Lacan calls "our jouissance" is exactly the contemporary mode of enjoyment, that is to say jouissance in an epoch in which the Other does not exist, a jouissance which cannot therefore be situated by means of the agent of castration. Jouissance today is not situated by means of the ideal, the master signifier, it is not located on the side of the annulment of jouissance, rather, it is situated on the side of the surplus-jouissance as a stopper of castration. It is from such a perspective that human rights are today downgraded to the rights of the surplus-enjoyment.

What is new is that today, instead of being forbidden by the Ideal, jouissance is on the contrary commanded. What has changed is the way in which mass production, through its imperative 'Consume!', proposes jouissance as a semblance for everybody. This phenomenon which could best be described as "haunting the surplus-jouissance" creates the illusion that through the good use of the object a, the surplus-jouissance, we could achieve the complete satisfaction of desire. We can talk of the primacy of the object a over the Ideal which, in turn, is denounced as a mere semblant. The epoch of the inexistent Other is at the same time the epoch of the limitless production of semblants. Thus, it could be argued that the primacy of the surplus-jouissance goes hand in hand with the generalised "semblantification": where there is no instance to keep jouissance in check.

Thus, what were in Freud's time considered to be scandalous, new practices of perversion, are today considered to be an opportunity for the innovation of new semblants in order to inscribe all these various new modes of jouissance. Indeed, it is the new modes of jouissance that present themselves today as a condition for inventing new modes of the social bond, new fictions in Bentham's sense of the word, destined to secure the individual's right to his/her particular mode of jouissance. Hence, the invocations of semblants that organise the social bond and the sexual relation.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Paradoxically enough, psychoanalysis is not without responsibility for this disorientation of the contemporary subject in relation to jouissance since psychoanalysis has itself contributed to the undermining of ideals. Freud, like Bentham, detected behind the ideals of civilisation the modes and the forms of jouissance, in short, the presence of the libido, since, for him, the instance of the superego testifies to a paradoxical satisfaction of the drive disguised as a renouncement of satisfaction.

Yet something has radically changed, insofar as today, psychoanalysis seems to be oddly incapable of effecting a cut, a fracture in the dominant discourse and thereby of undermining contemporary moral and social semblants. On the contrary it seems to be rather a prolongation of this discourse. And it is precisely today, when psychoanalysis seems to be unable to disturb contemporary semblants, to fracture the dominant ideological discourse, that the semblant and its opposite, the real, is the decisive issue. This is why, despite the fact that nothing appears to stop the expansion of the empire of semblants, psychoanalysis has to maintain the real as its compass. But in order to succeed in it, psychoanalysis has to rediscover once more as its proper place the interval between the real and the semblant. Thus, the present interrogation of the semblant stems from the urgency of advancing a new, i.e. 'realist' orientation of psychoanalysis, in an era in which the Other does not exist. Indeed, in an epoch in which the figure of the Other and its ideals are declining, the question of the nature and the use of semblants in psychoanalysis looms higher than ever in the history of psychoanalysis.

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The semblant is a term forged by Lacan in the last period of his teaching in order to rework the relation between the symbolic and the real. The introduction of the semblant into psychoanalysis charts a moment of inversion in Lacan's teaching from Lacan's "structuralist phase" to his later teaching centred on the primacy of the real. From the perspective of this shift, the status of the signifier is radically modified: situated within the category of the semblant, the signifier instead of being perceived as a means to secure access to the real, is rather envisaged in terms of a defence against the real. It is this downgrading of the signifier from the structuring principle to the status of a mere semblance that we will be concerned with in this contribution.

Although the semblant is relevant to numerous contemporary discourses, it is only in psychoanalysis that this term was raised to the level of concept when Lacan, in the course of his elaboration of the psychoanalytic discourse, took up this question to highlight the relation that exists between the signifier and jouissance. And to a certain extent, the semblant is a problem specific to psychoanalysis.

There is indeed a special problem with the semblant in psychoanalysis. Omnipresent, unsettling, yet unresolved, the problem of the semblant comes to the fore at critical moments in the history of psychoanalysis, thereby marking turning points at which the orientation of psychoanalysis is at stake. Thus, Freud himself already tried to circumscribe the problem of the semblant by claiming that “there are no indications of reality in the unconscious, so that one cannot distinguish between truth and fictions cathected with affect”⁸. Thus stumbling across what could be termed a primordial deceitfulness at the level of the unconscious, Freud nevertheless refused to consider the distinction between truth and fiction as an operational conceptual opposition in psychoanalysis, thereby indicating that another dimension, that namely what Lacan later names the real of jouissance, is to be taken as compass to orient oneself in the unconscious swarming with semblants. One is almost tempted to say that the price to be paid for the orientation of psychoanalysis towards the real is the downgrading of the concept of truth.

Lacan, likewise, encounters the problem of the semblant at a crucial moment of his teaching, in particular in his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, in which he sets out to forge new conceptual tools to treat the real at stake in the analytical experience. More particularly, Lacan broaches the question of semblants at a point in his teaching at which he seems to be turning away from the problematic of truth, that is to say, from that problematic which previously constituted the focal point of psychoanalysis and its specificity in relation to the discourse of science. Indeed, it is under the guise of fiction, a concept borrowed from Bentham, that Lacan first tackles the question of the semblant. The task is to understand, Lacan insists, that what he means by fiction, is not to be confused with its commonly accepted sense: illusion. “Fictitious is not”, he claims,

⁸ Freud's letter to Fliess, dated 21st September 1897, *Sigmund Freud Briefe 1873–1939*, S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1968.

“in effect, in its essence that which deceives, but is precisely what I call the symbolic”⁹. Moreover, the very fact that the fiction is situated by Lacan in the symbolic order involves the displacement of the notion of truth: it is not enough to state with Freud that the opposition between fiction and truth is untenable since truth itself has the structure of fiction.¹⁰

One might say that, from the outset, the semblant is conceived by Lacan as a paradox of the relation between the symbolic and the real. In this respect, it is interesting to note that although both French terms, ‘*semblant*’ (semblance) and ‘*semblable*’ (similar), have the same root: the Latin word *similes*, Lacan’s category of semblance is not a new name for the imaginary. On the contrary, semblance, as conceived by Lacan, is intended to designate that which, coming from the symbolic, is directed towards the real. This is precisely what characterises Bentham’s fictions. Indeed, as a fact of language, made of nothing but the signifier, Bentham’s legal fictions are nonetheless capable of distributing and modifying pleasures and pains, thereby affecting the body. Thus, what held Lacan’s attention in reading Bentham’s *Theory of Fictions* was precisely that something which is ultimately an apparatus of language, since fictions owe their existence to language alone, this being properly Bentham’s definition of fictions, is capable of inflicting pain or provoking satisfaction that can only be experienced in the body. It appears as if with Bentham’s fictions Lacan found at last a missing link, a quilting point between the signifier and jouissance. This is why in Seminar XX, that is to say in a period of his teaching in which the notion of the semblant is well established, he can still remark, in referring expressly to the Benthamite fictions, that the whole purpose in using “the old words” is in their ability to capture jouissance.¹¹

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There is yet another aspect to the Benthamite fiction that Lacan brought to light, although rather late in the day, in his seminar *D’un Autre à l’autre*, to be precise. In Lacan’s reading, what sets apart Bentham’s approach to fictions in his *Theory of Fictions* from the usual understanding of this term is that Bentham with

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. D. Porter, Tavistock/Routledge, London 1992, p. 12.

¹⁰ “‘Fictitious’ means ‘fictive’ but, as I have already explained to you, in the sense that every truth has the structure of fiction.” *Ibid.*

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX: Encore*, trans. B. Fink, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1998, p. 58.

remarkable lucidity reveals how all human institutions have as their ultimate finality *jouissance*. Hence by openly stating that fictions are nothing but an artificial device, “a contrivance”, to use Bentham’s proper term, designed to provoke either pain or pleasure, Bentham brings into question all human institutions, in so far as they are an apparatus destined to regulate the modes of *jouissance* by dressing them up in virtues of the useful and the good.¹² And it is precisely to the extent that the human institutions are recognised as semblants, i.e. as the means and the modes of *jouissance*, that Bentham’s concept of fictions can be seen as a means of denouncing the moral and social ideals of the epoch, of exposing them as being nothing but semblance, a make-believe. In other words, what is scandalous about the Benthamite conception of fictions is precisely this hardly concealed cynicism reminding us of the primacy of *jouissance*. Indeed, unlike the rest of human institutions, in order to be operational Bentham’s fictions can do without the masquerade, more precisely, without the belief in moral or cultural ideals. From the perspective of Bentham’s cynicism, a crucial feature of semblants is thus brought to light: the constitutive role of belief. Broadly speaking, the semblant is present in any form of belief. So if semblants are destined to cover up the economy of *jouissance*, they can only succeed in their task if we believe in them, that is to say, if we take their make-believe at face value. With Bentham’s fictions, on the contrary, we are dealing with a semblant which openly declares that it is nothing but a make-believe. Bentham’s fiction is then a paradox of semblance, a paradox of lying truly.

From the moment fictions are conceived by Lacan as the very means with which to modify the subject’s relation to *jouissance*, his whole elaboration of the analytical practice changes. The lesson to be drawn from Bentham’s cynical use of fictions is the following: If the fiction is in itself, strictly speaking, a fallacy, a make-believe, a semblance, yet a semblance which presents itself as semblance, hence, a reflexive semblance, this means that it is possible to use fictions in order to attain the real without believing in them. As such, the fiction is capable not only of touching the real but also of denouncing, exposing semblants disguised as moral virtues. And it is precisely in this double capacity of a semblant hostile to semblants, if we may put it so, which is nevertheless able to attain the real, that the question of the semblants is posed to Lacan first of all as the question of how to put semblants to good use. Indeed, what use is to be made of semblants

¹² Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre XVI, D’un Autre à l’autre*, Seuil, Paris 2006, p. 190.

in psychoanalysis is of paramount importance to Lacan once it is admitted that fictions are in themselves indifferent to either “good use” or “abuse”. Actually, it is for that very reason that Bentham sets out to replace the existing unjust legal fictions, which profit the shrewd and powerful, with a system of fictions which would assure the maximising of pleasure and minimising of pain for the society as a whole. Yet the question of know-how with fictions, as a symbolic apparatus destined to intervene in the real of the body, demands a radical reorientation of psychoanalysis in which the role of the structuring principle is attributed to the opposition between the real and semblants.

We can see now how Lacan’s redeployment of Bentham’s concept of fiction made it possible for the real at issue in psychoanalysis, the real of jouissance, to emerge as such. In view of this shift in Lacan’s teaching which defines psychoanalysis not in its relation to truth but in its relation to the real, a shift which coincides with his elaboration of the notion of the fiction, it may appear odd that the notion of the semblant did not find what might be called its proper place until the seventies, as testified by the title of the seminar which was intended to specifically address the issue of the semblant: *D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant* (A Discourse Which Would Not Be of Semblant).

There is one further consideration about the Lacanian concept of the semblant that should be mentioned. The fact that this notion, which could truly serve us as a key to Lacan’s later teaching, did not receive the attention it deserves until recently, can be attributed in large part to the circumstance that the seminar in which the problem of the semblant is discussed, *A Discourse Which Would Not Be of Semblant*, occupies a transitional place between Seminar XVII, *On the Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, and Seminar XX, *Encore*. Unlike the seminar of the semblant, these two landmark seminars which discuss two issues of general interest, power and sexual difference, have come to take up a prominent place in contemporary debate across an impressive range of disciplines. Consequently, the semblant as a key concept which marks a momentous shift in Lacan’s teaching from the symbolic to the real as a focal point of psychoanalysis has passed largely unnoticed.

