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Filozofski vestnik (ISSN 0353-4510) je glasilo Filozofskega inštituta Znanstveno-raziskovalnega centra Slovenske akademije znanosti in umetnosti. Filozofski vestnik je znanstveni časopis za filozofijo z interdisciplinarno in mednarodno usmeritvijo in je forum za diskusijo o širokem spektru vprašanj s področja sodobne filozofije, etike, estetike, politične, pravne filozofije, filozofije jezika, filozofije zgodovine in zgodovine politične misli, epistemologije in filozofije znanosti, zgodovine filozofije in teoretske psihoanalize. Odprt je za različne filozofske usmeritve, stile in šole ter spodbuja teoretski dialog med njimi.

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Structures, Limits, Objects

Alejandro Cerda-Rueda*

Where Did the Unconscious Go? An Approach to Freudian Metapsychology

Keywords

Freud, metapsychology, topography, unconscious, capitalist discourse, ChatGPT, pain, analytical experience

Abstract

It has been suggested that due to AI-technology-generated gadgets, a digital unconscious enables the probable annulment of the Freudian unconscious. The purpose of this article is to delve into Freudian topography as a way to demonstrate that this foreclosure of the unconscious was somewhat present in Freud as of 1920. In addition, regardless of solid attempts at the extinction of the unconscious by contemporary demands, I will focus on how the capitalist discourse and AI-generated technology propose a different form of social bond. Finally, the conceptualization of pain (*Schmerz*) is important for ascribing a different modality to the Freudian unconscious than in recent dissertations, but most importantly, it is a significant element for analytical experience to function properly where it must not be aligned with suffering. An era without an unconscious may foretell a time where enjoyment, as a form of subjectivity, is effaced.

Kam se je izgubilo nezavedno? Pristop k freudovski metapsihologiji

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Ključne besede

Freud, metapsihologija, topografija, nezavedno, kapitalistični diskurz, ChatGPT, bolečina, analitično izkustvo

Povzetek

Pojavile so se ideje, da je zaradi naprav, generiranih s pomočjo tehnologije umetne inteligence, digitalno nezavedno omogočilo skorajšnje izničenje freudovskega nezavedne-

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ga. Ta članek se poglobi v Freudovo topografijo, s čimer želi pokazati, da je bila izključitev nezavednega pri Freudu na določen način prisotna že v letu 1920. Poleg tega se bom ne glede na utemeljene poskuse izničenja nezavednega s strani zahtev sodobnosti osredotočil na to, kako kapitalistični diskurz in tehnologija, ki jo ustvarja umetna inteligenca, predlagata drugačno obliko družbene vezi. Končno je konceptualizacija bolečine (*Schmerz*) pomembna za pripisovanje drugačne modalitete freudovskemu nezavednemu kot v nedavnih disertacijah, predvsem pa je pomemben element za pravilno delovanje analitičnega izkustva, kjer ga ne smemo enačiti s trpljenjem. Doba brez nezavednega lahko napoveduje čas, v katerem bo uživanje kot oblika subjektivnosti izbrisano.



Introduction: Freud's Topographical Obsession

If we could dare attempt an introduction to Freud's metapsychology with an encompassing term, inevitably a single word, something to pull the spirit off its bone, this would most likely be laid under the name of "topography." In *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, this entry is defined as a "theory which implies a differentiation of the psychical apparatus into a number of subsystems [. . .] so that they may be treated, metaphorically speaking, as points in a psychical space which is susceptible of figurative representation."¹ Although the etymology for τόπος, which literally means "place," bears resemblance to various "common-places," Freudian topography must be understood as purely a theory of spaces or localities. Unlike Plato's *ὑπερουράνιον τόπον*—the world of ideas or, more precisely, "place beyond heaven"—or the Aristotelian τόποι considered as rubrics with logical or rhetorical value, Freudian topography hits differently. In psychoanalysis, there is another "scene" to view.

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Freud's topographical intentions were never fully dictated with an anatomical target in mind. He made this quite clear in *The Interpretation of Dreams*² and

¹ Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Quadrige, 1984), 484.

² "I shall entirely disregard the fact that the mental apparatus with which we are here concerned is also known to us in the form of an anatomical preparation, and I shall carefully avoid the temptation to determine psychical locality in any anatomical fashion." Sigmund Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams (1900)," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete*

furthermore, fifteen years later in “The Unconscious,” where he adamantly expressed that “[the] psychical topography has *for the present* nothing to do with anatomy; it has reference not to anatomical localities, but to regions in the [psychical] apparatus, wherever they may be situated *in the body*.”³ Here our italics are not meant to be taken lightly as we will situate part of our analysis on the existing localities that a body has to offer. Contrary to what many psychoanalysts, influenced by an overruling neurological tradition with the aid of mental mapping, have instigated on a deviation from Freud’s metapsychology by “confirming” the location of particular psychical functions (i.e. the superego) in concrete entities within the brain, this “new” materialism seems incomplete. For the most part, Freud is not necessarily interested in advocating for cerebral locations as such, thus his work on aphasias, written in 1891, is a clear example of this zealous criticism. On the contrary, the place of interest—the sought out psychical scene—is indeed the unconscious.

As such, I do not intend to overlook Freud’s purpose in defining his witch-metapsychology tripartite—topography, dynamic, and economy—nor to undermine the potential of neuropsychology. However, what I truly want to unfold in this article is that as a result of his topographical sketching, which covered most of his professional life, Freud committed an omission, a minor hiccup in his scientific pursuit, since it was by way of his most eccentric adventure at formalizing abstract models of the mind, a daring conjectural achievement at framing the unconscious, that he offered us a legitimate appreciation of the *seelischer Apparat*. In spite of that, he did commit a fine slip of the tongue by leaving the locality of the unconscious (after 1923) exclusively to the domain of the id. All in all, in psychoanalysis, a mark left by an erasure is never to be taken lightly.

Thus, we must ask: a) What consequences remain from such oversight?; b) Is the rising advocacy in favor of a new unconscious appearing with the dawn of technologies such as ChatGPT?; and c) Which paths could this topographical adventure take us on by providing a comprehension of psychoanalysis as not only a tradition of the mind, but also, most importantly, of the body itself.

Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 5:536.

³ Sigmund Freud, “The Unconscious (1915),” in *Standard Edition*, 14:175.

From Eels to Psychoanalysis: The Sketches

Early in his medical studies, Freud enjoyed drawing diagrams—as a matter of fact, he was quite a talented artist at doing so—thus inserting his practice in the 19th-century tradition of histological illustrations that allowed the enhancement of microscopic cells and biological tissues as well as picturing the internal shapes and contours of various organisms. A true endeavor for a credible anatomist. One of his earliest drawings—and perhaps his most memorable—were those of the testicles of the eel, drafted in 1877, and later those of spinal ganglia of lamprey fish and nerve fibers in freshwater crayfish, both published in 1878 and 1882, respectively, which laid the foundation for the discovery of the neuron doctrine. It is curious to think of how Freud, while searching for the “hidden” gonads of the male eel, which to his disappointment he could not locate successfully,⁴ stumbled upon the fact that the primitive form of the dissected organism was intersexual after all, that is, it has both male and female characteristics, thus promoting not only the early stages to his future sexual theory (bisexuality as a constitutive part of our nature) but also paving the way to one of his earliest manuscripts, namely the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*. From this point forward, his neuro-artistic attention gradually shifted to a more compelling understanding of the mind, thus cells, fish, medullas, and acoustic nerves transformed themselves into abstract figures and outlines. The materiality of the “living” copied specimen now became the development for the conceptual, particularly for a hypothetical and speculative incorporeal entity.

In 2006, the New York based art historian Lynn Gamwell—alongside South African psychoanalyst Mark Solms—curated an art exhibit celebrating Freud’s neurological drawings and diagrams of the mind at the Binghamton University Art Museum, commemorating the 150th anniversary of his birth. This exposition peeked into the evolution of Freud’s scientific reasoning through illustrations that stretched from histology and anatomy up to psychoanalysis.⁵ In such mat-

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⁴ In those years, the reproduction of the European eel was a “dark continent” for science. According to the German anatomist Max Schultze, everything was already known to science with the exception of the “eel question”: no gonad maturation, no egg or sperm laying, no larvae. How then did the eel reproduce?

⁵ See Lynn Gamwell and Mark Solms, *From Neurology to Psychoanalysis: Sigmund Freud’s Neurological Drawings and Diagrams of the Mind* (Binghamton, New York: Binghamton University Art Museum, 2006).

ter, one of Gamwell's arguments addresses the importance for 19th century researchers of finding novel ways to delineate that which "could not be seen"—the microscope being the tool of choice preferably—and prompting them to draw suppositional explanations. Reluctant to accept the authority of British empiricism and French positivism, and re-igniting the age-old philosophical debate as to where reality was to be situated (in the physically visible or in functions that were intangible), Freud consistently fluctuated between clinical observations and his own theoretical formulations, thus confirming a well-known maxim arising from Charcot's lectures at the Salpêtrière that he attended: if theory cannot give a solid account or explanation of a given phenomenon . . . well, so much for theory. Even if an unconscious locality does not meet a "positive" criterion, it must give ground to the observable clinical material beyond any speculative diagram.

Indeed, the place where Freud's diagrams made any sense were precisely in the locality alongside his clinical observations. In such tradition, perhaps we can see a brief parallelism with Lacan and his use of graphs, knot theory, and topology in order to demonstrate the concrete as formal abstractions. As a formulation condenses knowledge, similar to dream formation, it also demands rearrangement for its understanding to be somewhat attained. Precisely this is what Freud earnestly shared in his epistolary exchange, for nearly two decades, with his esteemed colleague Wilhelm Fliess: case studies, dreams, and scientific formulations. This heartfelt correspondence not only triggered Freud's self-analysis, but it also ignited the production of various outlines that he continuously reworked in future years. It was precisely in that moment that his most prominent "metapsychological" transformation took place.

From 1895 to say 1923, Freud built his model of the mind—a complex *seelischer Apparat*—based on two distinct topographies: 1900's topography is best known for its "systems" and 1923's topography is rather positioned on "instances." But foremost, 1895 is a key year for this transition to develop. Firstly, his publication co-written with Josef Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, opened a chapter to their comprehension not only of a new treatment but also of the logical functionality of their patient's ailments, thus a different locality, "another scene," was to be taken into consideration when treating their symptoms. Secondly, although he reluctantly shelved the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, considering its ideas to be unfinished, it comes as no surprise to find in this text Freud's most

ambitious attempt at depicting the psychical apparatus—emanating from met-abiological inquiries with abstract aspirations. However, the eminent neurologist soon-to-become-psychoanalyst was not very satisfied with this manuscript, thus he locked it away until it was rediscovered in 1950. (Only Lacan seemed to notice the value of such text.)

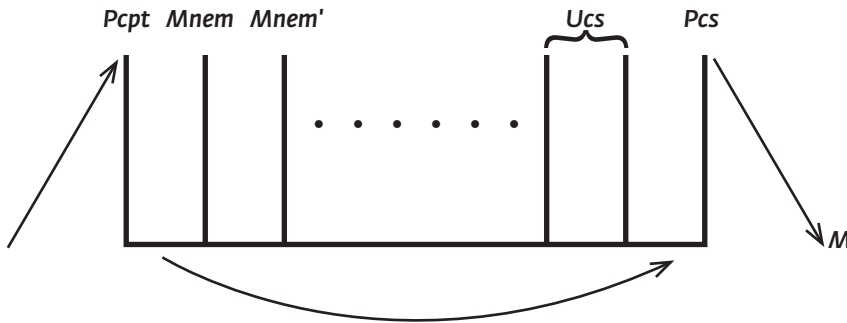


Fig. 1: First topography, 1900, in Freud, "Interpretation of Dreams," 541.

The draft of the first topography raises Freud's concern with achieving a suitable locus for dream formation, the whereabouts of the newly "discovered" unconscious system (*Ucs*). He carefully places the *Ucs* between two vertical lines that cover the grounds for such system. What is *in* this compartment? In such sense, an outline is formalized between two moments of translation (Freud once called this "censorship"), ergo two parallel lines "holding the dam" to form a sort of "bucket of the unconscious." Anything that traversed the second line (to the right) up until the *Pcs* system or motility (*M*, in this diagram) is considered a formation of the unconscious (i.e. slips of the tongue, parapraxes, symptoms, jokes, accidents, and/or acting out). However, dreams (and hallucinations) work differently based on a regressive inclination.

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Interestingly enough, Freud's 1900 topography functions primarily according to the reflex arc model revamped by John Dewey in 1896. Indeed, Freud cannot rub away his neurological background just yet. However, what is at stake here is something other than pure physiology. Freud observed in the regressive character of dreams (and hallucinations) the material where unconscious representations are resolved as pure satisfaction (i.e. dreams as wish fulfillment). Although a circumflexed arrow appears showing the direction towards which the psychical apparatus is oriented, this is only depicted to signal the typical movement

that works under the inherited reflex arc: stimuli → response, cause → effect, from perception to motility. Nonetheless, Freud shows that the force of attraction was not given by the direction the arrow displayed, but the opposite. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he stated: “If we describe as ‘progressive’ the direction taken by psychical processes arising from the unconscious during waking life, then we may speak of dreams as having a ‘regressive’ character.”⁶ Therefore, we can speculate that in order for Freud’s 1900 topography to function properly, it not only situates its degrees of translation in successive epochs being maneuvered by the consistency of “progress,” but rather it also operates by virtue of a dual shifting temporality: P ↔ M.