As has already been pointed out,¹³ at the beginning Lacan used both terms, ‘semblant’ and ‘fiction’, practically as synonyms. To account for this equivalence of both terms we propose the following hypothesis: it is because Lacan grasps the specificity of the function of the semblant, regardless of the term used in the knot it effects between the symbolic and the real, that ‘semblant’ and ‘fiction’ are in Lacan’s view exchangeable. Nevertheless, in the seventies, the term ‘fiction’ practically disappears from Lacan’s vocabulary. One reason why he gives up the notion of the fiction in the end lies no doubt in the fact that the concept of the fiction is too restrictive: whereas the fiction is strictly speaking language dependent, the semblant, insofar as it exists in nature, does not owe its existence to language. Actually, all the examples used by Lacan to illustrate the notion of the semblant in his seminar *D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, are exactly non-discursive semblants, semblants in nature, such as rainbow, thunder, and meteors.¹⁴ This very fact indicates that the concept of the semblant, while partly overlapping with that of the fiction, is nonetheless irreducible to it. Here, one finds a shift in Lacan’s theory of the semblant and a break with the Benthamite paradigm. While one of our aims is to briefly outline the development of the Lacanain concept of the semblant, we also wish to draw attention to some difficulties that highlight the ambiguous status that the semblant has in psychoanalysis. Indeed, in an epoch in which the figure of the Other and its ideals are declining, this question of the nature and the use of semblants in psychoanalysis looms higher than ever in the history of psychoanalysis. But to what function exactly, one might wish to ask, does this notion of the semblant respond in the psychoanalytic discourse?

It should be noted, however, that ‘semblant’, as a term, may well have been a late entry into Lacan’s vocabulary, that which appears to be essential in the question of the semblant: the articulation between two radically heterogeneous if not antinomic registers, the symbolic and the real, is, on the contrary, a persistent problem throughout his teaching. As a matter of fact, Lacan never stopped inventing new terms destined to hold together that which does not hold together. Jouissance and the signifier. In the course of his teaching, he explored the

¹³ The genesis of Lacan’s notion of the semblant has been outlined by P.-G. Gueguen in a session of the 17 December 1997 during J.-A. Miller’s course “Le partenaire-symptôme,” 1997–98.

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre XVIII : D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, Seuil, Paris 2006.

different ways of capturing *jouissance* via the signifier. Starting with the phallus, also designated as the signifier of *jouissance*, Lacan inaugurates an extraordinary series of terms that replace one another in this function of the anchoring point, the nodal linkage between the symbolic and the real: the-Name-of-the-Father, the master signifier and finally the object *a*. Each of these terms will come, in the course of Lacan's teaching, to fulfil the quilting function, provided that it responds to the structurally necessary demand of building a bridge between two antinomic instances: the signifier and *jouissance*. On the other hand, the very fact that Lacan invented a new category, that of the *semblant*, and introduced it into psychoanalysis, along with his major categories of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary, testifies to the fact all these various attempts at solving the problem of the disharmonic relation between the real and the symbolic, in the final analysis, the relation of the subject of the signifier and the real of *jouissance*, proved to be unsatisfactory.

Thus, considered in retrospect, it is perhaps no accident that Lacan raised the thorny question of the *semblant* in the wake of his seminar on *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. The elaboration of the four discourses is for Lacan an opportunity to revisit his initial departure point: the disjunction between the signifier and *jouissance*, in such a way that behind the overt antithesis between signifier and *jouissance*, their clandestine solidarity is revealed.

In this seminar Lacan namely argues that discourse is a structure which is able to subsist due to certain fundamental relations that would not be able to be maintained without language.¹⁵ The distinction between discourse and speech, the latter being always more or less occasional, is crucial here insofar as it translates, at the level of language, the distinction between variable and invariable. Indeed, by opposing discourse and speech, Lacan clearly aims at situating discourse on the side of that which remains invariable, which remains the same, untouched by what is meant or said of it. One is almost tempted to say that discourse, to the extent that it is defined as a structure, is an instance of the real in language. Indeed, Lacan's theory of the four discourses is grounded in an idea which traverses the whole of his teaching, namely that for psychoanalysis, just like for science, there should be some symbolic in the real. If psychoanalytic

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¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. R. Grigg, W.W. Norton & Company, New York/London 2007, p. 13.

theory has for its object the unconscious, then it has as its charge the task of demonstrating that this peculiar kind of knowledge which cannot be assigned to an 'I', keeps returning to the same place, i.e. is situated in the real. Clearly, mathematical writing provides a model in this regard insofar as Lacan indicates that there is discourse in the real, that there are formulae, which the subject obeys without knowing it. It is from such a perspective that Lacan states that discourse should be taken as a social bond, and sets out to articulate the four distinct discourses in order to show what distinguishes psychoanalysis qua social bond from other discourses.

The structure of discourse itself is determined on the basis of the dominant position of the master signifier, S_1 , in the master's discourse since the master discourse is that discourse from which all the other discourses are derived. The master's discourse is, in effect, constructed as an elementary matrix of language that is the condition for the unconscious: one signifier, S_1 , represents the subject (placed under the bar) for another signifier, the product of this structure is its waste product, that which drops out: the *objet a*, an incalculable, inassimilable remainder of jouissance termed by Lacan the *plus-de-jouir*, surplus enjoyment which the system cannot absorb. By occupying the place of the agent in a given discourse, any of these four terms, S , S_1 , S_2 , and *a*, reveals at the same time its true character of the semblant. What Lacan called the structure of discourse gives us already a signifying structure that includes as one of its elements something which is not a signifier, a disparate element: the object *a*, a paradoxical symbol which, without being a signifier, obeys the laws of the signifier, interrelating with other signifiers: S_1 , the master signifier, S , the divided subject, S_2 , knowledge. In the analyst's discourse the psychoanalyst is positioned precisely in the place of the object *a* as the surplus-jouissance. In the four discourses, Lacan reverses the formula of fantasy, the barred subject and the object *a*, in order to inscribe the object *a*, in the analyst's discourse, in the place of agent, thus showing that the object *a* functions there as a signifier.

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Psychoanalysis is based on the assumption that the treatment of the real, more specifically, the real of jouissance, by the signifier is only possible within the framework of discourse. Not just any discourse, of course, but that which, like Freud's "maintains itself as close as possible to what refers to *jouissance*".¹⁶ In

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

other words, the pivotal point in the analyst's discourse is the relation between the signifier and jouissance. It is for that reason that, according to Lacan, the discourse that brings the other three to light is the analyst's discourse. Indeed, from the perspective of the relation between the signifier and jouissance, the task of the analyst's discourse is to expose the surreptitious alliance between the signifier and jouissance as constitutive of any social bond. Lacan's definition of discourse as a social bond can thus be understood also in the sense that it is a bond between the signifier and jouissance. From such a perspective, the analytic discourse can then be seen as a specific apparatus destined to uncover how instead of being a defence against jouissance, the signifier appears to be the condition of its possibility, moreover, an apparatus that produces jouissance.

Before the signifier could be situated in the order of the semblant, it was therefore necessary for Lacan to expose the duplicity of the signifier: the signifier which was initially defined by Lacan through the exclusion of jouissance, a barrier against jouissance, is revealed to be an apparatus of jouissance.¹⁷ Indeed there is a dialectic of the lack and the supplement at work in the relation between the signifier and jouissance. On one hand, the signifier involves the loss of jouissance, its annulment. On the other, however, this very loss, as effect of the signifier responds to the supplement of jouissance termed by Lacan as the object *a*, the surplus-jouissance. Thus it could be said that the loss of jouissance produced through the signifier is the condition of the possibility of repetition, encore, once more, again and again, and it is precisely through this repetition that a surplus is produced. Hence, the lesson to be drawn from the seminar *On the Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, is that the loss of jouissance and the surplus-jouissance, the *plus-de-jouir*, are both produced through the functioning of the signifier. Indeed, what is seen from one perspective as a loss of jouissance is seen from another as the production of a surplus. The signifying articulation thus appears to be an apparatus in which a loss, the minus, is converted into a gain, the plus. It is from such a perspective according to which the loss of jouissance produced through the functioning of the signifier is converted into the surplus-jouissance, the *plus-de-jouir*, that it could be argued that Seminar XVII, in a sense, anticipates the seminar *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*.

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¹⁷ See Jacques-Alain Miller, "Equivalence Between the Other and the Symptom", *Psychoanalytical Notebooks* (12/2004), p. 12.

The very fact that Lacan invented this category after the deployment of the four discourses as the foundation of any possible social bond signals that a necessary step in the genesis of the Lacanian concept of the semblant was precisely the uncovering of the solidarity between the signifier and jouissance, a solidarity in which the social bond as such is grounded. Thus, in following the construction of the discourses we can see that the social bond as such concerns not only the signifier but also jouissance.

We will argue that this inversion of perspective is inscribed in the very logic of permutation which enables the passage from one discourse to another. What is crucial in this respect is the relationship between the master discourse and the analyst's discourse, since, as indicated by the title of the seminar, the master's discourse is the reversal or the other side of the analytic discourse. While the master's discourse "has only one counterpoint, the analytic discourse"¹⁸, as Lacan states, their relationship is rather intricate. On the one hand, the master's discourse is defined as the cause of the analyst's discourse, since, as Lacan claims, "analytic practice is, properly speaking, initiated by this master's discourse"¹⁹. On the other hand however it is remarkable, as Lacan himself concedes, that "it is fairly curious that what [the analyst's discourse] produces is nothing other than the master's discourse, since it is S_1 which comes to occupy the place of production", but in saying that Lacan seems to be opening up the possibility that "perhaps it's from the analyst's discourse that there can emerge another style of master signifier."²⁰ It could then be said that, in a general way, the four discourses are interrelated insofar as the term produced as a waste by one discourse migrates to the place of the agent in another discourse.

In the analyst's discourse, the place in the upper left-hand corner of Lacan's quadripartite structure of the discourse qua social link, the place of the agent, is attributed to the psychoanalyst in so far as s/he assumes the function of the objet *a*, i.e. the place of the *plus-de-jour*, surplus jouissance. This particular property of the analyst's discourse singles out the place of agent as equivalent to the semblant. Indeed, semblant is the name by which Lacan designates this place of the agent or 'dominant' place, as he calls it, in all four discourses. For Lacan

¹⁸ Lacan, *The Seminar Jacques Lacan, book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, p. 100.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

this brings the question of semblance, that is to say, the question of the instance occupying the place of agent, the dominant place. We will address this question by following Lacan's indications in his seminar entitled *Encore*: "Before the semblance, on which, in effect, everything is based and springs back in fantasy, a strict distinction must be made between the imaginary and the real. It must not be thought that we ourselves in any way serve as a basis for the semblance. We are not even semblance. We are, on occasion, that which can occupy that place, and allow what to reign there? Object a."²¹

In this quotation Lacan revisits his own theory of the four discourses, questioning, in particular, that there is a link between semblance and the place that the psychoanalyst occupies in the matheme of the analyst's discourse. More precisely, he notes the fact that in this construction of the four discourses, the semblant is already slipping in. It is precisely from this perspective, according to which, as speaking beings, we are subjects, condemned even, to semblance, that Lacan revisits his theory of the four discourses, in showing that the analyst, by positioning himself or herself as *objet a* in the place of the agent, the dominant place, occupies the place of semblance.

While, strictly speaking, the analyst's discourse can not be considered to be a discourse that is not of the semblant, its privilege consists nevertheless in its ability to perceive the semblant for what it is: precisely a semblant. The very fact that in the analyst's discourse the analyst is situated in the place of the agent, permits it, by using the very mechanism of the production of the social bond, i.e. through this peculiar mode of mimicking the structure of the social bond which is sustained only by virtue of the make-believe situated in the place of the agent, to reveal the semblant itself. By exposing the semblant as a deceitful fiction, the analyst's discourse is for that reason able to subvert the make-believe of the social bond that is present in the other three discourses, the master's, the hysteric's and the university discourse.

It is from such a perspective that Lacan himself underlined the fictional foundation of psychoanalysis: paradoxically one should pay respect to the psychoanal-

²¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore, or On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. B. Fink, W.W. Norton & Company, New York/London, 1998, p. 95.

ysis of our time, he said, in so far as it “is a discipline which produces itself only through the semblant. The latter in it is denuded to the point that it unsettles the semblants which support religion, magic, piety, all that which conceals the economy of jouissance”.²² This remark assumes its full value on the condition that one treats the semblant through the psychoanalytic discourse.²³

The very promotion of the social bond implies for Lacan the radicalisation of the relation between the real and the semblant. Indeed the point of departure of the Lacanian concept of discourse is the steady erosion of the Other and its ideals. If the question of the real was encountered so acutely by Lacan in his Seminar XVII, it is because, from the perspective of the inexistence of the Other, from a perspective in which the Other with its ideals is downgraded to the status of the semblant, the real itself seems to vacillate. Indeed, what remains of the real if the Other is not real, if it has the structure of a fiction? Actually, the very idea of the four discourses, four mathemes, four discursive structures, is inspired by the knowledge in the real that the discourse of science intranscribes in mathematical formulae. In a way, the four discourses are Lacan’s desperate attempt at restoring the Other – under the guise of the discourse structure. Just as for science there is a knowledge in the real, there are discourse structures in the real for psychoanalysis. Lacan’s concept of discourse could then be considered to be a new edition of the Other as a structure in the real.

Of course, the Other in this new edition is not to be confused with the master signifier. The Other may well be concentrated in the place of the master signifier, but it could also be situated in the place of knowledge, that of product, in short, it would be more appropriate to situate knowledge at the level of the discourse as such. It is the structure of the discourse which can now be identified with the Other. Only in this sense can Lacan maintain in his seminar *Encore* that “the notion of discourse should be taken as a social link, founded on language.”²⁴ In other words, the Other, from the perspective of the four discourses, is not an instance that can be isolated, rather it is the very knot of all four instances. It is an attempt at maintaining the function of the quilting point without it being

²² Jacques Lacan, « Discours à l’École Freudienne de Paris » in *Autres écrits*, Seuil, Paris 2001, pp. 280–281.

²³ Jacques Lacan, « L’Étourdit » in *Autres écrits*, pp. 449–495.

²⁴ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore*, p. 17.

assigned to a particular instance. In this sense, the four discourses as a figure of the Other already announce the Borromean knot insofar as the Borromean knot is a solution proposed by Lacan to show how three heterogeneous orders the imaginary order of meaning, the symbolic order of knowledge and the real order of jouissance, hold together.

The four discourses can then be perceived as a desperate attempt to elevate psychoanalysis to the level of science. The idea according to which the structures of discourse are inscribed in the real is an ingenious invention which permits psychoanalysis to determine the specificity of the real that is at the core of its experience, and at the same time to avoid the snares of contemporary relativism according to which everything is semblant. The construction of the four discourses is an operation comparable to Galileo's and Newton's founding gesture of science, a gesture which consists in the strict separation of the real from the semblant. In other words, the four discourses are Lacan's attempt at circumscribing the place of the real in psychoanalysis while limiting the imperialism of semblants. And just like the knowledge in science that not only "reads", determines, deciphers the knowledge in the real by writing it down in mathematical formulae in order to transform it, psychoanalysis also presumes to be able to determine the real it deals with and to find a way to transform it.

The opposition of the real and semblance is therefore a crucial step in the development of Lacan's teaching: it is a radicalisation of the opposition introduced in his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* between the real on one hand and the symbolic and the imaginary on the other, so that it could be said that, from the point of view of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary appear to be equivalent. Yet this opposition between the real and the semblant became a structuring opposition only once Lacan accomplished the construction of the four discourses.

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Contrary to what one might believe – guided solely by the title which is rather equivocal since it evokes the possibility of a discourse that would not be a semblant – the central issue in the seminar *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant* is not the elaboration of a discourse that would not be a semblant, with the surreptitious implication that psychoanalysis might be, together with science, this discourse. On the contrary, from the beginning of this seminar, Lacan states in no uncertain terms that insofar as the signifier itself is the sem-

blant, all that belongs to the discursive order necessarily falls under the rubric of the semblant.²⁵ In other words, the semblant is a category inherent to the discourse as such.

Having established that in discourse the semblant is irreducible and that, consequently, there is no discourse that is not of semblant, the discourse of psychoanalysis being no exception, Lacan moves on to broach the question which is undoubtedly the crucial issue around which the major part of Seminar XVIII revolves, namely: once the constitutive lack, absence, the lack of the discourse of the real is admitted, how the problem of holding together the symbolic and the real, two heterogeneous registers, while maintaining their irreducible heterogeneity, be solved.

This constitutive lack of the discourse of the real is what leads Lacan to deploy a new category and to pose the question of knowing what is the real from a new perspective. If the question of the real poses itself to Lacan so persistently in the final period of his teaching, this is precisely because the real proper to the analytic experience is now considered to be resisting signifierisation, i.e. its conversion into the symbolic. In view of such a radicalised conception of the real, both, the imaginary and the symbolic, appear as a mere make-believe. This question of the real as being both, outside the imaginary and the symbolic, prompts Lacan to entertain the hope of a psychoanalysis which would not be founded on semblant. By naming his seminar consecrated to the question of the semblant “*Of a Discourse Which Would Not Be of Semblant*”, Lacan seems to be nourishing, encouraging the mere hope of the possible elaboration of a discourse that would not be reducible to a mere semblant, like the rest of them, but would rather be a discourse of the real. To the extent that since the symbolic is now seen to be downgraded to the order of semblant, this seminar which evokes the possibility of a discourse which would take its departure point from the real thus signifies a turning point, a pivoting of perspectives in Lacan’s teaching insofar as, at the outset, Lacan proposed to ground psychoanalysis as a discourse on the symbolic. It is at this point in Lacan’s later teaching, at which psychoanalysis is ordered by the relations of the semblant and the real, that a large part of Lacan’s theorisation which had been deployed in the register of the symbolic, appears to be reduced to the mere status of semblance: *sicut palea*.

²⁵ Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre XVIII: D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, p. 14.

In a sense it is only from the perspective of the semblant that one can realise that what creates an impasse here is that, actually, the cleavage between the signifier and jouissance was surreptitiously created by Lacan's proper definition of the subject. Conceived in terms of the signifier – the subject is what one signifier represents for another signifier – the Lacanian subject is essentially empty, dead, devoid of “enjoying substance”, severed from jouissance. The outcome of this irreducible disjunction between the subject of the signifier and the real of jouissance entails the coupling of the empty subject with the remainder of jouissance: the object *a*. With the object *a* as an answer to the lack of signifier, Lacan inscribed in what he called the four discourses a real that is within the reach of the subject of the signifier.

In Seminar XVIII Lacan started to bring into question the union of the symbolic and the real, and by so doing he proposed at the same to reconsider psychoanalysis and its practice from a different perspective: that of the disjunction of the symbolic and the real, from a rapport of the exteriority between the two, ultimately, from their non-rapport. From this perspective of non-rapport Lacan's seminar *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant* marks a crucial turning point at which the future orientation of psychoanalysis is at stake. Hence, despite Lacan's usual style of self-assurance and confidence, this seminar is nevertheless a seminar of hesitation as regards the possible ways of overcoming the impasse implied in the non-rapport between the signifier and jouissance. In fact, the question of a new departure point involving a radical inversion of perspectives plays across the whole surface of this seminar. The deployment of the notion of the semblant throughout this seminar allows it to gather its consistency, while at the same time providing the points of vacillation and resistance necessary for it to establish the themes that he pursues in the final period of his teaching. Lacan tentatively proposes various solutions to the problem that the articulation of registers which are absolutely heterogeneous poses, while avoiding at the same time the previously privileged device: the quilting point.

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Thus, by taking up the question of the semblant in its relation to the real, Lacan's Seminar XVIII is therefore, from the beginning, quite radically a question of defining a new type of articulation separating jouissance and the signifying articulation. In the context of Lacan's project thus outlined, the theory of semblants, insofar as it breaks with his previous assertion of the primacy of the symbolic, can be perceived as a “vanishing mediator”, a necessary step on the path to the

final solution: the Borromean knot, this being exactly the perspective in which all three registers, the symbolic, the imaginary and the real are considered to be independent and autonomous registers, absolutely equivalent at the level of the knot. Lacan's project thus becomes that of separating the three orders, while at the same time exploring many different ways in which it is possible to produce a new kind of knotting at the level of *jouissance*. The issue here is of course that of *jouissance* and the different ways in which it is elaborated at the level of the knot. In fact, we would argue that it is above all in order to explore this transformative aspect of knotting that Lacan explores *jouissance* as an enigma which drills a hole in sense. It is obvious that such a project has many consequences for the way in which psychoanalysis tries to situate the real from the perspective of the outside-sense. But it is also from this perspective that the notion of the *semblant* assumes its full value.

Lacan's theory of the *semblant* clearly follows a certain dynamic, a logic of its own. In Seminar XVIII, we can witness the displacement of this concept in relation to the quilting point. With his elaboration of the notion of the *semblant* Lacan throws precisely the quilting function of the signifier into relief. And it is by redefining what is at stake in this function that Lacan comes to effect, by replacing the term 'fiction' with that of 'semblant' a singular devaluation, the downgrading of the term whose role is precisely to pin down the real to the symbolic.

The notion of the *semblant*, under the guise of the fiction, was initially introduced by Lacan into psychoanalysis as an instance designed to situate the real in the symbolic, (which is to say, to make the real obey the rules of the signifier), in his later teaching, the same instances that were previously considered to secure access to the real, (the phallus, the master signifier, the Name-of-the-Father, the Other, the object *a*), and were as such valorised, now, under a new light, appeared to be the very obstacle on the path to the real, and were consequently downgraded to the status of semblance. In fact, the substitution of the term 'fiction' by 'semblant', to the extent that it implies a certain downgrading of the instance designated as *semblant*, involves at the same time a shift of paradigms.

In this regard, it is perhaps not for no reason that Lacan, starting with Seminar XVIII, preferred the term 'semblant' to that of 'fiction'. However, this final choice cannot be justified by saying that the *semblant*, as a concept, is broader and can include the fiction, neither is it enough to insist on a distinction between

discursive and non-discursive semblants, semblants in nature, since Lacan is primarily interested in discursive semblants. On the contrary, what justifies the substitution is Lacan's re-examination of the nature of the semblant and the function attributed to it. Thus one could say that it is the inversion of perspective which makes Lacan downgrade the semblant. More particularly, an instance is denounced as semblant insofar as it responds to the function of the quilting point. What downgrades the semblant is precisely its function. From this inversed perspective which takes as its departure point the non-rapport of the symbolic and the real, all these instances of the quilting point are seen now as being but a mere make-believe, a cover-up.

Indeed, the semblant is essentially a make-believe: by pinning down the imaginary, the signifier which operates the quilting makes us believe that it is the thing itself. In other words, the semblant is a symbolic instance which, by operating the quilting, makes us believe that it is the other of the symbolic, namely the real. This is why, for Lacan, the father is by definition a semblance. The father namely only exists in the form of the signifier and it exists so long as this signifier, the Name-of-the-Father, produces certain effects. The phallus, from this view, is also seen as a semblant since, strictly speaking, it is but a supporting evidence for the semblance of the father. And there is yet another, a third figure of the semblant, more delicate than the other two, the object *a*, a name invented by Lacan to designate the remainder of jouissance which is not converted into the signifier, which remains outside the signifier's operation of quilting. If the object *a*, from this perspective, is yet another name for the semblant, alongside the father and the phallus, this is because it is strategically positioned at a place where instead of the expected jouissance one only encounters its loss. The object *a* is the semblant as this operator effecting the conversion of the loss of jouissance, its lack, into a surplus, a surplus which, curiously is not to be found on the side of the real jouissance, but on the side of the symbolic. Hence the equivalence, established by Lacan, between the jouissance under the guise of the *plus-de-jouir*, and the *sens-joui* [enjoy-meant], the only jouissance that a speaking being can attain is precisely a *sens-joui*.

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In fact, we might say that with the quilting point thus exposed, the affinity of the semblant to the hole, the void, is also brought to light. From such a perspective, all these various names of the quilting point have something in common: their only function is to veil, to cover up, with their flimsy materiality, a hole, a void

in the structure. Indeed, we would argue that there is a structural, constitutive relation between the semblant and the hole. The question of the semblant is essentially the question of the relation between void and veil. By following J.A. Miller, we could propose the following succinct definition of the semblant: the semblant is a mask of nothing.²⁶ As a matter of fact, the semblant is only encountered there where something is expected one encounters a hole, a void, an emptiness, an absence. The function of the semblant is then no other than to cover up, by its very presence, the empty place of an instance which is constitutively lacking. But in so doing the semblant at the same time reveals that this instance ex-sists only through this empty place.