By 1923, things have drastically changed: it appears that the Latinized id has taken over the entire unconscious scene. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud marks his second topography with the introduction of three instances: the id, the ego, and . . . the acoustic channel? Yes, Freud’s return to his linguistic diagrams could not be more evident. Stemming from a cauldron of drives (id) confronted by defense mechanisms (ego), his conceptualization of an unconscious system now seems to be at risk. Freud is candidly open about the possibility of splitting the unconscious into two entities: “We recognize that the *Ucs* does not coincide with the repressed; it is still true that all that is repressed is *Ucs*, but not all that is *Ucs* is repressed.”⁷ This is a pivotal point in Freudian theory where the unconscious splits into two subsystems: the primal and the repressed. According to Recalcati,⁸ these two unconsciouses can also be interpreted as two different archaeologies that address the discovery of truth: on the one hand, we are left with an archival archaeology referred to as the subversion of desire, but, on the other hand, we are struck with a deeper sense of an attestation of the drive directed by the forces of the death drive. Which course does Freud take? In short, both.

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Unfortunately, after his 1923 elucidations, various authors took to arms to abandon his first dissertations in favor of a more theoretical and practical interest in the ego, id, and superego. However, this is where Freud’s omission comes into

⁶ Freud, “Interpretation of Dreams,” 542.

⁷ Sigmund Freud, “The Ego and the Id (1923),” in *Standard Edition*, 19:18.

⁸ Massimo Recalcati, *L'uomo senza inconscio: Figure della nuova clinica psicoanalitica* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2010).

place. If we look at the 1923 diagram closely, there are some interesting elements that demand our attention.

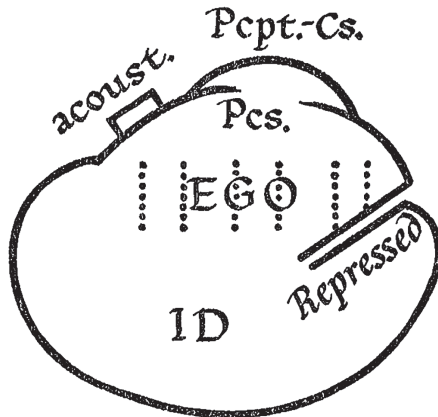


Fig. 2: Second topography, 1923, in Freud, “Ego and the Id,” 24.

It is notorious that Freud opened the psychical apparatus to a sphere-like formation governed by the capitalized letters of the ego and the id. However, we must focus on how the preconscious system (*Pcs*) and the conscious system (*Pcpt-Cs*), the latter linked to perception, are now connected. Also, a special place is granted to an outlet that allows the return of the repressed to occur regularly. Furthermore, another observation leads us to Freud’s appreciation of the acoustic sphere—he even draws what seems to be a hearing-aid for what would later be identified as the superego’s site. But, most importantly, where did the unconscious go? This omission in print led many to think that it was no longer convenient nor admissible to talk about the unconscious. As we shall see, this is not the case both clinically and politically speaking, thus returning to what Lacan said during his second seminar about a generation of psychoanalysts forgetting the dimension of the unconscious, or merely “stitching up the gap” of what was truly at the core of Freud’s discovery. Although a minor Freudian slip, the political implications for today’s assessment of the reaches of the unconscious are still in contention.

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Foreclosure of the Unconscious?

In 2010, Massimo Recalcati suggested in his book *L'uomo senza inconscio* (*The Man without an Unconscious*) a certain alertness springing from our modern

times: the disappearance of the subject left without an unconscious. In his inaugural reasoning, Recalcati posits five distinctive hypotheses for this alteration: a) an increasing tendency for scientific research to be relevant on the parameters of quantification, only statistical figures are taken as valid acceptance of knowledge; b) an ever-growing inclination for the premises of immediacy, an instantaneous experience where there is no longer any time for thought (perhaps our handling of gadgets are to blame); c) further antagonistic claims related to desire and its affiliation to law, hence the encounter with the Freudian unconscious entails coming up against a limit, an interruption of immediate non-castrated enjoyment; d) the mastery of truth being reduced to the expanding use of biotechnological knowledge leaving the judgement of being out of the equation; and e) the unnecessary requirements for a cure, which establishes a novel relationship to the unconscious, while favoring other forms of contemporary “relief” in the guise of well-being or a feel-good society. While these five hypotheses claim to be at the epicenter of modern culture and its discontent, there is the following critique to be resolved: Are these solid attempts at the extinction of the unconscious or merely anthropological mutations of our times? Whatever the allegation may be, one does not exempt the other.

According to Recalcati, the experience appropriated by the subject of the unconscious is three-fold: it is the concurrence of truth, difference, and desire. At the risk of losing its efficacy due to the fact of how contemporary demands have managed to unfold new forms of liaisons between subjects, peculiar modes of discursivity have permeated our social bond. In a time of standardized well-being, any kind of ailment and/or psychological distress must be considered a deviation from this norm, up to the point of nullifying any articulation of singularity. While psychoanalysis examines the uniqueness of each symptom as a ramification of a more complex historicity within the subject, as a mode of a particular existence, our modern times contribute to achieving exactly the opposite: the erasure of any form of psychological symptomatology in support of preserving a social norm. Thus, we are left with two questions: 1) What sort of discourse is promoted for such a calamity to be materialized? and 2) What remains of the body?

For the first part, the discourse at stake is what Lacan rightly introduced in 1972 as a formalized but unusual type of discursivity: the capitalist discourse.⁹ While most discourses tend to work regularly according to the placement of four relative positions (agent, Other, product, and truth) and their companion terms (subject [\$], master-signifier [S₁], knowledge [S₂], and object petit [a]), these distinct qualities do not seem to differ much from the capitalist discourse. It is the latter's mode of operation that is precisely offbeat. Rather than following a dextrorotatory flow, or even the opposite, a levorotatory action, the capitalist discourse delivers something noticeable: a new form of shifting that is neither progressive nor regressive, since all terms do not necessarily follow the usual operative flow, but it appears to create an endless loop between terms. This, however, does tend to bring about a series of proceedings concerning the actual purpose of this discourse. For example, while the subject links to the master-signifier in the form of truth, it is only there to signal towards the knowledge stemming from object petit *a*: ergo the endless production of enjoyment. Let us remember that while Lacan started to use the term "discourse" as a social bond founded in intersubjectivity, he also stressed the importance of the trans-individual nature of language, thus beckoning the emphasis of another subject through speech. Which sort of social bond is produced by each discourse depends on the way each position is taken by the four terms at hand. This fifth discourse ignites a different approach: rather than formalizing a new bond, its apparent aim does exactly the opposite, it gravitates towards its own destruction—liquefying the social bond between subjects.

According to Lacan, the capitalist discourse casts a surplus turned into a compulsory demand for enjoyment (*jouissance*). Currently, the outdated prohibition established by a superego to cease the ever-demanding enjoyment of say coital relations now turns upside-down and forces the subject into an excess of enjoyment as a lucrative imperative: rather than being prohibited from enjoying sex, now the demand turns into a compulsory exigency to do so. While the classical Freudian superego connoted a libidinal renouncement, nowadays the exhausting impulse to enjoy becomes the new social requirement. Therefore, our modern *saeculum obscurum* of overabundance implied by the endless supply of objects of consumption thrown insistently by the global market are precisely contemporary forms of servitude not to a master-signifier—as the

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⁹ See Giacomo B. Contri, ed., *Lacan in Italia, 1953–1978* (Milan: La Salamandra, 2007).

master's discourse foretells—but to our only aim: to enjoy urgently and continuously. In this case, there is no guaranteed bond with an Other, which can only occur through narcissistic alienation, thus alterity becomes an uncomfortable nuisance.

A useful way to illustrate this is best seen in Brandon Cronenberg's film *Infinity Pool* (2023), where a group of wealthy tourists vacation on the fictitious island of La Tolqa, and, in complicity with local authorities, are allowed to perform any sort of atrocities as long as they pay the customary fees which authorize the officials to cast a double of the perpetrator solely for social "justice." While the clone is brutally punished for the original host's crime, this sort of practice eventually turns into an endless spree of depravity and criminal behavior since there are no permanent consequences for the tourists' actions as they can always pay for another double to take the fall. During the film, the ontological question thus becomes: How do we know if we are truly the "original" subject or just a replica thereof that has watched its own assassination? In other words, does the clone have a conscience, or even better yet, an unconscious? While the protagonist James Foster, a mediocre writer, is drawn deeper into the realms of his own heinous enjoyment, we come to figure out that it is not necessarily a question of the subject or its double, but precisely an unscrupulous effort to view the unending force that drives these figures to such barbaric crimes, thus a capitalist discourse rationale is involved. How many layers of humanity does the subject have to shed in order to expose its true immoral core? In the final scene, we are left with an image of an alienated James Foster determinedly stranded on the island while the monsoon season has begun and the rest of the tourists have returned home: a subject (or a clone) bare to its pure enjoyment.

As Žižek points out, we are living in the end times where enjoyment has become an imperative condition.¹⁰ Therefore, through the appearance of this discourse, we foresee subjects that "relate"—be it through social media, computer-generated AI programs, or unlimited expenditure prompted by a free-flow market to consume. Nonetheless, the capitalist discourse is properly seen here to be a forthright characterization of the subtraction of love, an accurate anti-lover's discourse. Since the experience of love forcefully implies a loss in order to access the field of the Other, capitalist discourse's intentions turn against the self

¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2011).

where apparently “nothing” gets lost in a perpetual model of “anti-love” while our own enjoyment leaves us ceaselessly isolated, much like James Foster. Is not the experience of love in modern times such a burden that it is preferably more attractive to remain in an endless loop of narcissistic self-centered bliss rather than taking the risk of actually losing a tiny bit of our own selves? Sometimes although we may perceive the act of not losing as a feeble form of “winning,” it is actually the opposite—thus as a result of taking the leap away from this sequestered enjoyment we may actually gain something by, paradoxically, losing. If entry to speech was achieved when the *infans* was sacrificed, such mystery may also be applicable to love.

So, following Recalcati’s opening argument, our times, fueled by a ceaseless drive prompted by a capitalist discourse, in fact provoke a disengagement between the concurrence of truth, difference, and desire, or, in other words, the experience of the subject of the unconscious is fading amidst the contemporary demands of society. How are these changes, then, modifying our corporeal “topography,” especially when engaged through AI-generated technologies and/or gadgets?

Advocacy for a New Unconscious

In recent times, people have stopped dreaming, or so it seems. An obsessive patient deeply preoccupied with his career and who wanted to find more advantageous ways of being productive with his time and efforts, once told me that he was utterly incapable of formulating a dream, so he turned to ChatGPT to compose one—and it did. Moreover, nowadays it seems that the demand for analysis, commonly praised as a demand of love, has abruptly shifted into a demand for productivity or efficiency. According to Bollas, this “normotic illness” is characterized by a lack of awareness of an interior life, hence no knowledge of dream formation is accepted.¹¹ Usually analysands come into the consultation room with a blank “stare” into their own intrinsic affairs. Turning back to our example, the content of the AI-generated dream is not important for our purposes, but it is precisely the action taken by a speaking subject leaning on the technology at hand that confronts us with an aggravating reality.

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¹¹ Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (London: Free Association, 1987).

Is ChatGPT a new form of the unconscious? This thesis has recently been at the epicenter of a vibrant debate between Rouselle,¹² Murphy,¹³ Žižek,¹⁴ and others.¹⁵ If we look at such arguments, most of them agree that ChatGPT stands in as a new unconscious, in the Lacanian tradition, as a novel form of the social bond. If this is their supposition, evidently pointing at the definition provided by Lacan that “the unconscious is the discourse of the Other,” then these claims are absolutely correct. However, my first critique would be to think outside the Lacanian box and try to figure this out from a Freudian perspective. Indeed, only Rouselle’s reasoning seems to take the time to point at this direction by taking into consideration dream-work as the *via regia* to the unconscious, where censorship is precisely needed for the continuity of sleep (thus satisfaction). However, what apparently looks like an honest Freudian hint is only a limited suggestion since it merely draws on one of Freud’s topographical diagrams. In alliance with a linguistic effort that establishes the division of a subject through speech, the Lacanian unconscious is displayed. This is accurate even from a Freudian perspective, but only up to 1920. However, I believe that what is actually missing from this debate is an essential element provided by Freudian theory. If the repressed unconscious is established through castration, then a division is installed in the subject, but what about that “other” scene which Freud neglected in 1923?

According to Žižek,¹⁶ a concise definition of the Freudian unconscious is “knowledge which doesn’t know itself,” or, in other words, his infamous “unknown knows.” Which unconscious are we talking about when we claim that ChatGPT is “an unconscious without responsibility”? Yes, the digital unconsciousness that Žižek and Rouselle aim at cannot be a bearing for the subject’s

¹² Duane Rouselle, “Escaping the Meta-Verse, Or ‘Forgiveness for the Artificially Intelligent?’,” in *Psychoanalysis and ChatGPT*, ed. Alfie Brown (London: Everyday Analysis Free Press, 2023), 9–14; Duane Rouselle, “ChatGPT, From a Window in Baltimore,” in Brown, *Psychoanalysis and ChatGPT*, 51–58.

¹³ Mark G. Murphy, “E-scaping Responsibility and Enjoyment Through ChatGPT: A New Unconscious?,” in Brown, *Psychoanalysis and ChatGPT*, 15–20.

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, “ChatGPT Says What Our Unconscious Radically Represses,” in Brown, *Psychoanalysis and ChatGPT*, 21–25.

¹⁵ Katherine Everitt, “Does ChatGPT Enjoy?,” *The Philosophical Salon*, May 15, 2023, <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/does-chatgpt-enjoy/>.