In this regard psychoanalysis seems to be inverting Leibniz's famous question: instead of asking why there is something rather than nothing, the question with which psychoanalysis is preoccupied is rather: why is only a void, absence, emptiness encountered there where something is expected? All semblants deployed by Lacan (from the phallus to the Other and Woman) are as many deceitful answers to this question. Semblants, in the final period of Lacan's teaching, are therefore all the instances designed to veil, to mask the nothing. Thus, the phallus is an instance covering up the castration, the Name-of-the-Father can be considered to be a mask concealing the hole in the Other of language, and finally Woman is nothing but a veil to disguise that there is no such a thing as a sexual relation. The semblant can then be designed as an envelope of nothing, an envelope which conceals precisely that behind the semblant there is nothing but the void.

Thus, it is precisely in throwing into relief the dialectics of void and veil that the concept of the quilting point comes undone. This conveys a profound switch in the line of Lacan's elaboration of the relation between the symbolic and the real which implies a renouncement of any kind of quilting point. In fact, this question of the articulation between the symbolic and the real, while giving up the operation of quilting these two orders, is one which offers a guiding thread through Lacan's seminar *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*. Indeed, we would argue that it is precisely in order to overcome the impasse left over at the end of his seminar on the four discourses in which the revolving circle of the

²⁶ Jacques-Alain Miller, "Of Semblants in the Relation Between Sexes", in *Psychoanalytical Notebooks*, (3/1999), p.10.

four discourses leads to a somewhat unexpected and certainly unwanted conclusion: if there is no discourse which is not of semblant, this only means that any attempt at converting the real into the signifier brings about the emergence of the semblant. By paraphrasing Miller, one could thus say: what is signifierised is by the same token 'semblentified'.

Certainly, taking seriously the real as a compass for psychoanalysis entails at the same time pushing psychoanalysis itself to its limits: not only beyond the Name-of-the-Father, that semblant which, according to Freud, represents the unsurpassable horizon for psychoanalysis, but even further: beyond the Freudian unconscious itself. One is almost tempted to say that the price to be paid for the orientation of psychoanalysis towards the real is the downgrading of the concept of the unconscious. From the perspective of the real, as has been underlined by Jacques-Alain Miller, "the unconscious itself appears as a response made to the real, at the level of the semblant, a response to the hole in the real, [due to the fact that there is no sexual relation] a response which has to do with the vain effort to make the absence of sexual programming signify at the level of the real".²⁷ One of the unexpected, indeed, paradoxical, consequences of such a radical position regarding the real, was that this reference to the real appears as a problematic as well as a problematising reference in Lacan. At the end of his teaching, Lacan even suggests that the status of the real is that of the symptom, a deduction made from the unconscious, that is to say, that the notion of the real, in the last analysis, is nothing more than his invention. However, if the question of the real poses itself to Lacan so persistently in the final period of his teaching, this is precisely because the real proper to the analytic experience is now considered to be resisting signifierisation, i.e. its conversion into the symbolic.

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This is why Lacan in the *Liturattere*, the published part of the Seminar XVIII, proposes as a possible solution for holding together that which does not hold together a new concept, that of the littoral. To propose the littoral as a solution consists in nothing other than to propose the void itself as the mediator, the "void-median", as Lacan calls it. The operation of the "void-median" or the littoral is the inverse of the quilting operation since, with the littoral, the void holds together by keeping the heterogeneous instances apart. "... between knowledge

²⁷ Jacques-Alain Miller, unpublished cours entitled *L'expérience du réel dans la cure analytique*, lesson of the 25 November 1998.

and jouissance, there is a littoral that only turns towards the literal on condition that this turn may be taken likewise at any instance.”²⁸ Littoral, by activating the void itself as a mediator is certainly a way of relating to jouissance which can do without the semblant. On the other hand, when Lacan posed a rhetorical question: “Is it possible for the littoral to constitute such a discourse that is characterised by not being issued from the semblant?”²⁹ his answer is clearly no. The littoral can only testify to the fracture of which it is itself an effect. But it is unable to effect the cut. Only a discourse can produce a cut. One can see in what sense the theory of semblants constitutes a clearing gesture: indeed, it is only after bringing into question any instance of quilting that something as a littoral can be established, an empty plane in which something new can be inscribed. In the seminar *D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant* Lacan seems to be still harbouring the hope of writing the formula of the sexual relation, a hope quenched with the seminar *Encore*. But just like the formula “there is no sexual relation” does not abolish the contingency of the encounter, the littoral proposes itself as a virgin canvas on which new combinations of knotting the real, the imaginary and the symbolic can be inscribed.

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²⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Liturattere*, in *Autres écrits*, Seuil, Paris 2001.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

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Cindy Zeiher*

Lacan's Fifth and Unfinished Discourse: Capitalism's Alchemist Dream

Why is it that we sometimes think of Lacan as Marxist when is so assertively Freudian? Perhaps it is because Lacan perceives Marx rather than Freud as the discoverer of the symptom and furthermore places Marx as central to his fifth Capitalist discourse, in contrast with his previous discourses which are all inspired by Freud. In this way Lacan's final and arguably unfinished Capitalist discourse stands apart from all the others, yet at the same time it reveals contradictions and possible parallels with them as it attempts to unravel the dialectical tensions between the problematic production and consumption of meaning.

The centrality of Marx in discovering the symptom follows from Lacan's conceptualization of Marxian surplus-value as "the cause of the desire which an economy makes its principle".¹ Elaborating on Adam Smith, Marx theorises the process of capitalism as a science which seeks to enhance one's enjoyment, and whose kernel of surplus-value guarantees the continuation of capitalism. Lacan interprets Marx's principle of capitalism as "the extensive, and hence insatiable, production of the failure-to-enjoy"², where surplus-value is on the one hand "accumulated to build up the means of production as capital" and "on the other it extends that consumption without which this production would be pointless, precisely for its inability to procure an enjoyment such that it can slow down".³

¹ Lacan (1970 [2003]). *Radiofonía*. J. Zahar [Trans.]. *Outros escritos*. Rio de Janeiro, p. 434. Lacan goes on: "that of the extensive production, therefore insatiable, of that lack-in-*jouissance*. It is accumulated on the one hand to increase the means of this production on the side of capital. It extends consumption, on the other hand, without which this production would be vain, precisely from its ineptitude in procuring a *jouissance* that would allow it to slow down."

² *Ibid.*, p. 39

³ *Ibid.* Marx's account of surplus-value is not restricted to, on the one hand, the productivity of human labour and on the other to the enhancement of capital, but further identifies this surplus as reliant on the dual character of the commodity being produced: that this is valued not only for immediate consumption in the name of satisfying desire for enjoyment, but also for its exchangeability with other commodities. When the commodity is human

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This contradiction lying at the heart of capitalism provides its cogent internal force conditioned by time and space, where the production of surplus-value and of surplus-enjoyment coincide with the risk of failure-to-enjoy. Although surplus-enjoyment and its anticipation can speed up or slow down, when it is relentlessly and insatiably pursued with no possibility of remediation for lack of enjoyment, there nevertheless remains in this failure to enjoy, this lack, an implicit will towards *jouissance*. The more one consumes in the pursuit of pleasure, the more enjoyment of this consumption reveals itself as also enjoyment of the pursuit. In this way lack is integral to both enjoyment and its pursuit.⁴

Although enjoyment of one's lack is an implicit tenet of capitalism, its pursuit appears a conundrum because enjoying one's lack is simply not always enjoyable, a contradiction which cannot be ignored. The answer here might be that since the will towards *jouissance* is an inherent condition for the speaking being, the enjoyment of one's lack necessarily remains a *bona fide* part of subjectivity.

In addressing subjective lack of enjoyment Lacan proposes a discourse that is both independently self-supporting and one which the speaking being can make its own. It is here that the parallel between Lacan and Marx breaks down. For Marx, enjoyment is imbedded and dependent on hidden social forces whereas for Lacan it is a question of problematic, subjective non-rapport which for the speaking being does not have a social origin, nor ever could have. For Lacan, even where the social bond is truly implicated and recognized, for example in economic exchange, social origin is never just *social* because it is fundamentally a product of the Symbolic Order.

Lacan distinguishes between the Capitalist discourse and that of the Master when stating, "Marx had not set about completing [his theory of capitalism], giving it its subject, the proletariat, thanks to which the discourse of capitalism

labour purchased at its exchange value, there nevertheless remains a surplus of labour time which presents as an increased exchange value, a surplus-value.

⁴ Todd McGowan (2016) offers in *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (Columbia University Press) a robust theorisation of lack within the Capitalist discourse as not only crucial to the will to enjoy, but that it is enjoyment. Furthermore, Samo Tomšič (2015) suggests in *Capitalist Unconscious* (Verso) that the Capitalist discourse is a fake one, manufactured for the purpose of inserting the libido into social relations.

spread wherever the form of the Marxist State held sway”.⁵ What characterizes the Capitalist discourse, claims Lacan, is “the banishment [of castration] from all the fields of the symbolic...”, so that “every order, every discourse which relates to capitalism leaves aside what we can call simply the things of love”.⁶ We can envisage the Marxist state as being, like capital, located under this typology wherein the symptom is precluded in order to ensure the continuation of the state. In confronting capitalism Marx identifies the subject as uniquely proletarian, a pathology which the subject, in needing to be cured, fully supports, rather than remaining an inscription of Adam Smith’s rational economic man, doomed to carrying the symptom of pursuing surplus-enjoyment towards its inevitable consequence, exploitation.

Lacan takes this up not only as a subjective struggle, but also as part of his larger inquiry as to whether there could be a politics which does not keep desire at bay. Such a theoretical politics would have to be either totally distinct from the state which is merely its’ manager, or a politics devoid of the state in that both it and the state are one and the same. Although these positions are barely conceivable as actualities, they do provide a platform from which to think politics as a praxis. For example, in considering how the Marxist state could be hystericized, Lacanians must inevitably turn to the Analyst’s discourse: how could desire be kept alive in the well-oiled state mechanical machine in which every subject is compliant? How does one live within such a politics and at the same time engage with the problem of one’s desire? Here we might look to Lacan’s lack of sexual relation as being an apt metaphor for the social bond whose absence similarly allows interpretation of symptoms as based on desire and therefore on lack. In light of this, perhaps our questions can be reframed as how can politics and desire coexist as one ethical form?

⁵ Lacan, J. (1971-72 [2011]). *Talking to Brick Walls: A Series of Presentations in the Chapel at Sainte-Anne Hospital*. A. Price [Trans.]. Cambridge: Polity, p. 96.

⁶ *Ibid.* What we can glean elsewhere from Lacan is that enjoyment in terms of “the things of love” is value in the absolute, in other words, detached from use and need. This is particularly so at the level of the non-rapport where man’s enjoyment as value in use, is always phallic, whereas that of the woman, being exchange-value, is non-phallic. Samo Tomšič (2016) in *Jacques Lacan: Between Psychoanalysis and Politics* (Routledge) speak of this inherent contradiction between where “sexuality [is revealed] without the inexistence of the sexual relation” (p. 149), that is sexuality and its commodification emerge via repression.

But first, how are we to interpret these symptoms? Although *jouissance* associated with apathy and ambivalence has always been a part of subjectivity, it is today appearing more and more in the clinic.⁷ Compared with the symptoms which dominated in Freud and Lacan's clinic (hysteria, obsession and phobias), contemporary apathy and ambivalence differ in not signifying some sort of command to address the Other. As with addiction, there is an immediate *jouissance* associated with apathy and ambivalence, which perhaps indicates resistance to the social. Furthermore, unlike traditional symptoms of neurosis which pass through a battery of signifiers, these contemporary symptoms are neither addressed to the Other nor need its support in attaining *jouissance*. We could even say that addiction, apathy and ambivalence deliberately obliterate the Other as mediator of *jouissance*, so that in obtaining the desired object, the Other is not passed through in the passage towards *jouissance*. This by-passing characterizes contemporary symptoms and points towards direct access to *jouissance* whose signification is either repressed or absent. Why contemporary symptoms present in this way is perhaps because the social bond has taken a new form in so far as we are no longer living through the discourse of the Master but rather the discourse of the Capitalist.

Bearing in mind that it is a task of psychoanalysis to analyse the conditions in which discourses emerge and are characterized, it is important not to forget the complexities of symptoms which are contradictory. It seems that the subject of today's symptoms harbours a certain perverse disdain towards investment in the Other. Yet even the figure of the Pervert needs to be heard with regard to how its' law is structured, a requirement which renders the Perverse subject obedient to a meaningful law albeit not that of the Other. Here we can say that the Perverse subject of contemporary symptoms is not by-passing the law of the Other because it appears meaningless or senseless, but because this by-passing is fully accepted as itself *jouissance*.⁸

⁷ Stephanie Swales and Carol Owen provide an excellent overview of these current clinical phenomena in *Psychoanalysing Ambivalence with Freud and Lacan: On and Off the Couch*, 2020, Routledge.

⁸ Todd McGowan (2019, *Écrits* Conference) gives an account of this by-passing as a way of fully submitting to the injunction of the law, claiming that the subject gives representation where meaning fails and that it is via representation where satisfaction can be found, albeit momentarily.

Arguably this is a manifestation of the Master's discourse,⁹ where a premise can become law simply because it is uttered by one who is masterful, even if this is the subject. Discourse is language in process which bears the imprint of conflict and contradiction. Lacan's typology of discourse allows the variety of discourses that exist – for example, those of governance, patriarchy and environment – to come under one of five intersecting discourses, of the Master, the University, the Hysteric, the Analyst and the Capitalist. Each discourse articulates agency relations variously and specifically. The discourse of the Master is hierarchical, subjugating all other subject positions to the rule of the Master, whether this be the king, the name of the father, the law and so on. The discourse of the University (or of knowledge), far from being autonomous as one might expect, serves that of the Master which today is capitalism. The discourse of the Hysteric, by contrast, questions the agency as well as the knowledge of the Master and is willing to encounter resistance in doing so. Yet at the same time any subversive statement, even one manifesting as a revolutionary subjective symptom also mirrors the symptom of the Master. Thus action in opposition to a particular ideological discourse is still caught up within that discourse, for example anti-capitalists are trapped within the discourse of capitalism, and so on.

Rather than pointing towards a particular dominant discourse, what such symptoms reveal is lack. The structural effect of discourse is founded on the subject's employment of the Master signifier as an instrument indicating not only mastery but also that this is the sole apparatus for acquiring knowledge. As well as being in service to the University discourse, the Analyst's discourse functions as mediator between the Hysteric's discourse and that of the Master. In the course of such mediation, what is revealed is that the questioning or criticism of the Master yields, surprisingly, a relativized Master's position which, in consequence of its loss of autonomy in succumbing to questions, produces a signifier of its own. It is with this relativizing of the master signifier in mind

⁹ One way of interpreting Lacan's discourse of the master is in terms of his definition of the subject: "the signifier (S1) represents the barred subject for another signifier (S2)." Insofar as no signifier ever manages to name the subject because the signifier can't signify itself (Seminar XIV), a remainder is always produced, something always slips away (*objet a*). This is what gives rise to the repetitive nature of the symptom in the universe of mastery. The subject's unconscious produces a number of signifying coagulations in an attempt to fill the lack (*objet a*) that can never be filled within the symbolic order. These signifying coagulations are symptoms of the Hysteric.

that Lacan's remarks in his 1972 Milan lecture regarding the discourse of the Capitalist, should be considered:

What is a discourse? It is what ... in the ordering of what can be produced by the existence of language, makes some social link function ... there must be at least two signifiers. This means, the signifier insofar as it functions as an element ... the signifier insofar as it is the mode by which the world is structured, the world of the speaking being, which is to say, all knowledge.¹⁰

Given this definition of discourse as a productive ordering of all knowledge through relations between signifiers, certain clinical implications emerge regarding how discourse determines the structuring of the social. Lacan proposes four signifiers to indicate specific determinants behind the mutable relations which comprise the different discourses (Figure 1).

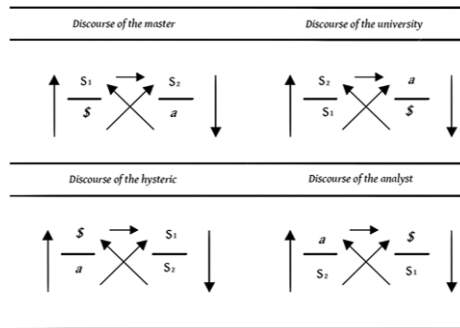


Figure 1: The Four Discourses

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These are the master signifier (S_1), the signifier for knowledge (S_2), the divided subject ($\$$) and surplus-*jouissance* (a). In the case of the Master's discourse, the function of the master signifier (S_1) is to organize the social field by establishing dominance over it. Simply put, the master signifier commands. The signifier for knowledge (S_2) both possesses and hides the truth that that the Master is just another subject divided between reason and the unconscious subversion of in-

¹⁰ Lacan, J. (1972). *On Psychoanalytic Discourse: The Capitalist Discourse*. Stone, J.W. [Trans.]. University of Missouri, p. 12.

tegrity and control (\$), while at the same time producing surplus-*jouissance* (a). The signifier for knowledge (S2), the University discourse, addresses the signifier of surplus-*jouissance* in the form of the *objet a*. We can think of this as a partial object, one which does not really exist but is nevertheless constituted within the Symbolic Order, for example the movement of force between things is afforded an object-like character. In its function, the *objet a* elicits a confrontation with one's lack, what one does not possess yet perceives oneself as possessing.¹¹ This produces the divided subject (\$) who attempts to cling on to the *objet a* yet simultaneously keeps it at bay. In this way, the *objet a* operates as the master signifier for the Analyst's discourse and we can understand the trajectory of this discourse as a precise articulation of the agent. Hence the Analyst's discourse addresses the split subject, producing the *objet a*, while the split subject (\$) in addressing the Master's discourse, produces the signifier for knowledge (S2).

Regarding the discourse of the Capitalist, Lacan seems initially to understand it as a conflation with the University discourse.¹² Yet at the same time, he positions the Capitalist discourse alongside the Master's as the most plausible. Later on in his Milan lecture, Lacan comes up with a more decisive and discursive formula. Instead of identifying it as a mixture of the University and the Master's discourses, he calls the Capitalist discourse the most ingenious discourse to date, creating something like an "an eternal motion machine".¹³ This becomes apparent when one looks at his formalisation of the Capitalist discourse. Its structure closely resembles the questioning of and rebelling against the Master, which in turn reveals that the Master (unlike the Hysteric) is a fake because in questioning the knowledge signifier it excludes questioning its own master signifier. Such questioning leads to the generation of surplus-*jouissance*, ironically dependent upon the master signifier, which is why the Capitalist discourse is the one in which we are all hystericized, like it or not.

¹¹ A very recognisable example of this desire for self-possession is when one proclaims to be standing in the name of a particular ethical character such as "I am honest", "I am empathic". This is however no more an attempt to bolster the chosen master signifier in so far as, because we are split subjects such declarations do not preclude us from behaving in ways which are dishonest or uncaring.

¹² Lacan, J. (1969-70 [2007]). *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. R. Grigg [Trans.]. New York: WW Norton, pp. 31-32.

¹³ Lacan, J. (1972). *On Psychoanalytic Discourse: The Capitalist Discourse*. Stone, J.W. [Trans.]. University of Missouri, p. 11.

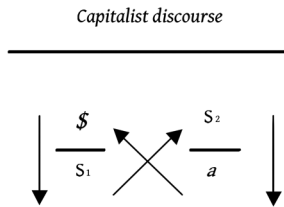


Figure 2: The Capitalist Discourse

The discourse of the Capitalist (Figure 2) postulates that the superego/master signifier (S1) commands the divided subject (\$) to enjoy (*a*) in the form of commodities (S2). Here the key thing to notice is where the master-signifier (S1) and the battery of signifiers, commodities (S2) are unified. It is structurally impossible for there to ever be a direct relation between S1 and S2 because they are both always separated by a third term, either the divided subject (\$) or *jouissance* (*a*). Here, fantasy functions as a supplement, providing a schema where lack is transformed into desire: as the desiring subject under the Capitalist discourse chases lack, this chasing decenters the now disavowed subject of desire.

The Master signifiers at work today seek to manage and discipline lack. For example belief, in uniting desire with the Law, is a way of imagining a tangible but possible certainty. The Master signifier functions further as a limiting field and prohibiting agent sustaining desire, for example empathy is an emerging master signifier in today's climate of increasing liberal tolerance where anguish and outrage are the most expected reactions.¹⁴ Here the body provides an authoritative locus for desire because it constitutes a reality, a way of managing *jouissance*. Desire and the body are implicitly linked not only to the promise of *jouissance* but also to its containment. Desire marks the body and enables the subject to speak about its' possibility notwithstanding that for the subject the body is unknown and unpredictable. Desire becomes a form for the body in that it is both a specter of possible desire and a location in which various meanings

¹⁴ We are increasingly encouraged to become faithful servants in portraying empathy, even when we feel none. Stephanie Swales' (2019, *Écrits* Conference) theorisation of empathy as an extimate fantasy of caring maintains that in so far as capitalism fosters dissatisfaction, it initiates empathy as an identification with the Other in a fantasy of empathy, a narcissistic reduction of another's experience to one's own.

can be construed. The body both regulates and contains *jouissance* as it is revealed through the staging of lack and desire in the context of the social bond.

Psychoanalysis provides a way of interrogating symptoms of the subject's attempt to describe desire which is a substitute for the void. Perhaps as a result of today's mediatized technology the contemporary subject presents with a number of social symptoms arising from this alienation, for example the rise in fundamentalist religion and identity politics. Yet these do not hold much traction for the subject and remain more or less empty signifiers, the result of Symbolic inefficiency: dogmatism, nationalism, racism and so on simply speak to lack and in providing an array of dubious ideologies, are counterpoints to desire.

The problem of understanding desire as intrinsic to capitalism is one faced all the time by the subject of desire. From this Hysteric position, understanding desire is characterized by the impetus to respond to the Capitalist discourse in an attempt to structure and capture desire. That this, of course, cannot be done produces in the subject a void of anxiety in which the fantasy of fulfilling desire is all the time being staged. In this staging lies a promise of subjective transformation because when sublimating desire in the form of consumer objects, the subject is deemed to be acting (for a time at least) as if the sublimated object is not only enough but more than enough. Thus through consumption this sublimated object of desire becomes a surplus of itself. What it was promising but ultimately fails to deliver is a by-passing of the Other and in this we can discern both a method and a literacy of desire within the Masters discourse. However, this is a paradoxical position because for desire to be talked about and given symbolic meaning, it must be attached to a Master of one's choice, notwithstanding that a Master has already been constituted for the subject.

In the Capitalist discourse we get an entirely different set of permutations, where we no longer have only the discourses of the Master, University, Analyst and Hysteric. This suggests that the social relation formalized hitherto by Lacanian discourse theory is fundamentally different under capitalism. It is also worth noting that the Capitalist discourse sits apart from the other four discourses which are always in a relation to one another. When we consider the Capitalist discourse, it appears to present as the master signifier of the previous four discourses; whereas each earlier discourse relies upon rotation in order to transi-

tion to a different agent, the Capitalist discourse stands alone.¹⁵ By way of background to the Capitalist discourse, Stijn Vanheule says that

[i]n the late 1960s and 1970s, Lacan occasionally discussed the impact of capitalist culture on subject formation. In line with his general idea that the human subject comes into existence through the play of signifiers, which originate from the symbolic order, in this period of his work he also assumed that the symbolic order of capitalism moulds the subject in a particular way. Capitalist culture affects the way we deal with distress and suffering; it shapes the way we relate to others; it determines the way the unconscious functions; and it influences the kind of request for help that an individual might extend to a psychoanalyst. Indeed, early in the nineteen seventies he indicated that the capitalist discourse had started to replace the traditional discourse of the master.¹⁶

In capitalist culture the command to enjoy is paramount because the divided subject is continually searching for a better *jouissance*. However for each commodity consumed the divided subject experiences disappointment and is thus compelled to pursue yet another commodity in order to fulfil the super-ego's continuing imperative to enjoy. Moreover, the more we obey the super-ego's imperative, the more guilt we feel for obedience to something which we know will give us only momentary pleasure. This guilt and anxiety is relied upon by capitalism for its continuation and is where, for Lacan, Marxist theory engages capitalism as a praxis of repetition and surplus. Jan Völker (2018) takes this further in relation to whatever is problematic to value, that when theory engages praxis, all it too produces is repetition.¹⁷

Because of its reliance on repetition the Capitalist discourse perfectly situates compulsive symptoms of capitalism such as hoarding and endless buying, which clearly suggest a subject who is accumulating for its own sake rather than

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¹⁵ In Seminar XVII, when discussing the discourse of the Master, Lacan says that we are seeing Masters less and less, which is rather like saying that the universe of Oedipus is disappearing.