¹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, “Philosophy, the ‘Unknown Knows,’ and the Public Use of Reason,” *Topoi* 25 (September 2006): 137–42, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-006-0021-2>.

dismissal of his or her own responsibility for their unconscious formations. Like both authors like to underline, “That wasn’t me! It was my AI” suggests a trend not only regarding uncompromising forms of sociality, but also concerning distorted ethical positions where subjects disregard any responsibility for their own accountabilities. Similar to when a first-time analysand who once dreamt that he was stealing money from the firm he worked at immediately directed his attention towards me and unashamedly confessed: “Do not think that I am able to perform something like that! On the contrary, I am a fully responsible employee *incapable* of such fraud,” but after two months into his own analysis and he was “incapable” of making his first payment arguing that he had forgot. Such forgetfulness needs to be called out accurately as a subjective position. Accordingly, this is precisely the sort of symbolic dimension that ChatGPT brings into question. Now, we must focus on the “the unconscious without the paternal structuring point,” as Murphy argues.¹⁷

Evidently, this observation is already found in Freud as of 1920: an unconscious that is not repressed but continues to function without an intermediary such as castration or speech. Since there is no metalanguage, how can we display the presence of an unconscious that is not traversed by language itself? One way to look into this problem is by delving into Everitt’s rebuttal: Does ChatGPT enjoy? Her answer is “no,” since ChatGPT does not experience anxiety.¹⁸ In addition, she also signals that since ChatGPT cannot be taken as an externalized unconscious, it is perhaps most likely to be understood as “a mirror for our own enjoyment.” Even if her claims are accurate, there is still something missing in her counterargument. As Rouselle rightfully brings forth as an immediate response, we must ask: “Enjoy, but with what body?”¹⁹

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Let us pause here for a moment. As Rouselle’s contention focuses primarily on gadgets such as ChatGPT understood as extensions of the body, an argument extracted directly from Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, “demonstrating that the ideological environment is itself embodied,”²⁰ there is a clear view of the position taken by the subject and its relation to gadgets as forms of enjoy-

¹⁷ Murphy, “E-scaping Responsibility,” 16.

¹⁸ Everitt, “Does ChatGPT Enjoy?”

¹⁹ Rouselle, “ChatGPT, From a Window in Baltimore,” 51.

²⁰ Rouselle, 51.

ment—say the invention of a prosthetic unconscious.²¹ This perspective is obvious when we come to think about the impact these technologies are having upon our bodies. For example, how many times have we felt the vibration of an incoming call in our pockets only to be duped by the fact that we were not actually carrying our mobile phone at the time, or the expectant anxiety that is produced by the mesmerizing circular movement of the “refresh button” while we await a webpage to bring forth new content—say an email, a comment, or merely recently uploaded material (it feels like being halted in front of a slot machine in a casino). I will not contest all the multiple quivers that our bodies encounter constantly, since they are examples which we agree (sadly) are true; consequently, language could not have been conceived if such a collision was not supposed. However, what I believe is utterly essential to underline is the fact that there is a dimension in the body itself which will remain unrepresented.

To think of a model where the body is represented solely by language in its entirety is impossible. Since his earliest drafts, Freud was fully aware of this “unknown” compartment within the body. For example, in “Draft G. Melancholia,”²² there is a split, two dimensions where the internal (proper) and external (foreign) not only intertwine—some might speculate an early allocation to extimacy—but a division is established only separated by a boundary between the somatic and the psychical. Therefore, a division is accomplished within the body between certain represented states known as predicates (repressed material) and another unrepresented state placed as a core, namely and most properly coined as *Es* in Nietzsche’s tradition. Psyche and soma never fully integrate but also never fully disengage; they easily intertwine. This is the place where the inclusion of a primal unconscious comes to be, but also where I believe Freud blundered by granting too much advocacy to the id. In other words, the body which the body “enjoys” beyond the usage of gadgets is not the extension granted by such tools, but foremost it is a location within its own intrinsic quality. Lacan was quite decisive when he expressed that another name for *jouissance* was precisely the “second body,” or the “more body within the body.” This latter addition bears resemblance precisely to that foreign quality that the Freudian unconscious has always depicted beyond its own repressive scope, which is implicitly associated with the sexual.

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²¹ Murphy, “E-scaping Responsibility,” 15–20.

²² Sigmund Freud, “Draft G.—Melancholia,” in *Standard Edition*, 1:202.

In order to add a bit more complexity to the on-going debate that has fueled various disputes, I ask: Can ChatGPT not only enjoy, but also, more precisely, can it experience pain? Rather than focusing on the constitutive split of an outdated subject (the repressed unconscious, in Freudian terms), it is still worthwhile highlighting the formations of the unconscious, as Rouselle has rightfully claimed that “the slip of the tongue is not the ultimate measure of an unconscious formation,”²³ since AI-generated programs can actually emulate such wobbling. For the unconscious to operate, repression is indispensable, but I will argue in favor of another path chosen by Freud in an attempt to draw upon topography.

Freud and the Perks of *Schmerz*

On 22 August 1938, Freud wrote the following entry in his journal: “Space may be the projection of the extension of the psychical apparatus. No other derivation is probable. Instead of Kant’s *a priori* determinants of our psychical apparatus. Psyche is extended; knows nothing about it” (Psyche ist ausgedehnt, weiss nichts davon).²⁴ A year prior to his death, Freud was still concerned with the metapsychological problem of locality, but, in a more concise matter, it is clear that his viewpoint was to examine space as an extension of the subject. No matter how far the psyche can expand without employing Kantian meridians, there is still a place which “knows nothing about it.” According to Nancy, in his exalted *Corpus*, “Bodies don’t take place in discourse or in matter. They don’t inhabit ‘mind’ or ‘body.’”²⁵ Henceforth, with a direct reference to Freud’s posthumous note, Nancy employs a distinct parallelism by situating the “psyche” as being precisely a body in itself which “knows nothing about it”: “The ‘unconscious’ is the being-extended of Psyche, and the thing that some, following Lacan, have called the *subject* is the uniqueness of *local color* or *incarnation*,”²⁶ assertively a body that signifies. By taking this position, a distinction can be made between the classic hysteric, whose body is saturated with signification, too much meaning, construed in itself as part of a repressed unconscious, and today’s psychosomatic patients, where the organs lack signification

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²³ Rouselle, “Escaping the Meta-Verse,” 10.

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Findings, Ideas, Problems,” in *Standard Edition*, 23:300.

²⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 17.

²⁶ Nancy, 21.

as such, thus meaning is absent from a primal unconscious perspective; both Freudian unconsciouss are signaled here not as separate entities but as clear examples of how the body is a fissure of sense. In such matter, the signifier covers the body up to a certain extent, then “knows nothing about it.” In our previous examination, we asked what persisted of our corporeal reality apropos the perils of this “second body.” Rather than focusing on the extension of the psychical apparatus equivalent to a body image that projects surfaces (exteriorities), something amply studied by Freud’s bodily ego and continued with Lacan’s mirror stage, I will examine the function of *Schmerz* (pain) as a collateral outlet for the “second body” to emerge.

Why is the involvement of pain decisive for psychoanalysis? According to Derrida, there is a distinctive quality given by Freud to pain, but, most importantly, to the breaching (*Bahnung*) of a certain force that induces drive facilitation within the body: “It is because breaching breaks open that Freud [. . .] accords a privilege to pain. [. . .] There is no breaching without a beginning of pain, and ‘pain leaves behind it particularly rich breaches’. But beyond a certain quantity, pain, the threatening origin of the psyche, must be deferred, like death, for it can ruin psychical ‘organization.’”²⁷ Without this unpleasant “push,” there can be no beginning—inasmuch as the birth of the subject or the body is concerned. However, there is more to *Schmerz* than just a distressing intensity that can annihilate forms of subjectivity, lest it is compared to suffering. As reported by Freud in 1915,²⁸ pain is considered to be a “quasi-drive” since it is a force (*Drang*) that has an origin (*Quelle*) and an aim (*Ziel*), with the lacking quality of missing a proper object (*Objekt*), thus making its attributes almost comparable to a drive. Furthermore, in *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, Freud claims that pain acts like a “continuous drive stimulus” and is akin to an actual reaction to a loss of object, unlike anxiety, which implies a danger, at most a displacement to this possibility. While pain functions similar to the drive, its proper qualities enable various breaches in the psychical apparatus in light of unknown destinations depending on paths broken by previous gaps. That is why, from a Derridian perspective, a special emphasis is placed on the differences between breaches understood as the origin of memory and the psyche. If these collisions

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (New York: Routledge, 2001), 254.

²⁸ Sigmund Freud, “Repression (1915),” in *Standard Edition*, 14:141–58.

were of equal nature between force and resistance there would be no memory involved, thus no subjectivity at all. Considering that the origin of the psyche is placed within these differences, in addition to the deferral of the intensity of pain, this grants us another view away from the threatening forces of suffering; therefore, pain can also function as a pathbreaker for subjectivity.

Moreover, pain—at least physical distress—acts firstly upon the body. This does not mean that psychical pain is by far the lesser of two evils, although it usually carries a referential content to it, but by placing a certain quantity in the body, Freud offers a favorable approach to elucidating this “second body.” In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry not only situates the dimensions of pain solely upon the premises of expression, but also places in parallel its political implications as well as the material nature of pain proper to creation (i.e. artists’ grief as working through to their oeuvres). In such sense, “physical pain has no voice”²⁹ and thus seems to have no given reality other than the body itself; but “where” in the body does pain enable these three dimensions to align, apart from its aching organs? Can pain really be a directly shareable experience through language or just be mediated through speech acts and a symbolic truce? Pain has a nature unbeknownst to language (at least from its bodily front); throughout his life Freud was well aware of this limitation, even claiming on multiple occasions that “we know very little about pain,” which has remained a conundrum to psychoanalysis. According to Scarry, it is erroneous to think of pain as a realm “beyond” language, but rather it is based more on an alliance with the possibility of making/unmaking our world. Henceforth, pain offers two adjacent outlets to be explored: the pre-language quality of breaching and its linguistic representative successors. Since there is no language for pain to be expressed as it resists verbal objectification, this “second body” materializes into a corporeal reality as enjoyment installs a form of subjectivity.

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Let us recall the addenda in *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, where Freud explores different responses to object separation: anxiety, pain, and mourning. It is the second option that grabs his attention in reference to the subject’s response of “nurturing” too much physical pain while installing a narcissistic investiture that breaks away from social bonds, thus an internal shift is de-

²⁹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 3.

manded: “The transition from physical pain to [psychical] pain corresponds to a change from narcissistic cathexis to object-cathexis.”³⁰ In short, the convulsion of *Schmerz* allows the subject to transfix various unknown breaches in order not to succumb to the scope of iteration within the body; thus enjoyment, as a form of this “second body,” facilitates, through means of valid degrees of manageable discomfort, another reality to be reached, at least beyond the controls of modern well-being ideology. Even if the void left by an insidious painful experience acts similar to an absolute negativity—the core of trauma—it is only there to allow the “second body” to materialize within the body as an opportunity for working-through to commence. Although not enclosed by anatomical references, this corporeal topography is contained within a primal unconscious’s sphere. So, as the body “stops not being written,” and as long as there is a location where quantity mutates into quality, the acts of performativity have as yet to be consolidated.

Furthermore, the nature of Freud’s primal unconscious is not some hidden surface deeper than the repressed unconscious, similar to a lower register of a buried city like the analogy he regularly applied, but rather it operates more akin to an entity that is coalescent to the latter conjunct to pre-verbal phenomena prior to representation. This does not mean that the primal unconscious is located anterior to any form of language; instead, it is imbedded within it with one minor difference: it lacks proper *Vorstellung*; at best we could think of it in terms of vestiges or traces. Following Freud’s second topography, the “overlooked” unconscious is precisely the settlement where *Schmerz* harbors in light of “the breaking of a path” (*Bahnung*). Ergo, pain brought forth by breaching and the primal unconscious may be taken as synonymous categories, since the latter can be employed as another name for enjoyment not arrested by means of repression, even when it turns detrimentally excessive.

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One final note: in his last public talk on 11 November 2000, the centenarian Hans-Georg Gadamer delivered one of his most intimate accounts dealing with the experiences that surrounded his chronic pain which was caused by contracting poliomyelitis when he was 22 years old. As he recovered to some extent from the various effects such illness had upon his body (i.e. partial leg paraly-

³⁰ Sigmund Freud, “Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety (1926 [1925]),” in *Standard Edition*, 20:171.

sis, spinal pain, loss of muscle tissue), this outcome did not come without a certain “incessancy” (*Chronifizierung*) of pain taking over his life as an unaccustomed form of reality. Regardless of the multiple surgeries and palliative care he submitted his body to, he had to learn to live with this pain. Consequently, chronic pain not only turned out to be an agitator of well-being, but it also became an integral part of life as much as thinking: “The real dimension of life can be sensed through pain, if you don’t let yourself be overcome (*überwinden*) by it,” claims Gadamer.³¹ By using the German word *verwinden*, literally meaning “twist,” Gadamer insists on the efforts arranged by the subject not curtailed to acts of resilience or masochistic pleasure, it is rather an experience that “something is dawning on me, something is coming to me (*mir fällt etwas ein*).”³² Although palliative care has advanced in ways that efficiently alleviates the experience of pain, Gadamer insists on the vital dimension that pain brings forth to each subject: the aperture—breaching, in Freudian terms—of life. In fact, according to psychoanalysis, pain is better explicated as a vital force that promotes a certain accession to life, regardless of its deferred and inevitable triumph over the subject. That is why pain must not be equivalent to suffering—while the latter destroys subjectivity, the former ignites it.

Tilting the (Psychoanalytical) Subject

Freudian topography can only take us so far. As it is evidently limited to the rectifications of analytical experience, there is more to straighten out. So, where did the unconscious go? By 1933, “Lecture XXXI—The Dissection of the Psychological Personality” represents one last attempt by Freud to recapitulate metapsychological themes, especially topography. In a corollary sketch to the 1923 diagram, Freud reinserts a proper location for the unconscious alongside the deeper realm of the capitalized id. Therefore, the second topography does not substitute for the previous one; on the contrary, it is due to the first topography that the ground is set. By tilting the diagram below on its side, the sketch from 1900 is recovered.

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³¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Schmerz: Einschätzungen aus medizinischer, philosophischer und therapeutischer Sicht* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2003), 27.

³² Gadamer, 27.

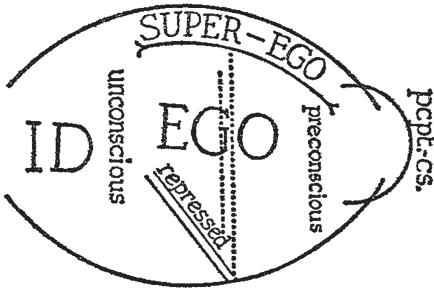


Fig. 3: Further topography, 1933, in Sigmund Freud, "Lecture XXXI—The Dissection of the Psychological Personality (1933 [1932])," in *Standard Edition*, 22:78.