¹⁶ Vanheule, S. (2016). Capitalist Discourse, Subjectivity and Lacanian Psychoanalysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, pp. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5145885/> <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01948>

¹⁷ Jan Völker (2018). Marx' Affirmation. *Vortrag im Rahmen der Ringvorlesung Warum nicht Marx?*. Freie Universität Berlin, July 21. Unpublished, untranslated manuscript.

for any use-value. Perhaps the compulsive symptoms of anorexia and bulimia also fit in here, with the qualification that, unlike the hoarder, the anorexic/bulimic subjects' refusal of the command to enjoy is nevertheless a desperate attempt to maintain a place for desire.

In the universe of mastery, the discourse of the Hysteric is organized around identification with a master signifier (S₁) in the form of a leader, for example a country, a political movement, a God and so on, the movement here being from the divided subject to the subject of mastery ((\$→S₁). These symbolic identifications pass through the intermediary of the Other who is always imagined. Under capitalism the subject is inevitably an addict who furthers symbolic identification through attempting to put a substance/consumerable in the place of the master-signifier as a way of overcoming constitutive lack, by making the lack's illusive object into something tangible. Here the addict is the perfect capitalist subject (\$ <> S₁), one that in attempting to assume self-mastery presumes there is no need to pass through the mediation of the Other in reaching for *jouissance*. Indeed through this particular relation with the object of addiction, the addict is sated in a *jouissance* that is attempting to escape the castrating effects of the signifier (S₂).

Whereas in the universe of mastery, desire and deferral as a defense against *jouissance* predominate, the universe of capitalism is awash in individual *jouissance*. Perhaps this accounts for the attention we today give to certain depressive disorders, for as Lacan and Freud argued, the closer the subject is to the *jouissance* of the Other (that is, the objet a) the greater is subjective anxiety. Similarly, melancholia arises when desire is erased and the subject fades into the *jouissance* of the Other.¹⁸ Although the universe of mastery is characterized by the questioning Hysteric, this relation is increasingly absent in the universe of capitalism where the Other, through which enjoyment must be mediated, increasingly disappears, to be replaced by the subject's direct relationship to the object. Because under capitalism this relationship is inevitably confused by sur-

¹⁸ Freud points this out in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917, p. 205) when he says, "the object may not have really died, for example, but may instead have been lost as a love-object... Indeed, this might also be the case when the loss that is the cause of the melancholia is known to the subject, when he knows *who* it is, but not *what* it is about that person that he has lost." [Emphasis in original]

plus-value,¹⁹ fetishism emerges as a symptom which actively forecloses social relations. Because there is here no direct relation between the master signifier and the battery of signifiers, symptoms no longer signify because they are attempting to short circuit the Other. We have instead subjects immersed in a *jouissance* which signifies nothing beyond itself. This suggests the emergence of a new structure of subjectivity, one organized around *jouissance* rather than signification of the Other, one in which the subjective pursuit of enjoyment takes the place of signification. For example we might sometimes, when discussing a topic we know little about, say in veiled negation 'oh, what would I know...!'. This acting outwardly as if one's knowledge is woefully inadequate, this framing of subjective deficit as modesty, represents enjoyment without invalidating one's position in so far as it attributes to knowledge a status whose value is shared. What is going on here? Unlike the subject in the universe of mastery, in that of Capitalist's discourse the relation of the subject is no longer a relation with an Other to which the symptom is addressed (in this case, as veiled negation). Rather, the subject's symptom is now organized around masturbatory *jouissance* which, in the quest for instant *jouissance*, functions to foreclose the Other. In this scenario the focus of treatment of, for example addiction, would be how to establish, in place of forgetfulness of *jouissance*, a relation to the Other where (a different) demand (for a different object) might be articulated.

So powerful is the signifier of knowledge that rituals enacted to maintain belief in signifiers of for example, particular Gods, political creeds and so on, is upheld even by today's atheists and cynics. The impetus to present as a fair minded and upright person is metonymized within notions of an ultimate sacred Other which in turn signify subjective authenticity. For example, the separation of church from state is a divide which although not as straightforward as humanism contends, nevertheless for many people provides an alternative Other which, in banishing the spectre of division, affords a mode of *jouissance* preferable to that engendered by the irreconcilable fallback position of essen-

¹⁹ In his reading of Marx, Lacan is guided by the fetish *signifiant* he finds there in the form of an object which, being divested from its value in use, takes on a different value, that of surplus-enjoyment. This is all there is to Lacan's involvement with Marx, surplus-value as surplus-enjoyment produced during consumption through the subtraction of value in use. Indeed, the more surplus-enjoyment is subtracted from value in use, for example through renunciation, the more overall value increases.

tialized subjectivity: *you can't know me because I can't know you.*²⁰ Although a product of division this alternative Other nevertheless embodies a reliable ideological principle that guarantees the subject's belief as ethical. In this way subjects from both sides of a divide are enabled to enunciate shared sovereign convictions which in turn structure the network or community. Here the modern Master is renouncing *jouissance* in exchange for sovereign ethical belief, a disavowal which props up community in the face of capitalism's alienation of the contemporary subject. In reconciling division through short-circuiting the Other, subjectivity is simultaneously, unwittingly short-circuited.

Of this Freud was already well aware.²¹ In its traversing of human experience, psychoanalysis and in particular the Analyst's discourse can easily be overwhelmed by conformist pressures that regulate social bonds. This is why the Analyst's discourse should be prioritised; it posits the realm of what Lacan calls the Real, which is the kernel of analytical discourse where the speaking being's subjectivity is determined through the unconscious discourse of the Other. This is the symbolic linguistic system which precludes the possibility of a metalanguage through which to establish the truth about anything, including truth itself. In the eruption of Lacan's Real, all social and political orders in the Symbolic contradict one another, all discourses collide in hostile confrontation and any authority about knowledge is confined to the Imaginary.

Lacan clearly had little time for the state, mainly because for him it struggles to accommodate potential divergence from it in so far as being driven by *jouissance*, its desire becomes irrelevant. He perceives the function of the state to be supported by *jouissance* afforded in obeying the law, which is today enshrined in capitalism. Perhaps Lacan would have liked to see the state decline and eventually to become extinct. Neither has he much patience with liberalism, as we know from his provocation to the May '68 students. The liberal participation in choice is somewhat comical in its veiled aspiration towards an imaginary power and its repressed need for a 'stupid' Master. For Lacan, liberalism is an unconvincing discourse of this Master because despite claiming to be progressive it fails to gain

²⁰ That *jouissance* can be essentialised and particularised in a subject is testament to how capitalism commands the subject to be taken up as one whose *jouissance* is essential to subjectivity.

²¹ *Totem and Taboo* (1913), *Civilization and its Discontents* (1920), *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939).

forward momentum, instead moving in stationary circles whilst everything “continues to go all too damn well.”²² Better, he contends, to attend to the Analyst’s discourse and to the notion of an individual liberal subjectivity which, in pursuing desire, nevertheless retains a Kantian conscience and rationality.

This practical liberty, asserts Lacan, is what enables a cut in the metonymic machine of the social bond, from which social ties must then emerge. For the libertine subject the kernel of morality is freedom to indulge in repetitive compulsions, wherever these lead. However, as Lacan reminds us in *Kant avec Sade*, even freedom has limits and a cost, certainly where desire is not merely for satiation via the object, but rather for release from being compelled towards satiation by the object. This can be difficult and as Kant reminds us, a painful freedom for the subject especially in so far as it confronts subjective compulsion engrained through the processes of consumption and production. Here, as Lacan observes, obedience to the law goes against the pleasure principle.

This kind of freedom with limits can have a tragic dimension for the subject. At the end of his lengthy commentary on *Antigone*, Lacan suggests a correspondence between the context in which the tragic hero exists and the one experienced in psychoanalysis. Given that in both cases the sole moral fault with which one can tarnish oneself and for which sooner or later one will have to answer, is that of compromising one’s desire, of betraying it in favour of ‘the good’, then the hero who stands by desire is the one who can with impunity, be betrayed. If Lacan’s ethics appear tragic it is because the analysand is required to tolerate the contradiction inherent in desire: in order not to betray it, the subject must tolerate betrayal and by accepting solitude become one with the singularity of the Other. No wonder that here the subject tries to short circuit desire.

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Politically, freedom has less to do with democracy than is sometimes claimed. Rather as Lacan knew, democracy more closely resembles its caricature in Plato’s *Republic*, where everyone does just as they like, every principle of social order is subverted, constitutions are bought and sold and people are impotent witnesses to the advent of tyranny. What counts in this caricature is that in no case should the State, which ostensibly acts in the name of the good of its subjects, even

²² Lacan, J. (1969-70 [2007]). *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. R. Grigg [Trans.]. New York: WW Norton, p. 259.

when killing them, dictate to the individual what his values and actions should be. Today the function of the democratic state is simply to ensure that every individual has access to possibilities, even if these are tragic. For Lacan, this is the price paid for pursuing desire which inevitably requires sacrifice of some sort. Here Lacan's thesis on the relationship of Marx's surplus-value to psychoanalysis' surplus-enjoyment, is more than just an analogy: surplus-value is surplus-enjoyment. Because of this, desire and the state cannot together comprise one ethical form, but are rather two categories which must remain distinct. Just as the alchemist's dream is the only way in which gold might be derived from base metal, so capitalism is the only economic system capable of producing a surplus of such symbolic, pure enjoyment and value.

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Povzetki | Abstracts

Banu Bargu and William S. Lewis

Disjecta Membra: Althusser's Aesthetics Reconsidered

Keywords: aesthetics, art, ideology, science, marxism, materialism, painting, theater

This essay takes a synthetic and critical approach to the scattered pieces of art criticism and aesthetic theory authored by Louis Althusser. Connecting these texts to his larger philosophical and political project, we argue that these reflections make an independent contribution to its worth and that they offer different perspectives on lingering theoretical problems. We piece together the insights that form the core of the Althusserian approach to aesthetics and show how these are formulated (in connection with the work of Pierre Macherey as well as the dominant controversies of the time) and trace how their formulations take shape in relation to the work of different authors and artists. In addition to helping us better understand his overall project, Althusser's aesthetic theory is, we argue, a powerful and original contribution to Marxist aesthetics. Specifically, it points us to the idea that we need to take aesthetic production seriously as a practice with its own specificity – one that has its own logics of determination, rituals of production, circulation, and consumption, one that commands effects that need to be theorized on their own terms.

Banu Bargu in William S. Lewis

Disjecta membra: ponovni premislek Althusserjeve estetike

Ključne besede: estetika, umetnost, ideologija, znanost, marksizem, materializem, slikarstvo, gledališče

Pričujoči članek ima sintetičen in kritičen pristop do razpršenih fragmentov umetnostne kritike in estetske teorije v delih Louisa Althusserja. S tem ko te tekste umestiva v Althusserjev širši filozofski in politični projekt, trdiva, da predstavljajo te refleksije neodvisni prispevek k njegovemu pomenu in da ponujajo drugačne perspektive na persistentne teoretične probleme. Skupaj poveževa uvide, ki tvorijo jedro althusserjanskega pristopa k estetiki, pokaževa, kako so ti formulirani (v navezavi na delo Pierra Machereya in na prevladujoče kontroverze tistega časa) ter oriševa, kako se njihove formulacije oblikujejo v razmerju do del različnih avtorjev in umetnikov. Poleg tega, da nam pomaga razumeti njegov celotni projekt, trdiva, da predstavlja Althusserjeva estetska teorija pomemben in izviren prispevek k marksistični estetiki. Natančneje, usmeri nas k misli, da moramo estetsko proizvodnjo jemati resno kot prakso z lastno specifičnostjo – takšno, ki ima

svoje logike določenosti, ritualov proizvodnje, cirkulacije in potrošnje, takšno, ki določa učinke, ki potrebujejo svojo lastno teoretizacijo.

Dave Mesing

The Intervening Prince: Althusser, Foucault, and a Theory of Strategy

Keywords: Althusser, Foucault, strategy, theory, practice

This paper stages an encounter between Foucault and Althusser on the question of strategy. By contrasting a few passages in *La Volonté de savoir* with some of Althusser's writings on Machiavelli and Lenin, I propose an alternative between the two thinkers according to a schema of strategic thought (Foucault) and a philosophy for strategy (Althusser). This narrow focus enables me to generate a working definition of strategy as the anticipation of an encounter which modifies, abolishes, or otherwise alters the relations constituting its conjuncture. By staging the encounter between the Foucault and Althusser, I propose this definition as a reflection on the phrase "intervention into conjuncture," and conclude by sketching implications concerning theory, practice, and the discipline of the conjuncture.

Dave Mesing

Intervenirajoči vladar: Althusser, Foucault in teorija strategije

Ključne besede: Althusser, Foucault, strategija, teorija, vaja

Članek uprizori srečanje med Foucaultom in Althusserjem glede vprašanja strategije. Prek zoperstavitve odlomkov iz *La Volonté de savoir* z nekaterimi Althusserjevimi teksti o Machiavelliju in Leninu, predstaviti alternativo med obema mislecema glede na shemo strateške misli (Foucault) in filozofije strategije (Althusser). Takšna ozka osredotočenost mi omogoča ponuditi delovno definicijo strategije kot anticipacije srečanja, ki modificira, odpravi ali kako drugače spreminja razmerja, ki tvorijo njegovo konjunkturo. Prek uprizoritve srečanja med Foucaultom in Althusserjem predlagam takšno definicijo kot refleksijo besedne zveze »intervencija v konjunkturo« in zaključim z orisom implikacij za teorijo, prakso in disciplino konjunkturo.

Vittorio Morfino

Althusser, Machiavelli, and the PCF

Keywords: history, politics, party, beginning, revolution

In this essay I consider the fundamental features of Althusser's reading of Machiavelli in its historical development, starting from the 1962 lecture course, passing through the

1972–76 course published with the title of *Machiavel et nous* as well as the writings of 1977–78, concluding with the group of writings written during the 1980s. I show that any teleological reading that sees in the final writings the truth finally revealed of the path of Althusser's reading of Machiavelli (or its inversion, that is, the path itself as a corruption of an original truth) should be rejected, and instead present the thesis that Althusser, through the figure of Machiavelli, theoretically reworks his relationship with the Party

Vittorio Morfino

Althusser, Machiavelli in PCF

Ključne besede: zgodovina, politika, partija, začetek, revolucija

V pričujočem članku obravnavam temeljne značilnosti zgodovinskega razvoja Althusserjevega branja Machiavellija. Pričnem s ciklom predavanj iz leta 1962, nadaljujem s predavanji iz leta 1972–76, ki so objavljena pod naslovom *Machiavel et nous*, s spisi iz let 1977–78 ter sklenem s spisi, ki so bili napisani v osemdesetih letih. Pokažem, da moramo zavrniti vsako teleološko branje, ki vidi v zadnjih spisih končno razkrito resnico poti Althusserjevega branja Machiavellija (ali, narobe, tj. pot kot izprijenje izvorne resnice) in namesto tega predstaviti tezo, da s pomočjo lika Machiavellija Althusser teoretsko preoblikuje svoj odnos do Partije.

Panagiotis Sotiris

From Traces of Communism to Islets of Communism: Revisiting Althusser's Metaphors

Keywords: communism, Louis Althusser, Marxism, philosophy of the encounter, Jacques Derrida, Étienne Balibar

Promises of communism, traces of communism, outlines of communism, islets of communism: Althusser's metaphors for communism emerging at the margins of existing social forms point towards important open questions for any rethinking of a strategy for communism: Is communism just a political project or a political design for a post-capitalist society or is the projection, elaboration, and expansion of social forms already appearing within contemporary capitalist society as a result of collective struggles, resistances, and experimentations that bring out the collective ingenuity of the subaltern classes and groups? Can a political project for radical social transformation simply be a generalisation of the dynamics emerging within contemporary social dynamics? How can we think the political and organisational labour needed to turn these elements into new social forms? The aim of this paper is to attempt to revisit and rethink the tensions of Althusser's thinking of communism emerging at the margins or interstices of capitalist society.

Panagiotis Sotiris

Od sledi komunizma do obočkov komunizma: ponovni pretres Althusserjevih metafor

Ključne besede: komunizem, Louis Althusser, marksizem, filozofija srečanja, Jacques Derrida, Étienne Balibar

Obljube komunizma, sledi komunizma, orisi komunizma, obočki komunizma: Althusserjeve metafore komunizma, ki se pojavijo na obrobju obstoječih družbenih oblik, opozarjajo na pomembna odprta vprašanja za vsak ponovni razmislek o strategiji za komunizem: Ali je komunizem zgolj politični projekt, ali predstavlja politično obliko postkapitalistične družbe, ali pa je projekcija, elaboracija in razširitev družbenih oblik, ki se že pojavljajo v sodobni kapitalistični družbi kot rezultat kolektivnih bojev, uporov in eksperimentiranj, ki razkrivajo kolektivno domiselnost subalternih razredov in skupin? Je lahko politični projekt radikalne družbene preobrazbe zgolj posplošitev dinamik, ki se pojavlja v sodobnih družbenih dinamikah? Kako lahko mislimo politično in organizacijsko delo, ki je potrebno, da te elemente preobrne v nove družbene oblike? Namen tega prispevka je predstaviti poskus ponovnega premisleka tenzij v Althusserjevem mišljenju o komunizmu, ki se pojavlja na obrobjih ali v vrzelih kapitalistične družbe.

Antonia Birnbaum

Adorno: A Humorist In Spite of Himself

Keywords: humor, style, cultural industry, schematism, subject, Adorno, Horkheimer

What insight is there to gain when Adorno is put “beside himself”? The humoristic tendency of Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s famous essay on the culture industry highlights the non-categorical modalities borrowed from the avant-gardes and psychoanalysis that disorganize Kant’s supposedly invariant concepts *a priori*: partialities of the driven montage, allegorisation. This tendency opens on the decentering consequences for the thinking of another subject, beyond the logic of suspicion and the melancholic *jouissance* that block it.

Antonia Birnbaum

Adorno: humorist, sebi navkljub

Ključne besede: humor, stil, kulturna industrija, shematizem, subjekt, Adorno, Horkheimer

Kakšen uvid dobimo, če postavimo Adorna „poleg samega sebe”? Humoristična težnja v slovitem eseju Theodorja W. Adorna in Maxa Horkheimerja o kulturni industriji osvetli nekategorične modalnosti, sposojene iz avantgard in psihoanalize, ki razgradijo Kantove domnevno nespremenljive apriorne koncepte: parcialnosti strojno gnane montaže, ale-

gorizacijo. Ta težnja odpira razsrediščevalne posledice za mišljenje drugega subjekta, onstran logike dvoma in melanholične *jouissance*, ki ga blokirata.

Jean-Jacques Lecercle

Volochinov, Thackeray and the Enthymeme

Keywords: enthymeme, evaluation, interpellation, Moore's paradox, realism of form, refraction, situation, Althusser, Culioli, Deleuze, Pontiggia, Sterne, Thackeray, Volochinov

The aim of the essay is to revive the philosophy of language of the Soviet linguist Valentin Volochinov, by revisiting his concept of the utterance as enthymeme: the meaning of an utterance is not fully determined by the linguistic system, but is dependent on its insertion in a social situation, which it refracts rather than reflects, thus giving rise to evaluations. The essay proceeds by analysing a number of such enthymemes (a grammatical example, an advertisement, a comedian's joke), moving towards literature and a definition of a realism of form rather than content, of refraction rather than reflection, examples of which are to be found in the works of Thackeray.

Jean-Jacques Lecercle

Vološinov, Thackeray in entimem

Ključne besede: entimem, evalvacija, interpelacija, Moorov paradoks, realizem forme, refrakcija, situacija, Althusser, Culioli, Deleuze, Pontiggia, Sterne, Thackeray, Vološinov

Namen članka je oživiti filozofijo jezika sovjetskega jezikoslovca Valentina Vološinova z vrnitvijo k njegovemu konceptu izjave kot entimema. Pomen izjave ni v celoti določen z jezikovnim sistemom, ampak je odvisen od njene umestitve v družbeno situacijo. Toda pomen ni zrcalna, ampak prelomljena podoba situacije, s čimer spodbuja vrednotenja. Esej analizira nekaj takšnim entimemov (slovnični primer, oglas, komikova šala), dokler ne pride do literature in definicije realizma forme namesto vsebine, lomljenja namesto zrcaljenja, primere pa najde v Thackerayevih delih.

Rok Benčin

Photography between Affective Turn and Affective Structure

Keywords: photography theory, aesthetics, affect, melancholy, index, Roland Barthes, Thierry de Duve, Jacques Rancière

The affective turn in photography theory takes as its point of departure Roland Barthes's move from semiology to affective phenomenology in *Camera Lucida*. This article, however, considers the way affective phenomenology is itself grounded in the semiological

structure of photography. It looks at how, before *Camera Lucida* was even written, Thierry de Duve had already discussed the affective implications of Barthes's understanding of photography's indexical nature. The article then proceeds to rethink the structural affectivity of photography beyond Barthes's and de Duve's emphasis on a direct relation between indexicality and loss. Reconsidering photography through Jacques Rancière's conception of the aesthetic regime of art, the article rather puts emphasis on the indeterminacy of photography, which results from the way the camera captures and isolates a spatio-temporal fragment. Shifting the focus from indexicality to indeterminacy sheds a different light on the loss implied by the structure of photography, parallel to how Freud understood the difference between mourning and melancholy.

Rok Benčin

Fotografija med afektivnim obratom in afektivno strukturo

Ključne besede: teorija fotografije, estetika, afekt, melanholijski indeks, Roland Barthes, Thierry de Duve, Jacques Rancière

Afektivni obrat v fotografski teoriji izhaja iz Barthesovega premika od semiologije do afektivne fenomenologije v *Camera lucida*. Pričujoči članek pa se ukvarja z načinom, na katerega afektivna fenomenologija sama temelji na semiološki strukturi fotografije. Oglejmo si, kako je Thierry de Duve, že preden je bila *Camera lucida* sploh napisana, zarisal afektivne implikacije Barthesovega razumevanja indeksikalne narave fotografije. Članek nato ponovno premisli strukturo afektivnosti fotografije onstran Barthesovega in de Duvovega poudarka na neposredni povezavi med indeksikalnostjo in izgubo. Izhajajoč iz obravnave fotografije skozi pojmovanje estetskega režima umetnosti Jacquesa Rancièra, članek poudari nedoločeno fotografije kot posledico načina, na katerega fotoaparati zajamejo in osami določeno prostorsko-časovni fragment. Premestitev pozornosti z indeksikalnosti na nedoločeno prikaže izgubo, ki jo implicira struktura fotografije, v drugačni luči, razlika pa je vzporedna tisti, ki jo med žalovanjem in melanholijsko vidi Freud.

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Tania Espinoza

The Truth of the Work of Art: Freud and Benjamin on Goethe

Keywords: love, sibling rivalry, hysteria, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, Juliet Mitchell

Juliet Mitchell's psychoanalytic account of sibling rivalry, fluctuating between narcissistic identification (love) and fear of annihilation (hate), also applies to Walter Benjamin's model of true love in his reading of Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. This model is found in the utopian novella "The Curious Tale of the Childhood Sweethearts," inserted within Goethe's novel. By reducing the relationship between the novella and its framing narra-

tive to an opposition between truth and semblance, Benjamin replicates in his reading the specular logic that is love's obstacle. On the other hand, Freud's analysis of an episode in Goethe's autobiography can be said to retroactively operate what Mitchell calls "lateral castration," for Freud compares the great writer to patients in analysis and thus establishes the necessary seriality that creates "space for one who is the same and different." Still, and although elements of his own autobiography facilitate the construction of alternative scenarios, Freud exempts Goethe's sisters from the position of rivals. Recognising "the sister" as earliest playmate, and object of hatred and narcissistic identification, like Mitchell does, might be the first step necessary for drawing a model of love for women as peers this side of utopia.