However, it has been widely noted that Freud's oversight was not necessarily the elimination of the unconscious from the second topography, but, most importantly, the restrictions that came about due to using bi-dimensional diagrams. This is something considered by Lacan in his second seminar,³³ where he poses the problem of regression. It is notably acceptable for our arguments that Lacan refers precisely to Freudian topography, especially the 1900 diagram, in order to critique the intricacy of space. Thus, he insists, in his collaboration with Jean Valabrega, on addressing the problem of space in Freud as a true *temporal* topography—at least from the first topography's perspective—a circular entity in the form of a parallelepiped three-dimensional figure covering the *seelischer Apparat* where entry (perception) and exit (motility) converge, rather than thinking it in linear terms, including a flat direction, as Freud clearly showed: the sphere is, then, an improved model for explaining Freudian topography. However, this "topographic unit" is also understood as a model in which two opposite ends paradoxically imply a beginning, thus the "unit" gets decomposed: it is one but split. As Lacan confronts his audience about the risks of "stitching up the gap" left by Freud's discovery, this split must be referred to, then, as that which *Schmerz* insistently refuses to concede.

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While various attempts at formulating terminologies such as a "third topography" (Dejours) or a "third unconscious" (Berardi) have been conceptualized, I propose to look into the *Project of Scientific Psychology* as it has as yet to offer a final unwavering answer. Instead, it compels us with multiple questions as we read along—especially when conceptualizing what is a body in psychoanalysis. It comes as no surprise that pain has a distinctive place at the very beginning

³³ Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991).

of this text, especially situated between “The Problem of Quantity” and “The Problem of Quality.” Could it not be best to think of pain—a “quasi-drive”—as the leading hinge-concept between quantity and quality?³⁴ According to Freud, pain is coetaneous with the very beginning of life since the infant’s first cry, and because it accompanies us throughout our lives to a lesser degree, it converts itself into a noted part of our subjectivity. In this text, *Schmerz*, but more extensively “breaching” (*Bahnung*), becomes the central maneuver for the structure of subjectivity: no given path has as yet been predetermined. In neurological terms, Freud explains: “Pain sets the ϕ [permeable neurons] as well as the ψ [impermeable neurons] system in motion, there is no obstacle to its conduction, it is *the most imperative* of all processes.”³⁵ The efforts implied by such agitation require an additional counterforce.³⁶ So, when addressing the formation of the ego, Freud introduces the term “side-cathexis,” which acts as an inhibition to the course of energy, making each “deviation” (or *différences*, in Derridian terminology) a cornerstone for singularities to propel. In short, each body is eventually a display of forces and inhibitions as it will remain inimitable.

As seen before, *Schmerz* also operates as a hermeneutics of life; thus its aperture promotes thinking. Therefore, closure to pain may perhaps boost an additional hypothesis: the lack of certain discomfort may initiate a proper closure to the unconscious. To eliminate pain completely from human life may be inferred to be an eradication of the breaching it brings forth, so its absolute effacement may imply the dissolution of the body likewise. So, without the initial pulsation brought forth by *Schmerz*, thinking—an irritation to modern capitalist ideologies—turns futile. Let us take the example of the opioid crisis, a disturbing epidemic seen throughout the United States and other parts of the globe. Although opioids’ efficiency in alleviating pain in light of an individual’s arrested existence does provide a benefit, when induced alongside the capitalist discourse, subjectivity becomes superfluous. The continuous advertisement of oxycodone

³⁴ By 1920, Freud shifted his originary sadism theory to a more precise theory of masochism, specifically describing the former erogenous masochism. These views were amply studied in “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” published in 1924.

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, “Project for a Scientific Psychology (1950 [1895]),” in *Standard Edition*, 1:307; italics added.

³⁶ Piera Aulagnier coined “primary violence” as the term for this force, a “necessary” action to get the apparatus activated, unlike the secondary form of violence, which destroys subjectivity.

(OxyContin) or fentanyl-derivative drugs have increased the demand for analgesics in the market. Yes, certain disquieting forms of pain should be soothed urgently. But by doing so, upon the immediacy of dealing with all sorts of ailments (the vast majority of which do not actually need a painkiller as strong as morphine), demand has become a new marketing strategy: eliminating distress above all measures of existence. Does this entail the arrested development of subjectivity? No, it promptly means that our (bodily) breaching drive facilitation becomes limited to stricter and more compressed ideological corsets of appeasement. The “no pain, no gain” slogan is, indeed, its efficient advocate under capitalist discourse.

Still, if the capitalist discourse destroys social bonds, it also dismantles bodies (individually and collectively). In fact, while ChatGPT evidently does not experience pain as a human body does, it formulates novel ways to substitute dreamwork and express our repressed fantasies. Accordingly, what was once the embarrassing experience of acknowledging an “immoral” dream, now turns out to be the displacement of our faults upon the reification of AI technology. But what can psychoanalysis truly offer as a dissident attempt at this contemporary discursivity? It is suggested that this warning is quite startling, but let us be firm about this: a dream formulated by ChatGPT is not a dream. In addition, what psychoanalysis introduces is the fact that *Schmerz* in parallel with love are elements contrary to the capitalist discourse; they are resistances essential for pursuing subjectivity. In fact, both categories can sometimes be taken synonymously as guarantors of the aperture of the unconscious. We have reached a point where there is no turning back since, according to Rouselle, “without love, forgiveness is foreclosed,”³⁷ and if there is something to be drawn from analytical experience, it is precisely its unyielding aim at facilitating different modes of enjoyment not fixed on the premises of capitalist empowerment. Therefore, love as a cure is also defiance. Can there be another way to tilt the psychoanalytical subject? By focusing on the vulnerabilities of the “second body” and its historicity, we just might gain a slight clue to inventing a different future, maybe not a sumptuous one—but hopefully one that is livable.

³⁷ Rouselle, “Escaping the Meta-Verse,” 13.

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The Dialectic of the Limit: Knowledge, Truth, Thinking, and Being after Bataille and Lacan

Keywords

Bataille, fantasy, Lacan, limit, mysticism, inner experience

Abstract

In a series of presentations at Sainte-Anne Hospital, published in English under the title *Talking to Brick Walls*, Lacan offers one of the few explicit references to Bataille in his *œuvre*. He interposes a stark disagreement between himself and Bataille on the status of possible knowledge regarding ontological questions. Lacan reads Bataille as a mystic who proposes that the pursuit of knowledge is a futile task and that knowledge of being is *only* possible *per viam negativam*. In order to advance this reading, Lacan emphasises Bataille's fixation with "nonknowledge." At first glance, one can understand why Lacan identifies him as a mystic, and many commentators on Bataille's writings offer similar reading; however, this ignores subtle nuances of Bataille's arguments regarding what he calls "inner experience." More crucially, it ignores his explicit rejection of mysticism on the very basis of the knowledge that results from nonknowledge. This comparison frames a problem for fundamental ontology, of which I hope to elaborate only one aspect: The incompleteness of thought implies a non-relation between thought and being, and we can have a knowledge about this non-relation through an analysis of the limit as phantasmatic and structural rather than as real.

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Dialektika meje: vednost, resnica, mišljenje in bit po Bataillu in Lacanu

Ključne besede

Bataille, fantazma, Lacan, meja, mysticizem, notranje izkustvo

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Povzetek

V seriji predavanj v bolnišnici Sainte-Anne, objavljeni pod naslovom *Je parle aux murs*, Lacan poda eno redkih eksplicitnih referenc na Batailla, ko vnese strogo razhajanje med njima glede statusa mogoče vednosti o ontoloških vprašanjih. Lacan Batailla bere kot mistika, ki trdi, da je zasledovanje vednosti brezplodno in da je vednost o biti možna zgolj *per viam negativam*. Da bi podkrepil to branje, poudari Bataillovo fiksacijo z »ne-vednostjo«. Na prvi pogled se Lacanova identifikacija Batailla z mistikom zdi razumljiva, in mnogi komentatorji Batailla ponujajo podobna branja; pa vendar, na ta način se izgubijo pretanjene podrobnosti Bataillovih preudarkov glede tega, kar poimenuje »notranje izkustvo«. Še bolj bistveno, na ta način se izgubi njegova eksplicitna zavrnitev mysticizma na podlagi prav tiste vednosti, ki izhaja iz ne-vednosti. Ta primerjava zastavlja problem za fundamentalno ontologijo; v besedilu nameravam razviti le en vidik tega problema: nesklenjenost mišljenja implicira nerazmerje med mišljenjem in bitjo, in do mišljenja tega razmerja se lahko dokopljemo z analizo meje, ne kot realne, temveč kot fantazmat-ske in strukturne.



Introduction: The Mystics Do Not Know

In a series of lectures given at Hôpital Sainte-Anne from 1971–72, Jacques Lacan interposes a disagreement between himself and Georges Bataille on the status of nonknowledge. On a surface reading of Bataille one can easily understand why Lacan identifies him as a mystic, and as such someone who believes that there is a “whole truth” or a truth about truth.¹ If we accept that account, then we should also understand this disagreement as implying that the two thinkers’ deeper projects are not compatible, since, on Lacan’s reading, Bataille’s alleged mysticism is diametrically opposed to the epistemological and ontological precipitates of psychoanalysis. However, on my reading, Bataille’s *œuvre* provides a consistent account of the relation between the architectures of thought and of being, respectively; his examination is founded on a latent reappraisal of the ontological category of the limit. In this structural account, Bataille defines the contours and dynamics of nonknowledge and subjective destitution in a decep-

¹ Jacques Lacan, . . . or Worse, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 154–57; Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 58.

tively rigorous manner, and, moreover, in a way that is consonant with Lacan's own. Both thinkers identify how symbolic discourse is founded upon the structural incompleteness of thought, defining it as something with a mere "structural" limit rather than a "real" limit. Both Bataille and Lacan also describe how we can derive a "knowledge about truth" (*savoir sur vérité*) or a "new knowledge" from the examination of the limit implied by this incompleteness.² This comparison not only establishes a manner of future exegesis of both *œuvres*, but frames how we can investigate two fundamental ontological and epistemological questions anew: *What is the relationship or delimitation between thinking and being, and what constitutes knowledge about this relationship?* The conclusions that I extract through my comparison are thus: *The incompleteness of thought implies a "non-relation" between thought and being, and we can have a knowledge about this non-relation through an analysis of the limit as phantasmatic and structural rather than as real.*

There are, on my count, only five explicit mentions of Bataille across Lacan's *oeuvre*, a strikingly low number given his biographical proximity to Bataille and his explicit discussion of figures close to Bataille—for instance, Maurice Blanchot and Pierre Klossowski—on the topics of fantasy, anxiety, and subjective destitution.³ Lacan pinpoints his perceived disagreement with Bataille in proclaiming:

[My followers] heard fairly well, as well as they can, what I said about knowledge as a fact of this correlate of ignorance, and this troubled them somewhat. I don't know what got into some of them, *it was something literary of course, stuff lying around in the writings of Georges Bataille*, for instance, because otherwise I don't think they would have come across it. I'm referring to non-knowledge.⁴

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What exactly is the debate here and what are its stakes? There are two main thrusts of Lacan's critique of this notion of nonknowledge.

² Lacan, . . . or Worse, 154–57; Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 58.

³ Jacques Lacan, "Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre IX: L'identification, 1961–62" (unpublished typescript, June 27, 1962), PDF document.

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Talking to Brick Walls: A Series of Presentations in the Chapel at Sainte-Anne Hospital*, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 9; italics added.

α) First, ignorance has a correlate knowledge, so Lacan says in the same lecture where he dismisses Bataille.⁵ This is fundamental to psychoanalysis, since there is some knowledge supposedly obscure to the analysand. You go to analysis because you have a symptom—*I'm impotent* or *I compare myself to others obsessively and compulsively*, and so on—and this symptom has an unconscious cause, and psychoanalysis renders a knowledge of this cause. This knowledge has three aspects: knowledge as *symbolic*, knowledge as *unconscious*, and knowledge as *jouissance of the Other*.⁶ It is symbolic because it concerns the subject's relation to meaning, discourse, and the signifier. It is unconscious because it is not decided upon by the conscious subject; it is "formed" and framed within the unconscious fantasy of the subject. Finally, it is the *jouissance* of the Other because it concerns the object that the analysand supposes or fantasises the Other desires. Knowledge acquired through analysis concerns this object, *l'objet a* more precisely, and its place in the unconscious economy of fantasy relative to the Other. Hence, knowledge and *jouissance* occupy equivocal positions for the subject, since what it is we do not know concerns what we unconsciously believe the Other enjoys and why our phantasmatic logic leads to the production of a particular symptom. Now, if one claims that in the end there is only nonknowledge, then Lacan's rebuttal is that nonknowledge only names the moment of the subject's confrontation with what it was already barred from prior to analysis, namely the *jouissance* of the Other or the "cause" of the symptom. In other words, nonknowledge is a feature of the architecture of thought rather than a truth that says something about this architecture. Put in a reductive manner, coming to knowledge of the Other and what a particular analysand unconsciously fantasises must be the enjoyment of the Other is partially the aim of analysis. This implies that there must be a knowledge that we can access if we hope to explain why psychoanalysis functions at all.

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β) The second criticism more directly concerns questions related to ontology and epistemology. On Lacan's reading, Bataille's proposition regarding non-knowledge implies that there is a biunivocal or one-to-one relationship between thought and being. First, let us momentarily accept Lacan's reading wherein Bataille features as a sort of mystic. Lacan sums up his definition of mysticism

⁵ Lacan, *Talking to Brick Walls*, 4–5, 9.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 15.

with the following: “It is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics consists in saying that they experience it but know nothing about it.” The mystic is someone who touches the outer rims of human experience, near the alleged divine, and comes that much closer to absolute knowledge, only for it to decay in the mundane realm post-climax. At first glance, this provides us with a working-definition of nonknowledge as it figures in Bataille’s thought and even seems to exactly describe his own account of the experience of the limit. In *L’expérience intérieure (Inner Experience)*, he chronicles several limit-experiences approximate to religious ecstasy, often consciously using religious and mystic lexicons to trace the outline of something that he apparently knows nothing of. The result, on that reading, is that there is a relationship between thought and being *qua* the alleged divine, ineffable, or mystical. Therefore, the mystic,⁸ experiences the Divine *per viam negativam*. Put differently, the phenomenal world is incomplete for the mystic but the alleged divine world is complete. In the case of eschatological mysticisms, like the one expressed by John of the Cross, the incompleteness of the phenomenal world is promised to one day be completed. This is a problem for Lacan since it misses what the limit-experience of the mystic exposes: that the symbolic structure of thought is incomplete, and its relation to being is not biunivocal, as many mystics would have it.

Bataille offers no such promise and does not produce a mystic theology *per viam negativam* either. My reading becomes more plausible upon close examination of Bataille’s direct engagement with the Christian mystic, Angela of Foligno. He quotes and then comments on Angela’s words, writing,

“God,” said Angela of Foligno, “gave his son, whom he loved, a poverty such that there never was and there never will be a poor man equal to him. And yet he had

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge: Encore, 1972–1973*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 76.

⁸ Now, Lacan does specify further distinctions of mystical experience on the basis of the absence of a sexual relation. There are differences between logically feminine and masculine mystical experience as a consequence of different relations to symbolic castration. The questions such partitions raise, as well as their logical foundations, should not be underestimated in their significance for psychoanalysis, political philosophy, queer theory, and fundamental ontology. For more on this issue, see Lorenzo Chiesa, *The Not-Two: Logic and God in Lacan* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 3–14; Guy Le Gaufey, *Lacan and the Formulae of Sexuation: Exploring Logical Consistency and Clinical Consequences*, trans. Cormac Gallagher (London: Routledge, 2020), 15–20.

Being as property. He possessed substance and it was his such that that belonging is above human speech.” This only concerns Christian virtues: poverty, humility. [. . .] The destitution and death should be the beyond required for the glory of He *who* is eternal beatitude [. . .], a truth as ruinous could be nakedly accessible for the saint. Still: starting from an ecstatic vision, it can’t be avoided.⁹

Bataille’s criticism is that Angela evades the knowledge about truth that her words silhouette. Though God has Being as a property, her ecstatic vision depends upon an experience of destitution of, at least, the feeling of having substance. This Christian mystic thus stands out for Bataille because something in her vision relates a knowledge about the truth about her incompleteness as it is reflected in the Son. The poverty of this Son potentially ruins the supposed sovereignty of the Father insofar as the completion of God’s trinitarian existence depends upon a destitution (of substance) and a death (the Crucifixion). Nonetheless, the saint insists that He retains a minimal determination as a substantial entity, lest we conclude that the Father himself may depend on the deprivation of substance, and thus lose his status as ontologically All, Whole, and One, as is typically posited in Christian mysticism and trinitarian theology. Furthermore, though she claims that this property is “above human speech” she offers no examination of what this implies about speech other than that it is an inadequate mode of expressing something about the Divine or Being. She speaks about experiencing it, but she also claims that she *does not know* what she experiences.

Certainly, Bataille admits his own proximity to Angela and other mystics; yet one should not conflate a proximity to mysticism as agreement. Bataille indicates where this proximity with mysticism becomes opposition. In recounting his participation in an orgy, Bataille writes: “No blame, no shame. Eroticism—the women flaunting their heavy breasts, the crying mouths, which is the horizon—is even more desirable to me if it is removed of all hope. It is not the same as mysticism whose horizon is the promise of enlightenment.”¹⁰ The “horizon” in the orgy denotes the limit before an abyss, and experience of this abyss signifies a loss of a sense of self. Again, the mystic insists upon a vision of completion. The phenomenal world appears incomplete, but an experience of the

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⁹ Georges Bataille, *Guilty*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 19.

¹⁰ Bataille, *Guilty*, 11; translation modified.

alleged divine promises knowledge of the true wholeness of Creation. Thus, the mystic insists that beyond the horizon of an ecstatic experience there stands God. For Bataille, this is representative of what he calls dogmatic mysticism in the opening of *L'expérience intérieure* because it insists on a conclusion that does not follow from the ecstatic experience of subjective destitution ostensibly relayed by mystics.¹¹

Following her own analysis of Bataille's critical, complicated proximity to a mystic like Angela, Amy Hollywood attempts to establish a parallelism between Bataille and Lacan. She cites a lengthy passage concerning Angela and John of the Cross from *Séminaire XX*, where Lacan notes how it is possible for mystics, no matter their physiologically male or female sex characteristics, to expose the operations of the phallic function.¹² Here, the phallic function really is "discursive thought" as Bataille formulates it, since the subjective destitutions experienced by the mystics are submitted to the rules of a symbolic discourse. In other words, the mystics are not mystics all day, every day. They are not constantly in the throes of ecstasy. They submit their experience to the phallic function when they *write or speak about their experience*. Lacan is thus claiming that rendering the mystic experience in language is tantamount to a return to the domain of the phallic function and symbolic castration. Hollywood suggests that for both Lacan and Bataille, something in the mystic evasion of the phallic function in subjective destitution is worth valorising.

Importantly, Lacan himself would not assent to Hollywood's argument for a convergence between himself and Bataille. Recall again that "the essential testimony of the mystics consists in saying that they experience it but know nothing about it" and that, at least in *Je parle aux murs (Talking to Brick Walls)*, Bataille's *L'expérience intérieure* is such a testimony, according to Lacan.¹³ Furthermore, these testimonies ignore the correlate knowledge of ignorance or unconscious knowledge. The kernel of the second Lacanian criticism (β) is present in this characterisation of mysticism and Lacan's association of Bataille with this mysticism. Hollywood's reading of Bataille casts him as the mystic that Lacan con-

¹¹ Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 9.

¹² Lacan, *Encore*, 70; quoted in Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 65.

¹³ Lacan, *Encore*, 76.

demns in *Je parle aux murs*, and so we cannot accept her claim that *Séminaire XX* is a retroactive defence of Bataille's *L'expérience intérieure*.¹⁴

I contend, however, that these associations are not circumspect, despite Hollywood's otherwise careful analysis of the differences between the two thinkers and mysticism. Knowledge does not concern what lies beyond the phallic function necessarily. It instead concerns the logic of the relations that result from what I call the dialectic of the limit exposed by Bataille. For now, though, let us dwell on why Lacan is not himself a staunch supporter of mysticism as Hollywood suggests.¹⁵

The first (α) and second (β) criticisms already detailed both arise from Lacan's quadrangulation of knowledge, truth, being, and thought. The first step in this analysis is establishing the "problem" with truth for Lacan and what he means by "knowledge about truth." As I suggest in this essay's opening paragraph, knowledge about truth corresponds to this new knowledge of a new relation to structural incompleteness, but before we can establish that argument we need to understand what truth in a "pre-reflective" sense might signify for Lacan.

Knowledge about Truth: The Question of Lacan's Relation to Philosophy

Truth, for Lacan, is not *totally* devoid of value; it is just that there are different ways of relating to the notion of truth that are more suspect than others. In this regard, Lacan comes close to so-called "anti-philosophy" as Alain Badiou defines it. On the definition of anti-philosophy, I *partially* concur with Badiou that "the basic gesture of every anti-philosophy involves a destitution of the philosophical category of truth."¹⁶ Indeed, Lacan himself subverts the typical privilege afforded to truth, claiming that "truth is situated by assuming that aspect of the real that acts as a function in knowledge, which is then added to the real [as a supplement]."¹⁷ Badiou himself, however, recognises the need for more ex-

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¹⁴ Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 149–50.

¹⁵ Hollywood, 149–50.

¹⁶ Alain Badiou, *Lacan: Anti-Philosophy 3*, trans. Kenneth Reinhard and Susan Spitzer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 8.

¹⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Autres écrits*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 443; my translation.

egetical vigilance when it comes to considering Lacan's relation to philosophy and truth. He incarnates this vigilance when explaining that

it's perfectly possible to argue that Lacan [. . .] re-established the category of truth. In this re-establishment we find, of course, the gesture of destitution of the philosophical category of truth, while, at the same time, Lacan had to traverse that category. In his traversal of it, he set it aside in favour of another concept that he put in the very place of the analytic act.¹⁸

It is not that Lacan proposes truth is devoid of value, but rather that it serves a function for the speaking subject in establishing a prosthetic, obscuring relationship between thought and being. We can have a knowledge of such truth-effects and the semblances they generate. Badiou perhaps oversteps in claiming that Lacan simply puts truth in "the very place of the analytic act," though. Certainly, Lacan re-establishes a notion of truth insofar as one can have a knowledge of its function *qua* meaning, thinking, and being, and this arguably is a knowledge that springs from analysis, but it is not the sole remit of psychoanalysis for Lacan. After all, the mystics come close to exposing this function of truth in its effects. However, they shirk from the consequences that Lacanian analysis allegedly arrives at.

So, Lacanian psychoanalysis is distinct from mysticism, but all of this begs the question of what psychoanalysis *exactly* is as distinct from philosophy, assuming there is any distinction at all. On this question, Badiou maintains a sharp distinction between psychoanalysis and philosophy, while still noting Lacan's more nuanced "dstitution" of the category of truth. In some regards, his starting point is not entirely incorrect. Lacan views psychoanalysis as not only opposed to a supplementation of the truth of being but also as a discourse which reveals how and why a problematic notion of truth is summoned by the subject to fantasise that the circuit between being and thought is *really* complete. Badiou provides a partially correct formulation of why one might accept that psychoanalysis and philosophy are opposed in writing that "the philosophical operations claim to be coextensive with truth. Philosophy describes itself in a quasi-generic way as a search for truth. But it is clear that the analytic act is anything but

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¹⁸ Badiou, *Lacan*, 23.

a search for truth.”¹⁹ That final sentence falls short of the mark since psychoanalysis is the establishment of a knowledge about truth, a claim which will unfold below. Nonetheless, it is a “method” of locating and identifying the characteristics of a particular analysand’s fantasies, which is to say that Lacanian analysis aims at dispelling problematic (for the analysand) symptoms by establishing a knowledge of the truth undergirding the symptom. It is a discourse which would not be a semblance, to provide a stereotypically Lacanian formulation.

Yet, this requires that psychoanalysis be a knowledge about truth in general, then. Badiou *almost* captures this aspect of Lacan’s argumentation when he writes: “For Lacan, as we see, the truth effect depends on the fact that, in knowledge, a real acts as a function, it functions. [. . .] That’s why psychoanalysis can in no way be understood as a search for truth. It can be an activation of a truth effect.”²⁰ And, in activating a truth-effect, psychoanalysis reveals what was added onto knowledge of the real or to being, depending on the question at hand. Psychoanalysis is thus a way of acquiring knowledge about what truth-effect the subject has adopted in order to suppose that the circuit between being and thought is completed or can be completed. So, the first (α) and second (β) Lacanian criticisms are related: psychoanalysis is a venture of establishing what knowledge of the conscious mind we can have on the basis of unconscious knowledge and *jouissance*, and more specifically how one’s symptom and fantasy supplement the apprehension of being with a truth-effect. We can further define psychoanalysis, then, as an analysis of *ontological misapprehension*. In contrast to another supplement to what is already a supplement, or a truth about truth, a *knowledge about truth* amounts to a knowledge of the misapprehension of the fundamental incompleteness of structure and the subsequent misapprehension of the non-relation between being and thought.

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To reiterate and take inventory: with Hollywood and against Lacan, I conclude that Bataille’s proximity to mysticism is not itself a mysticism of the ineffable or a simple theism. With Lacan and against Hollywood, though, I also maintain that there is a knowledge about truth, that Lacan’s psychoanalysis is not a mystical discourse of some “real” lying beyond experience and sensation, and that it is in fact an analysis of how discourses come to veil the non-relation between being

¹⁹ Badiou, 144.

²⁰ Badiou, 145. Badiou refers to Lacan’s quote previously cited in this article under note 17.

and thought. Close examination of Bataille's dialectic of the limit evinces how Bataille is in accord with Lacan, and what a knowledge about truth actually is.

Presentation of The Four Moments of the Dialectic of the Limit

Lacan's characterisation of nonknowledge in Bataille's thought is not infelicitous, but he ignores its place in a matrix of dialectically related moments, resulting in a common misreading that equates Bataille to a mystic. Nonknowledge is only one moment of what I call the dialectic of the limit. I read the following passage as a crystallisation of this dialectic: "But anguish [*l'angoisse*] is the horror of destitution and the moment comes when, in audacity, destitution is loved, when I give myself to destitution. Then knowledge returns, satisfaction, anguish again, I start over redoubling it up to the point of exhaustion."²¹ I call this a "dialectic of the limit" because the experience recounted and detailed in the writing of *L'expérience intérieure* is elsewhere called a "limit-experience" and exposes features of the ontological category of the limit. Namely, it exposes the structural and phantasmatic character of the limit, which implies that all delimitation and relationality are also structural and phantasmatic rather than *purely* ontological. Furthermore, it is a "dialectic" because of its transformation of contradictory categories into one another, like nonknowledge into knowledge or nonmeaning into meaning. I will illustrate this in detail below.

Now, the moments of the dialectic of the limit are thus: *first*, anguish—*second*, nonknowledge and subjective destitution²²—*third*, knowledge, and a reduplication of the process, which, I argue, implicates a *fourth* moment: knowledge about truth and the restitution of subjectivity. The fourth moment is what commentators on Bataille almost ubiquitously neglect, ignore, or miss. It is the establishment of a new relation to structural incompleteness, and thus constitutes a knowledge about truth *qua* knowledge regarding the limit.

Lacan does not acknowledge Bataille's position *vis-à-vis* the third moment, when "knowledge returns," and it is followed by a spuriously infinite process

²¹ Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 57.