Tania Espinoza

Resnica umetnine: Freud in Benjamin o Goetheju

Ključne besede: ljubezen, rivalstvo med sorojenci, histerija, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, Juliet Mitchell

Psihoanalitični prikaz rivalstva med sorojenci, kot ga opisuje Juliet Mitchell, kolikor tako rivalstvo niha med narcisistično identifikacijo (ljubeznijo) in strahom pred uničenjem (sovráštvom), bi lahko uporabili tudi na vzor resnične ljubezni, kot jo je v svojem branju Goethejevega romana *Izbirne sorodnosti* zastavil Walter Benjamin. Takšen vzor lahko najdemo v utopični noveli, ki je vključena v Goethejev roman. S tem, ko je Benjamin razmerje med to novelo in njenim uokvirjajočim narativom zvedel na opozicijo med resnico in dozdevkom, je v svojem branju ponovil spekularno logiko, ki je ovira ljubezni. Po drugi strani bi lahko tudi rekli, da Freudova analiza pripetljaja v Goethejevi avtobiografiji za nazaj vzpostavi to, kar Mitchell imenuje »lateralna kastracija«, saj Freud velikega pisatelja primerja s pacienti v analizi, s čimer vzpostavi posebno serialnost, ki ustvarja »prostor za tistega, ki je enak in drugačen«. Kljub temu, da Freudu elementi lastne avtobiografije olajšajo gradnjo alternativnih scenarijev, Goethejevo sestro poskuša izvzeti iz pozicije rivalstva med sorojenci. Mitchellino pripoznanje »sestre« kot najzgodnejše prijateljice in objekta sovráštvu ter narcisistične identifikacije, bi bil lahko prvi nujni korak za oris vzora ljubezni do žensk, ki so podobnice tostran utopije.

Ekin Erkan

For a Rationalist Politics of the Event: Zermelo–Fraenkel Set Theory and Structuring the Multiple

Keywords: Badiou, the event, Plato, truth, event, nomadism, universalism, Deleuze

This article examines the relationship between Alain Badiou's work on mathematics and politics by tethering his most recent work on the former, *Migrants and Militants* (2020)

with *L'Être et l'événement* (1988). Juxtaposing Badiou's work on being with Deleuzean becoming, this article begins by detailing Badiou's Platonism. Consequently, the paper seeks to demonstrate that Badiou's political position on migration (as articulated in *Migrants and Militants*) is not only compatible with but serves as an extension of his work on Zermelo-Fraenkel axiomatized set-theory. This bricolage critically engages with Badiou's conception of the truth-procedure and the event. In relation to the ontological order of the pure multiple and the objective order of presentation, subjectivation emerges as an interruption of the stability and stasis of the ontological order, both politically and in mathematics, stiling the process which Badiou names an "event," which initiates the creative process of construction or "truth-procedure." The nexus of Badiou's case study on migration finds him repudiating what he sees as a faulty moral imperative lodged in Derrida's conception of hospitality, which Badiou sees as denying true subjectivity and reaffirming pernicious (ethnic, racial) essentialisms.

Ekin Erkan

Za racionalistično teorijo dogodka: Zermelo–Fraenklova teorija množic in strukturiranje množstva

Ključne besede: Badiou, dogodek, Platon, resnica, dogodek, nomadizem, univerzalizem, Deleuze

Članek preučuje razmerje med deli Alaina Badiouja na področju matematike in politike tako, da najnovejše delo na področju prve, tj. *Migrants and Militants* (2020), poveže z *Bit in dogodek* (1988). Prične se s podrobnim opisom Badioujevega platonizma, prek zoperstavitve Badioujevega razumevanja biti in deleuzovskega postajanja. Posledično poskuša članek pokazati, da Badioujevo politično stališče do migracij (kot je izraženo v *Migrants and Militants*) ni le združljivo z njegovim delom na Zermelo-Fraenklovi aksiomatizirani teoriji množic, temveč služi tudi kot njena razširitev. Ta brikolaž vzpostavlja kritičen odnos do Badioujevih koncepcij resničnostnega postopka in dogodka. Glede na ontološki red čistega množstva in objektivnega reda prezentacije vznikne subjektivacija kot prekinitev stabilnosti in staze ontološkega reda tako v političnem kot v matematičnem smislu in s tem sprodbudi proces, ki ga Badiou imenuje »dogodek«, slednji pa sproži ustvarjalni postopek konstrukcije oz. »resničnostnega postopka«. Badiou v osrednjem delu svoje študije primera migracij zavrne to, kar je po njegovem mnenju napačen moralni imperativ v Derridajevem razumevanju gostoljubja, za katerega Badiou meni, da zanika resnično subjektivnost in ponovno afirmira škodljive (etične, rasne) esencializme.

Denisse Sciamarella

A Topological Reading of Ernesto Laclau

Keywords: topology of chaos, nonlinear dynamics, political theory, populism, hegemony, antagonism, heterogeneity

This work proposes a reading of Laclau's theory on *populism* using concepts from topology applied to dynamical systems. The analogical correspondences are established between the elements used in the reconstruction of a topological structure from data and categories such as *discourse*, *hegemony*, *demand*, *empty* and *floating signifier*, *antagonism*, and *heterogeneity*.

Denisse Sciamarella

Topološko branje Ernesta Laclauva

Gljučne besede: topologija kaosa, nelinearna dinamika, politična teorija, populizem, hegemonija, antagonizem, heterogenost

Pričujoče besedilo ponuja branje Laclauvove teorije o populizmu, pri čemer uporablja koncepte iz topologije, aplicirane na dinamične sisteme. Članek vzpostavlja analogno ujemanje med elementi, ki so uporabljeni pri rekonstrukciji topološke strukture iz podatkov in kategorijami, kot so *diskurz*, *hegemonija*, *zahteva*, *prazen* in *plavajoč označevalec*, *antagonizem* in *heterogenost*.

Jan Völker

Hegel's *Entäußerung* – Notes on the Kenotic Actualisation

Key words: Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, speculative, presentation, kenosis

The article reads the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as the unfolding of the first circle in the development of spirit. It starts with a deception, as we become aware of the impossibility of reading the text along the lines of a regular understanding of regular meanings: instead, the speculative presentation needs to be written while reading. Philosophy takes place in this actualisation of the speculative, and Hegel appears within the text not as its author, but as the site of the speculative, in which he disappears at the same time. This first circle creates a model for the development of spirit in which the theological form of the kenosis is actualised. Spirit empties itself and actualises itself as externalised, directing us beyond Hegel's text to other texts, only to find its actual presentation in other places.

Jan Völker

Heglovo povnanjenje – zapiski o aktualizaciji kenoze

Ključne besede: Hegel, Fenomenologija duha, spekulativno, prikaz, kenoza

Članek bere predgovor k *Fenomenologiji duha* kot razgrinjanje prvega kroga v razvoju duha. Prične z razočaranjem, ko se ovemo nemožnosti branja besedila po vzoru običajnega razumevanja običajnih pomenov. V nasprotju s takim branjem, bi bilo treba spekulativno predstavitev pisati med tem, ko jo beremo. Filozofija se dogaja ravno v tej aktualizaciji spekulativnega, Hegel pa se v besedilu ne pojavi kot njegov avtor, temveč kot mesto spekulativnega, v katerem sam tudi izgine. Ta prvi krog ustvari model za razvoj duha, v katerem se aktualizira teološka oblika kenoze. Duh se izprazni in se aktualizira kot povnanje in nas tako usmerja onkraj Heglovega besedila v druga besedila, zato da bi na drugih mestih našel svojo dejansko predstavitev.

Jelica Šumič Riha

Truth between Semblance and the Real

Key words: semblant, truth, the real, discourse, jouissance, psychoanalysis, Lacan

What is the peculiar evocative force of the notion of the real? Rather than succumbing to the temptation of forcing appearance in order to accede to the real supposed to be lurking behind it, for Lacanian psychoanalysis the access to the real is that of the semblance. While one of our aims in this paper is to briefly outline the development of Lacan's rather peculiar "realism", we would also wish to emphasize the relation between the real and the semblance as being the crux of Lacan's later teaching. Indeed, for psychoanalysis, the question of the real is inseparable from the interrogation of the semblance, a term forged by Lacan in the last period of his teaching in order to rework the relation between the truth and the real. This is why although the semblance is relevant to numerous contemporary discourses, it is only in psychoanalysis that this problem is raised to the level of one of the central theoretical and practical issues. Omnipresent, unsettling, yet unresolved, this problem comes to the fore at the critical moments in the history of psychoanalysis, thereby marking turning points at which the orientation of psychoanalysis is at stake.

Jelica Šumič Riha

Resnica med dozdevkom in realnim

Ključne besede: dozdevek, resnica, realno, diskurz, užitek, psihoanaliza, Lacan

Raje kakor da bi podlegla skušnjavi raztrgati videz, zato da bi se dokopala do realnega, ki naj bi tičal za njim, je za lacanovsko psihoanalizo dozeved edini dostop do realnega. Eden od namenov pričujočega članka je podati karatek oris Lacanovega svojevrstnega

“realizma”, zato da bi na tem ozadju izpostavil razmerje med dozdevkom in realnim kot ključnim momentum poznega Lacana. Za psihoanalizo je vprašanje realnega neločljivo od preiskovanja dozdevka, pojma, ki ga je Lacan razdelal v zadnjem obdobju svojega nauka, zato da bi na novo obravnaval razmerje med resnico in realnim. Zato je problem realnega, ki je sicer pomemben tudi v drugih sodobnih diskurzih, edino v psihoanalizi postavljen na raven enega centralnih teoretskih in praktičnih problemov. Vsepričujoč, vendar nerazrešen, problem dozdevka stopi v ospredje v kritičnih trenutkih zgodovine psihoanalize, s čimer zaznamuje ključne momente, ko je orientacija psihoanalize ključni zastavek psihoanalitične prakse in teorije.

Cindy Zeiher

Lacan's Fifth and Unfinished Discourse: Capitalism's Alchemist Dream

Key words: Lacan, Marx, capitalist discourse, social bond, jouissance, ideology

Why is it that we sometimes think of Lacan as Marxist when he is so assertive in being Freudian? Perhaps it is because Lacan perceives Marx rather than Freud as the discoverer of the symptom and furthermore places Marx as central to his fifth Capitalist discourse, in contrast with his previous discourses which are all inspired by Freud. This article considers how Lacan's final and arguably unfinished Capitalist discourse stands apart from all the others, yet at the same time it reveals contradictions and possible parallels with them as it attempts to unravel the dialectical tensions between the problematic production and consumption of meaning.

Cindy Zeiher

Lacanova peti in nedokončani diskurz: alkemistične sanje kapitalizma

Ključne besede: Lacan, Marx, kapitalistični diskurz, družbena vez, jouissance, ideologija

Zakaj včasih razmišljamo o Lacanu kot o marksistu, ko pa sam zase tako odločno trdi, da je freudovec? Morda zato, ker dojemamo Marxa in ne Freuda kot odkritelja simptoma in ker je za razliko od prvih štirih diskurzov, na katere je vplival Freud, osrednjo vlogo v petem, kapitalističnem diskurzu, podelil Marxu. Članek pokaže, da se Lacanov zadnji in domnevno nedokončani kapitalistični diskurz loči od vseh drugih, a ob tem tudi razkriva protislovja in morebitne vzporednice z njimi, saj poskuša razkriti dialektične napetosti med problematično proizvodnjo in potrošnjo pomena.

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3. Granger, *op. cit.*, str. 31.
4. *Ibid.*, str. 49.
5. Friedrich Rapp, "Observational Data and Scientific Progress", *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, Oxford, 11 (2/1980), str. 153.

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3. Granger, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
5. Friedrich Rapp, "Observational Data and Scientific Progress", *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, Oxford, 11 (2/1980), p. 153.

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