²² I add "subjective" to "dstitution" because, (a) it is an uncontroversial addition since Bataille is referring to an evacuation of a sense of self-conscious and self-constituted consciousness, and (b) it resonates with the phrase Lacan uses to characterise what is written "on the ticket" when someone initiates analysis. Lacan, *Autres écrits*, 252; my translation.

wherein the entire series begins again: anguish—subjective destitution—knowledge *ad infinitum*. In this moment, subjectivity reëmerges and one can derive a new knowledge or simply another, different knowledge about oneself that will be subject to this dialectic of the limit and the travails of *l'angoisse* and subjective destitution inevitably again. In essence, one does not remain in nonknowledge forever and one's subjectivity is *necessarily* restored. The drama of existence must recommence, even after the torture, *le supplice*, that Bataille captures in *La somme athéologique* and whose structure recurs, more strongly than a leitmotif, across Bataille's *œuvre* after the writing of his own inner experience. The limit is surpassed, but is seemingly reconstituted in this restoration of subjective, discursive thought.

Accordingly, this dialectic does not end in a simple capitulation to a Sisyphean existence. In parallel to the third moment of “contestation” or knowledge *ad infinitum*, we can construct a knowledge about truth of this seemingly endless contestation of knowledge. By also neglecting this moment, Lacan neglects the way in which knowledge figures in relation to symbolic discourse, the real, and fantasy in Bataille's thought. This knowledge about truth is really the reconstitution of symbolic castration and the establishment of a new relationship to structural incompleteness. I suggest, echoing Mohamed Tal's own theoretical description of the “end of analysis,” that this end of a limit-experience is theoretically and practically consistent with major tenets of Lacanian thinking: the end of analysis is the establishment of a new relation.²³ Mirroring this, there is a possible opening created by the rupture of subjective destitution with or without the analyst's intervention that can allow one to establish this new relation.

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This is precisely what Bataille describes as his “limit-experience” and its ontological and epistemological results in the writing of *La somme athéologique*. He concludes that “the analysis of laughter [and inner experience as a limit-experience] had opened a field of coincidences between the facts of a *communal* and *rigorous* emotional understanding and those of a discursive understanding.”²⁴ Here, he communicates one aspect of his new relation to his symptom in the fallout of his subjective destitution. This “emotional understanding” signifies

²³ Mohamed Tal, *The End of Analysis: The Dialectics of Symbolic and Real* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 75–76, 115–24.

²⁴ Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 5.

an individual and imaginary knowledge of oneself while that “discursive understanding”—which will interest us at the close of this chapter given its implications for an ontological account of the limit—constitutes a knowledge of the phantasmatic logic one’s identification seemingly necessitates. Such, “new-rosis,” to borrow Tal’s pun, has a formalizable structure as well as implications for the philosophical exposition of the (non)relation between being and thought.²⁵ All of this to say that a limit-experience *can* involve a “new” identification and a knowledge about truth, and analysis, in Lacanian practice, promises such a limit-experience.

Despite not advancing a clinical practice, Bataille’s dialectic of the limit nonetheless expresses a homologous process and end. Bataille is not so far from Lacan on these questions and problems concerning knowledge, nonknowledge, truth, being, and thinking, I proffer, then, a Lacanian criticism of Lacan’s dismissal of Bataille.

The First Moment: Anxiety and its Object-Cause

Bataille himself presents the moments of the limit-experience of anguish as interlinked in a dialectical relationship. At first, they are opposed, but in opposing one another they become essential to one another. So, in fact, it is possible that one oscillates between anxiety and subjective destitution in experience, anxiety culminating in nonknowledge and destitution only when the subject’s experiences of herself and the world are evacuated of meaning or sense. This is homologous to Lacan’s characterisation of *l’angoisse* in *Séminaire X*, where he explains how anxiety is a signal of the subject’s structural incompleteness; it is a “function of lack,” in his own words.²⁶ In signalling the subject’s structural incompleteness, *l’angoisse* functions as *both* a defence against *and* a necessary condition of subjective destitution.²⁷ Bataille presents this in writing: “Nonknowledge is first of all *anguish* [*l’angoisse*]. In anguish appears nudity, which leads to ecstasy. But ecstasy itself [. . .] slips away if anguish slips away. Thus, ecstasy only remains possible in the anguish of ecstasy, in the fact that it cannot be satisfac-

²⁵ Tal, *End of Analysis*, 75–76.

²⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety*, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 131.

²⁷ Lacan, 138.

tion, grasped knowledge.”²⁸ Anguish is at once a possible obstacle and a necessary condition for the experience of subjective destitution, according to Bataille.

For both Lacan and Bataille, anguish emerges when the object-cause of the subject’s desire appears where it should be absent, and its appearance at once renders the subject dispensable by removing the lack that they phantasmatically maintain as motivating the Other’s desire *for* the subject. Anxiety is a defence from the realisation that lack is itself generated by the signifier and the intrusion of the real would mark an intrusion of the Other’s unmediated desire, resulting, Lacan tells us, in subjective destitution. In a state of anxiety, the object appears right where it should be lacking, and it testifies to an uncanny, alien, and unconscious alterity within the subject’s unconscious fantasy. The abstract categories which allow a subject to orient themselves through relations and delimitations depends upon this “interior” alterity, the Other. In short, anxiety signals the *certain* solubility of the delimitations and relations enframed by fantasy due to its basis in *nothing other than the signifier*.

Bataille himself explicitly recognises the phantasmatic relations and frame of the subject and the object-cause of the limit-experience. He writes that upon the restitution of thought and subjectivity,

I arrive at this notion: that the subject, object are perspectives of being at the moment of inertia, that the intended object is the projection of the subject *ipse* wanting to become everything, that all representation of the object is phantasmagoria resulting from this foolish and necessary will.²⁹

46 The limit between subject and object is phantasmatic or phantasmagorical, for Bataille, because this division only exists in order to ossify two concepts for the ease of dialogue between speaking beings. The limit-experience sunders these divisions, relations, and delimitations, demonstrating that these words and images produces a symbolic lack.

At this stage in my theoretical argument, this comparative reading of Bataille and Lacan already verifies the symbolic production of a lack or a negativity in

²⁸ Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 57.

²⁹ Bataille, 58–59.

the real or in being. It is not a *real lack*, but a supposed lack attributed to the real *qua* the structure and economy of fantasy as I have just detailed it. Again, Bataille assents to this description in calling the delimitation between subject and object and the lack produced by signification “phantasmagoria.”³⁰ The limit-experience, especially that of anguish, exposes these operations’ and their functions’ dependence on this symbolically produced lack. Furthermore, both Lacan and Bataille are arguing that this lack is phantasmatic, existent only with a fantasy proper to, even constitutive of (“necessary” in Bataille’s own words), subjectivity.

This portrait of fantasy bears upon the fourth moment of the dialectic of the limit and the knowledge about truth. However, for now, it is enough to conclude that for both Bataille and Lacan, anxiety is framed within fantasy as well as that the subject maintains a phantasmatic relation to an object whose appearance causes the signal of anxiety to begin. Once it has begun, anxiety may defend against the second moment of this dialectic or serve as its necessary condition: subjective destitution.

The Second Moment: Nonknowledge and Subjective Destitution

In *Méthode de méditation*, Bataille distills the conclusions and principles he took away from “Le Supplice,” “The Torture,” which led him to his own limit-experience. Bataille entitles the final part of this work “La Nudité.” He opens, “In the end everything puts me at risk, I remain suspended, stripped bare [*dénudé*], in a definitive solitude. [. . .] What I see and what I know no longer have meaning, no longer have limits [. . .].”³¹ “Nudity,” in naming this state of suspension, characterises subjective destitution as a process related not only to knowledge and meaning, but limitations and boundaries. The prosthetic, phantasmatic “defences,” of which we can count anxiety amongst, fail, and the subject is destitute. In this state, there is no knowledge of or relationship to the subject, other subjects, or object. This is why it is a state of nonknowledge, proximate to the state of ecstasy communicated by mystics.

³⁰ Bataille, 59.

³¹ Bataille, 201; translation modified.

Yet, this state of nonknowledge is ephemeral, dialectically transforming on its own terms into two distinct forms of knowledge. Bataille writes,

Nonknowledge lays bare [Le non-savoir dénude].

This proposition is the summit, but must be understood in this way: lays bare [*dénude*], therefore I see what knowledge was hiding up to there [i.e., the point of subjective destitution], but if I see I know. In effect, I know, but what I knew, non-knowledge again lays bare. If nonsense [*non-sens*] is meaningful [*est le sens*], the meaning [*sens*] that is nonsense loses itself [and then] becomes nonsense once again (without possible end).³²

The subjective destitution resulting from nonknowledge is in a dialectical relationship with the third moment, that of grasped knowledge, in that it renders explicit what was implicit in the first moment and the knowledge that precedes even anxiety. Namely, that all meaning derives from nonsense losing itself. In losing itself, it logically becomes meaning. Note that this would accord with Badiou's definition of typical anti-philosophy. However, Bataille's dialectic of the limit and Lacan's notion of the knowledge about truth are different than a mystical arrest in nonmeaning or nonknowledge. Again, nonknowledge is merely a moment of the dialectic of the limit. It is not a truth about truth in the guise of a quietist resignation to a spurious infinity of possible knowledges. The distinction between the third and fourth moments of the dialectic of the limit clarify why. In sum, subjective destitution results in a kind of knowledge. Two knowledges more precisely, captured by the third and fourth moments of this dialectic.

The Third Moment: Knowledge *ad infinitum* and Contestation

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And this is indeed a knowledge, because the third moment is a necessary precipitate of the negation of knowledge and meaning that characterises subjective destitution. Bataille himself spells this out as a dialectical process predicated on language and discourse supplementing something, because "nudity [and] supplication are first notions added to others. [. . .] They are themselves reduced to the state of subterfuges."³³ Through this third moment, discursive thought adds meaning to subjective destitution, and in so doing, further supplements the

³² Bataille, 57; translation modified.

³³ Bataille, 20.

phantasmatic circuit that “fills in” the incompleteness of structure. Nonknowledge and subjective destitution are “reduced to the state of subterfuges” in that they do not themselves coalesce into propositions without the intervention of “discourse,” and better yet, without the symbolic itself as the “universe of discourse,” as Lacan formulates it in *Séminaire XIV*.³⁴ In short, they only temporarily sabotage grasped knowledge within discourse since the dialectic results, in one register, in the reduplication of “grasped knowledge” within discourse *ad infinitum*.

On the intervention of discourse in the dialectic of the limit, Bataille writes that “this is the work of discourse within us. And this difficulty is expressed in this way: *the word silence is still a sound*, to speak is in itself to imagine knowing, and to no longer know, it would be necessary to no longer speak.”³⁵ Discourse, here, should be understood as the intervention of the symbolic and as that which determines our existential status as speaking beings. Bataille provides an illustrative example of this with the word *silence*: it is still a sound, or otherwise still a signifier with a signification, leading him to claim that the audacity of speaking is itself a pretension to knowledge. Bataille laments the futility and failure of his endeavour in the very first pages of *La Somme athéologique* because this submission of silence to knowledge and meaning is an unavoidable result of the dialectic of the limit.³⁶

Moreover, this unavoidable result helps clarify Bataille’s rejection of mysticism as dogmatic. This further problematises Lacan’s interposition of a disagreement between himself and Bataille. Bataille explains that

[inner experience], born of nonknowledge, remains there decidedly. It is not ineffable, one does not betray it if one speaks of it, but to questions of knowledge, it steals from the mind the answers that it already had. Experience reveals nothing and cannot be the basis of belief or set out from it.

³⁴ Jacques Lacan, *La logique du fantasme, 1966–1967* (Paris: Seuil, 2023), 34–36.

³⁵ Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 20.

³⁶ Bataille, 4–5.

[Inner experience] is questioning (testing), in fever and anguish, what man knows of the facts of being.³⁷

Here then is the definitive evaluation of nonknowledge and its place within dialectic of the limit. It remains part of that second moment, but it is not ineffable as the mystics dogmatically claim. In contrast to the mystics, Bataille's nonknowledge cannot be a foundation of truth or belief. Additionally, this third moment gives way to a spurious infinity in the Hegelian sense. This "new" knowledge amounts to the production of finite, determinate *some things* rather than an absolute knowing that grasps the true infinity and cannot serve as the basis for an infinite judgement in the Hegelian sense of those terms. This third moment is the realisation of knowledge as a spuriously infinite process of questioning, or testing, or, as Bataille puts it more definitively elsewhere, "contestation."³⁸ So, the third moment leads back to the first.

This mirrors movements of other processes described in other works by Bataille. Notably, the dialectic between transgression and taboo in *L'érotisme* follows the structure described in the first three moments of the dialectic of the limit. Bataille, on this matter, is often misrepresented as a liberator of libidinal energies, a proponent of the emancipatory potential of transgression.³⁹ For example, Tim Themi understands transgression as affording some access to our "true" animality.⁴⁰ However, this reading neglects the discursive construction of animality, something Bataille characterises as poetic and synchronic with the emergence of the concept and image of humanity.⁴¹ This means that for Bataille, the social bond, transgression and taboo, and the concepts of animality and humanity function only within symbolic discourse and do not themselves serve as coordinates of the Lacanian real, of nature, or of being *tout court*. They are part of semblance and discursivity, and Themi overstates their correspondence

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³⁷ Bataille, 9.

³⁸ Bataille, 19–23.

³⁹ Cf. Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism (an Essay in Atheistic Religion)* (New York: Routledge, 1992), xx–xxi.

⁴⁰ Tim Themi, *Eroticizing Aesthetics: In the Real with Lacan and Bataille* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021), 15.

⁴¹ Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 35.

to the Lacanian real by claiming that Bataille posits a *real* or “true” animality.⁴² The recurrence of this structure and its structural, phantasmatic economy cements Bataille’s implicit argument that this dialectic of the limit holds significance not just for the first-person expression of an individual limit-experience but is part of the economy of thought and structure itself, an economy necessitated by the fact of our structural incompleteness.

This brings us to the fourth moment of the dialectic of the limit, a knowledge in parallel to the third moment of grasped knowledge and contestation.

The Fourth Moment: The Restitution of Subjectivity and Knowledge about Truth

The third and fourth moments exist in parallel. At first, the “reduplication to exhaustion” characterises the spuriously infinite process of contestation, wherein “new” yet still incompletely structured knowledge and identifications are produced at the close of subjective destitution. This really marks another feature of the restitution of subjectivity, the reconstitution of symbolic castration in a new relation to the subject, and knowledge of the consequences of the structural incompleteness induced by symbolic castration.

Recall the moment Bataille draws our attention to an immanent contradiction in the signification of silence *qua* the word *silence*. Not uncoincidentally, Lacan formulates a similar idea in the form of an axiom in *Séminaire XIV*: “No signifier can signify itself.”⁴³ The word *silence* requires sound to be communicated in speech and thus is not silent. It communicates some knowledge, even if that knowledge is very minimal, in the form of a single word. Bataille’s dialectical example is a simple illustration of discursive reason or understanding in Bataille’s idiom, and symbolic discourse and its logic in Lacan’s idiom. Recognition of this nonknowledge/knowledge or nonmeaning/meaning dialectic is a necessary condition of apprehending a knowledge of the way in which truth is merely an effect rather than a first principle, an ideal unity of subjective and objective knowledges. The impossibility of signifying silence without destroying silence is the most basic example of the incompleteness induced by thought’s architecture.

⁴² Themi, *Eroticizing Aesthetics*, 4, 15.

⁴³ Lacan, *La logique du fantasme*, 34–36; my translation.

So, the reintroduction of the subject back into discourse after a subjective destitution is a repetition but not necessarily a reproduction of that “naïve” moment of knowledge that preceded the entire constellation. It is not necessarily a reproduction because this knowledge is transformed and amended, slightly different since it carries with it the knowledge of the limit and the structural incompleteness that necessitates an ontological category of the limit at all.

This structural incompleteness itself emerges as an effect of symbolic castration. There is no universe of signs, symbols, words, and meanings, without symbolic castration. In *Séminaire V*, Lacan claims that “the father is a metaphor. [. . .] The father’s function in the Oedipus complex is to be a signifier substituted for the first signifier introduced into symbolization, the maternal signifier.”⁴⁴ Though human infants will experience this first function of metaphor as the paternal metaphor through their father (or equivalent phallic, authority figure), it is by no means the only representation of castration. Indeed, even before the “naively real father” says “No,” the infant is already immersed in the universe of discourse. Thus, we need to mark the two distinct levels that Lacan’s arguments regard. The first is an ontogenetic level, where anxiety is an element of individual subject-formation. This is the “primordial” moment of anxiety introduced by symbolic castration. The second level is a phenomenological level, the one discussed in my explication of the first moment of the dialectic of the limit. In essence, the limit-experience of anxiety recapitulates the operation and effect of symbolic castration. This makes intuitive sense even if we consider this phenomenon without appeal to either Bataille or Lacan, since these limit-experiences wherein our sense of self is lost must necessarily entail a loss of something which “defined” our sense of self and the relations we maintained with other subjects and objects.

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This homology seems further evident when we consider Bataille’s own argument regarding the role of discourse in producing a lack, an argument he inherits from Alexandre Kojève. Christopher M. Gemerchak convincingly demonstrates how Bataille’s own “theory of discourse” hits upon the same radical lack constitutive of subjectivity. In a simple summation, Gemerchak concludes that “[for Kojève and Bataille] truth is not simply reality [. . .] but rather it is *revealed*

⁴⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Formations of the Unconscious*, trans. Russell Grigg (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 158–59.

reality. That is, it is reality *plus* the revelation of reality in human discourse. This is why the Real is a ‘discursive real.’”⁴⁵ Is this not to say that a revealed truth is always only a truth-effect of something else that functions, i.e. the real? What I’m suggesting, here, is that this is a proposition assented to by both Lacan and Bataille. This proposition concerns the relation between semblance, this notion of truth-effect as well as the peculiar, dubious relation between the architecture of thought and the architecture of being.

The Non-Relation Between Being and Thinking, or Knowledge about the Logic of Non-Relation and Fantasy

In bringing together illuminating passages from *Séminaire XVIII*, Chiesa summarises the relationship between semblance and truth-effect: “Psychoanalysis does not believe semblance to be an ‘artifact’ beyond which ‘the idea of something that would be other, a nature’ would arise, since ‘truth is not the contrary of semblance, but, rather, supports it.’”⁴⁶ Psychoanalysis does not produce more certain knowledge of physical nature in highlighting the flaws in current knowledge. Here, Lacan is quite explicit about that. Rather, nature, and our supposed knowledge of it, is always already mediated by a discourse which is a semblance founded upon symbolic discourse. Furthermore, this analysis allows me to articulate a degree of complexity that I have effaced thus far for the sake of simplicity. The truth-effect is not itself semblance. In Bataillean vocabulary, semblance corresponds to the third moment: knowledge *ad infinitum*. Be they socio-anthropological, political-economic, or mystic, these discourses which would be semblances are endless. This clarifies the relationship between the third and fourth moment. They are parallel knowledges, each born from the exigency of destitution in inner experience. Knowledge of the ephemerality of discourse that would only ever be a semblance *is not* the knowledge of the incompleteness of structure.

Chiesa draws out this distinction in his account of Lacan’s development from *Séminaire XVIII* through *Séminaire XIX*. He explains “that Lacan does *not* iden-

⁴⁵ Christopher M. Gemerchak, *The Sunday of the Negative: Reading Bataille Reading Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 129.

⁴⁶ Chiesa, *Not-Two*, 83. Quotes from Lacan’s *Séminaire XVIII*: Jacques Lacan, *D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, 1971 (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 27, 13, 26; Chiesa’s translation.

tify truth with semblance: for speaking beings, semblance is nothing but the signifier, while truth amounts to the fact that for signifierness [*signifiance*] to be able to signify, ‘signifiers cannot be there all together.’⁴⁷ Since they cannot be there all together there is a structural incompleteness of thought itself. More to the present point, if truth were semblance, then it would itself be a truth about truth, the so-called mystical knowledge regarding the ineffable, a “fundamental” fiction undergirding a naïve conception of reality.

We should connect this argument to one made by Lacan nearly a decade earlier in *Séminaire X*, where he claims that the “site whence emerges the fact that there is such a thing as the signifier is, in one sense, the site that cannot be signified.”⁴⁸ Once again, there is some “site” or “fault” that necessitates symbolic discourse. Yet, symbolic discourse itself *repeats* that ontogenetic fault captured by the paternal metaphor and symbolic castration because the signifier cannot signify itself or its origin in being. In clinical terms, this is the rearrangement of a neurotic fantasy into a perverse fantasy. To simplify matters somewhat for the sake of illustration: if the neurotic were to turn his symbolic castration into what the Other lacks, this would entail a recognition that signifiers never exist “all together,” and this would make him a pervert. The symbolisation of an imaginary lack in anxiety as well as the attempt to symbolise the Other as lacking and castrated are means of defence against subjective destitution. In short, simply saying, “the symbolic is incomplete; the Other is castrated” is not knowledge about truth.

At this juncture, Tal’s careful distinction between “therapeutics” and “analysis” helpfully distinguishes the third and fourth moments of the dialectic of the limit I am presenting. He concludes that “if psychoanalysis partners with repetition as opposed to therapeutics, it is not to lead it to any fantasized success or consummation but rather to the realization of the very failure in *jouissance*” that leads to the limit-experience and subjective destitution, i.e. the “problem” that was there even prior to analysis (or to any encounter with therapy).⁴⁹ This further solidifies the claim that in the analytic situation repetition *re-presents* the ontogenetic

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⁴⁷ Chiesa, 83. Quotes from Lacan’s *Séminaire XIX: Jacques Lacan, . . . ou pire, 1971–1972* (Paris: Seuil, 2011), 33; Chiesa’s translation.

⁴⁸ Lacan, *Anxiety*, 134.

⁴⁹ Tal, *End of Analysis*, 116.

fault that inaugurates the human infant into the orders of the symbolic and the real on the basis of a structural incompleteness. Again, the faults in symbolic discourse repeat themselves by being inscribed into the architecture of thought itself. This necessitates the conclusion that the knowledge Bataille describes in this fourth moment of the dialectic of the limit concerns amended knowledge of the structural and phantasmatic character of the limit *in toto*. This involves one's particular delimitations, but it also concerns the general problematic of the limit and ontological and epistemological questions regarding the *relation* or *limit* between the architecture of thought and the architecture of being.

Indeed, "the work of discourse" provides the "phantasmagoria" of completeness while simultaneously betraying the incompleteness of symbolic structure. What then does this imply about any statement or decision regarding "interior" structure's relation to "exterior" being?

Specifically, Lacan's attempt to clarify the relation (more properly understood as a "non-relation," as I demonstrate below) between structure and the real in *Séminaire XIV* with allusion to the "inverse eight" and the "cut Möbius strip" rests on the simple premise that the division between inner and outer is an amphibology, unable to be demonstrated logically in writing.⁵⁰ The "topological facts" are "favourable" images and symbolisations (Lacan designates them with both terms in these passages) in articulating the divided, which is to say *internally delimited*, character of the subject.⁵¹ This division concerns Lacan's play on the Cartesian *cogito*; it is a division between *Je ne pense pas* or "I do not think" and *Je ne suis pas* or "I am not."⁵² The former is a forced choice; we must necessarily choose it, because the latter cannot be chosen.⁵³ This division evinces the strange impossibility of determining the *real* location and features of the limit between inner and outer. This impossibility, Lacan tells us, belongs to "the dimension of the contestable," not due to error or defect on the part of the philosophers but as a "fact of structure."⁵⁴ This fact is that the Other is *structurally* lacking, but nonetheless, discourse ensues, structure perdures.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Lacan, *La logique du fantasme*, 181–89.

⁵¹ Lacan, 188; my translation.

⁵² Lacan, 188; my translation.

⁵³ Lacan, 188.

⁵⁴ Lacan, 184; my translation.

⁵⁵ Lacan, 184.

These propositions concern the structure and economy of *fantasy* as conditioned by these facts of structure. The symbolic and the real condition one another, but the problem is how and to what extent knowledge might pass over into the real and become something distinct from semblance. Given my preceding analysis of the frame, economy, and logic of fantasy, and my location of these aspects in both Lacan and Bataille's respective *œuvres*, our question now becomes, how does fantasy relate to being?

Here, then, my previous discussions and analyses of the lack in the Other, symbolic castration, repetition and the restitution of subjectivity, and the relation between thinking and being comes to a head. The use of this word *contestable* stands out in the present study given Bataille's own identification of this dimension of the contestable in that third moment of the dialectic of the limit. The question of how knowledge passes into the real is the question of knowledge about this dimension, its genesis, its economy, and its internal logic; in other words, the "work of discourse" *structurally*. Dispensing with the amphibology between inner and outer is a requisite, logical step to begin articulating this knowledge since that amphibology is *only* a consequence of structure and its incompleteness. Therefore, I suggest that "knowledge about truth" discussed in *Séminaire XIX* is this "analytic knowledge" that Lacan is trying to detail five years earlier in *Séminaire XIV*. If we accept that this fourth moment of the dialectic of the limit constitutes "knowledge about truth," then, by implication, we are dealing with a knowledge that has a peculiar relation to the real as opposed to "contestable" knowledge.

Fantasy circumscribes and even frames this dimension of contestation, and knowledge of this constitutes knowledge of the truth-effects upon structure as a result of the dialectic of the limit. Recall Bataille's claims regarding the relation between supposedly mystic nonknowledge and "scientific" knowledge: "[After subjective destitution], I know, but what I knew, nonknowledge again lays bare. If nonsense [*non-sens*] is meaningful [*est le sens*], the meaning [*sens*] that is nonsense loses itself [, and then] becomes nonsense once again (without possible end)."⁵⁶ The fourth moment concerns knowledge regarding what Bataille elsewhere describes as phantasmagoria, semblance, and discursive understanding concerns this dialectic of the limit between meaning and nonmeaning. Analytic

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⁵⁶ Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 57; translation modified.

knowledge entails recognising the “finiteness” of the Other, that guarantor of meaning, of course.⁵⁷ Yet, it must also entail a knowledge of the dialectic that necessitates the generation of meaning and the economy amongst, the subject, *l’objet a*, and the Other within the frame of fantasy. Otherwise, simple arrest at the third moment, that domain of contestation wherein the subject *might* impute a lack to the Other, would be an undialectical and purely structural *perversion*. It would not constitute a knowledge passing over into the real.

The logic of fantasy foments an *ontological* non-relation between thinking and being. Knowledge of this non-relation precipitates from this dialectic of the limit that exposes the limit to be, itself, *only* structural and phantasmatic. I say “non-relation” since a relation would belong to the realm of structure and fantasy as a consequence of the structural, phantasmatic character of the limit. Indeed, if one were to posit a quasi-Kantian, stark, and hard boundary between interior subjectivity and exterior being, one would be advancing a truth about truth; this would be a discourse that is a semblance since it would position the limit as something structural yet unaffected by either the real or its own dialectical, economic role within fantasy. The frame, economy, and logic of fantasy produce this paradoxical non-relation between thought and being. Subjective destitution lays bare the dialectic of the limit in exposing the phantasmatic character of the limit and its place within that frame, that economy, and that logic of fantasy. In laying bare this dialectic, a knowledge precipitates regarding the structural incompleteness of thought *and* its dependence on the very real that it simultaneously generated and inflected. That knowledge is a knowledge about truth-effects on both the symbolic and the real, effects marking the architectures of thought and being and not simply marking a naively interior or naively unreal error in the subject’s perception of being, the real, or the “exterior” world.

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This seems to be the conclusion Bataille brings us to in noting his so-called “difference from the phenomenologists” in a marginal, seemingly discarded note. The Gallimard editors append this note to *Le coupable*, and document and record its strange provenance in the notes to the fifth volume of his *Œuvres complètes*.⁵⁸ In this note, Bataille proclaims that this “difference from the phenom-

⁵⁷ Lacan, *La logique du fantasme*, 183–84; my translation.

⁵⁸ Bataille, *Guilty*, 213. Note in the original French published in Georges Bataille, “Notes,” in *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970–88), 5:541. Editorial commentary and guidance

enologists” is his “objectivity,” and more precisely his identification of the retroactive character of the object-cause in inducing a limit-experience.⁵⁹ Thus, the knowledge that Bataille claims is *ontological* and *objective* is, in a sense, knowledge regarding the structural, phantasmatic establishment of a causal relation between subject and object. Of course, as I have sought to demonstrate throughout this article, knowledge of what is in fact *not a relation* but nonetheless *must be related* constitutes knowledge about truth or analytic knowledge.

So, we come to the disagreement that launched this investigation. Lacan does not recognise the consonance between himself and Bataille on this issue. In bringing to light the proximity between Lacan and Bataille on the status of knowledge, its relation to an object, the Other, and, most importantly, the category of the limit, I do not claim that I fully justify characterising the logic of fantasy as a logic of non-relation. However, I have demonstrated that comparison between Bataille and Lacan can serve as a vehicle for more precisely determining *some* features of an ontology in the wake of their legacies. Such an ontology has no recourse to the ontotheologies of the mystics since it concerns a knowledge about the truth and the non-relation between being and thinking that ensures the generation of discourse despite the lack in the Other, the lack that mystics like Angela of Foligno cower from. Such is Bataille and Lacan’s mutual problematic and mutual departure from the mystics.

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⁵⁹ Bataille, *Guilty*, 213.

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Habituated to Denial¹

Keywords

climate change, climate crisis, denial, Anthropocene, Margaret Mead, consensus

Abstract

The article discusses the mechanisms of climate change denial. It starts from the observation that habituation to denial is based on a process that is exactly the opposite on the content level: the process of repeated aha-experiences, i.e., sudden insights into reality of the climate crisis. In the first part, the author summarises the developments of recent years, which came to a symbolic end at COP 28 in Dubai, when the President introduced the contradictory idea that the transition to a sustainable paradigm is only possible by simultaneously maintaining the fossil fuel paradigm. In the second part, the article summarises some of the main points of what was probably the first interdisciplinary symposium on climate change, organised in 1975 by Margaret Mead. Referring to the conference's position paper, the author first develops the basic framework for productive interaction between the social and natural sciences as Mead envisioned it and then presents the social consequences of the fact that the relationship remained institutionally disorganised—and eventually had to organise itself.

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Privajeni v zanikanje

Ključne besede

podnebne spremembe, podnebna kriza, zanikanje, antropocen, Margaret Mead, konsenz

Povzetek

Članek obravnava mehanizme zanikanja podnebnih sprememb. Pri tem izhaja iz opažanja, da proces habituacije zanikanja temelji na procesu, ki je po vsebini ravno nasproten: procesu ponavljajočih se aha-doživetij, torej nenadnih uvidov v realnost podnebne krize. V prvem delu povzame razvoj zadnjih let, ki je svoj simbolni konec doživel na COP 28 v Dubaju, kjer je predsedujoči vpeljal protislovno idejo, da je prehod v trajnostno paradigmo mogoč le s hkratno krepitvijo paradigme fosilnih goriv. V drugem delu članek povzame nekatere ključne poudarke najbrž sploh prvega interdisciplinarnega simpozija o podnebnih spremembah, ki ga je leta 1975 organizirala Margaret Mead. V navezavi na programski tekst konference avtor najprej razvije osnovni okvir produktivne interakcije med družboslovjem in naravoslovjem, kot si ga je zamišljala Mead, nato pa predstavi družbene posledice dejstva, da je razmerje ostalo neorganizirano – in se je naposled organiziralo samo.



From Aha! to Nu-Uh!

The history of the climate crisis is a history of recurring aha-experiences.² Not a year goes by without us finally recognising, yet again, that climate change is real. Some acknowledge, for the first time, the basic fact that anthropogenic climate change exists and is not merely a manifestation of natural variability. Others realise, as if for the first time, that we are dealing with a pressing social, economic and security issue that society will have to confront at some point in the foreseeable future. Still others keep recognising for the first and final time, with growing fervour but also with increasing impotence and diminishing inner conviction, that climate change is an existential risk with potentially catastrophic consequences that demands urgent action. The intensity of these recurring

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² See Øystein O. Skaar and Rolf Reber, “The Phenomenology of Aha-Experiences,” *Motivation Science* 6, no. 1 (March 2020): 49–60, <https://doi.org/10.1037/mot0000138>.

revelations varies significantly from person to person. However, this does not change the fact that, overall, we are dealing with a repetitive process where, to rephrase Lacan, we keep waking up to reality only to keep on dreaming, dreaming of the moment when we can finally wake up in the world that will have already solved the problem.

Clearly, the sudden realisation, in all its variations and repetitions, has never been directly universal. While a public consensus has been achieved a number of aha-experiences ago (and has remained in place at least since the Paris Agreement, and before Paris it was Copenhagen, and before Copenhagen it was Kyoto, and before Kyoto it was Rio), many have nevertheless remained outside the realm of revelation. This outside, however, is becoming increasingly less neutral and unmediated. Indeed, the number of individuals or collectives who are directly ignorant or indifferent to climate change is decreasing with each passing year. This is partly due to the gradual transmission of knowledge, partly due to the eventual ruptures embodied by exceptional individuals (from James Hansen in 1988 to Greta Thunberg in 2018) with whom one can ally both intellectually and emotionally and that have initiated sequences of fidelity, and partly due to the exponential aggravation of material conditions (which first became recognisable only in model projections, then in still relatively abstract climate trends and today in directly visible catastrophic signals).

The sphere of pure denial is, again, becoming smaller and smaller in numbers. Yet, it is impossible to overlook that the affirmative side has been, on the one hand, contaminated at the level of cognition by its own secondary resistance, requiring ever more intense signals to trigger the next aha-experience. On the other hand, those who avow climate change have become discredited at the level of behaviour by their entrenchment in business as usual, taking part in the “implicatory denial.”³ As a consequence, the numerically inferior sphere has

³ “British sociologist Stanley Cohen (2001) describes three varieties of denial: literal, interpretive, and implicatory. His framework is useful in explaining this book’s particular focus. Literal denial is ‘the assertion that something did not happen or is not true’ (the global warming skeptics). In interpretive denial, the facts themselves are not denied but are instead given a different interpretation. Euphemisms, technical jargon, and word changing are used to dispute the meaning of events—for example, military officials speak of ‘collateral damage’ rather than the killing of citizens. [. . .] In the case of implicatory denial, what is minimized is not information, but ‘the psychological, political or moral

become, ironically, more attuned to the reality it has been effectively denying, and far more vibrant.

Indifference to climate change, which has become objectively impossible, has not simply disappeared but has been transformed into a genuine nuh-uh-experience that often surpasses its affirmative counterpart in its political impact. “Nuh-uh!,” claim the denialists, “Climate change is obviously not real.” However, what they do see as real is their own sudden realisation of the goals of the climate change agenda. In their view, the discourse on climate change has no intrinsic scientific value. It instead serves as a metaphor for the general desire of the “woke” to denaturalise all aspects of human society, from the economy (by questioning the One of capital) to the family (by questioning the One of the two complementary sexes). This process, by which climate change denial becomes part of the general endorsement of the natural, also explains the otherwise incomprehensible fascination of climate change deniers with the ideal of (natural) science. On the one hand, the natural is self-evident in their eyes and, therefore, only accessible to intact common sense. On the other hand, the natural is infinitely incomprehensible in its eternal autonomy. The correct scientific approach to climate change can thus only be one that resists the temptation to interpret signals of human-induced climate change as a fundamental shift in the functioning of the natural climate system. Attributing any agency to humans in the functioning of an essentially natural system should, in their view, be seen as an epistemological hoax, an artificial way out of the inability to face the incomprehensible. (This, in turn, is the reason why the idea of the Anthropocene will, for some, remain forever incomprehensible.)⁴

implications that conventionally follow.” Kari Marie Norgaard, *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 10–11. See also Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 8–9; Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm. Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2018), 136–37.

⁴ The reason for denying the essential human influence on the functioning of a fundamentally pre-human system is, of course, to ward off the extreme consequences of the Anthropocene thesis, which is fundamentally *anti-anthropocentric*. The dominant influence of human activity does not imply perpetual control over the dynamics of the system, quite the opposite. “The Anthropocene could thus be defined as *an irreversible transition to a new regime of the Earth System’s dynamics in which the human factor, precisely at the point of its maximal intensity, is deprived of its former relative autonomy*. Once human activity becomes one of the drivers of the System’s dynamics, it is no longer able to dissociate

The sphere of denial in which the nuh-uh-experience is generated must not only be understood in its literal form. This sphere does not only concern the limited, really existing sphere of pure denialists who derive their certainty from the perfect correspondence between the denial of the imaginary construct of climate change and the denial of the imaginary construct of social change. While this actually existing but utterly delusional existence is intriguing for its ability to completely foreclose cognitive dissonance, denial is much more effective and far-reaching when it returns to the realm of affirmation and positions itself as a purely realist and pragmatic common-sense option that acknowledges the reality of the climate crisis—but in a way that also mobilises the previous failure to break with business as usual for the purpose of maintaining it.

When we talk about the sphere of acknowledging the climate crisis, it is hard to imagine a more representative setting than the annual Conference of the Parties (COP), and it is hard to imagine a more representative person than its president. It is perhaps only a coincidental irony—but in this irony lies an almost transcendental necessity—that in the very year of the glaring escalation of the climate crisis COP 28 took place in Dubai and was chaired by Sultan al-Jaber, the head of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company and chairman of Masdar, Abu Dhabi Future Energy Company. Al-Jaber is, by his very credentials, a direct epitome of the present moment, i.e., of the unsustainable attempt to come to a compromise within the Anthropocene reality between the simultaneous active sustainment of the old fossil fuel paradigm and the gradual introduction of the future sustainable paradigm.

It is therefore no surprise that he caused a scandal even before the conference began when he claimed: “There is no science out there that says that the phase-out of fossil fuel is what’s going to achieve 1.5°C.”⁵ The statement, which is true only in that the 1.5°C limit would very likely be exceeded even if the fossil fuel

itself from the other processes of the now reconfigured Earth System.” Tadej Troha, “The Age of H: Towards the Anthropocene Imperative,” *Filozofski vestnik* 39, no. 1 (2018): 125. See also Owen Gaffney and Will Steffen, “The Anthropocene Equation,” *The Anthropocene Review* 4, no. 1 (April 2017): 53–61.

⁵ Damian Carrington and Ben Stockton, “COP28 President Says There Is ‘No Science’ Behind Demands for Phase-Out of Fossil Fuels,” *The Guardian*, December 3, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/dec/03/back-into-caves-cop28-president-dismisses-phase-out-of-fossil-fuels>.

paradigm were immediately shut down, was accompanied by another of the standard modern *topoi*, namely that phasing out fossil fuels would prevent sustainable development “unless you want to take the world back into caves.”⁶ In his keynote speech, of course, al-Jaber avoided this kind of directness; instead, he called for cooperation and decisive action. But in choosing a lowest common denominator to motivate and orient the global community towards action, he had no choice but to resort to a term that also resolves his own contradiction: *energy*.

Energy is our friend. It runs everything we rely on. Our phones and our factories. It keeps your homes warm, and our homes cool. It allows children to study at night and treat them, if they become ill. In short, the world does not work without energy. Yet, the world will break down if we don't fix the energies we use today. The world will break down if we don't mitigate the emissions at a gigaton scale. And the world can potentially break down if we don't rapidly transition to zero carbon alternatives.⁷

As already pointed out, the term “energy” initially resolves the inner conflict of a particular speaker who wants to prepare the ground for a sustainable paradigm in 2023 by sticking to the fossil fuel paradigm. Once it becomes an all-encompassing umbrella term, other contradictory concepts also become tolerable, such as the “decarbonization of fossil fuels” project he later spoke of, which serious climate scientists can only understand as an obvious oxymoron, a fully developed form of greenwashing.⁸

Yet, the actual rhetorical effect of introducing “energy” as an umbrella term is not limited to the resolution of a logical contradiction. The real impact of the affective dimension of introducing “energy” that suppresses the “but nonetheless” of the potential breakdown of the world, the real impact of presenting energy as friend, as ally, as guardian of our everyday lives, and as protector of our

⁶ Carrington and Stockton.

⁷ Ahmed al-Jaber, “COP28 | WCAS Day 2 | Energy | Dr Sultan Al Jaber's Keynote Speech,” YouTube video, uploaded by COP28 UAE, December 3, 2023, 1:07, <https://youtu.be/E3XBeg6sjY8>.

⁸ See Meyer Steinberg, “Fossil Fuel Decarbonization Technology for Mitigating Global Warming,” *International Journal of Hydrogen Energy* 24, no. 8 (August 1999): 771–77, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0360-3199\(98\)00128-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0360-3199(98)00128-1).

children, is that it mobilises the repressed moment pertaining to the affirmative position, or better, to the sphere of implicate denial. Once we accept that our friend, our guardian, and the protector of our children is energy *of any kind*, a certain path is brought back to life that we have given up in the process of accepting the reality of the climate crisis, namely the possibility that the fundamental goal of reconciling theory and practise, cognition and behaviour, could actually be achieved *in any way*. Or, more specifically, what becomes possible again—but this time really for the first time—is to abolish the increasingly palpable gap between the theory of urgency and the practice of collective procrastination by changing the point of view of our cognition.

In this context, it is, perhaps, crucial to rethink the counter-intuitive option that our desire to solve the climate crisis is actually stronger in the unconscious than in the conscious. The fact that the acceptance of the reality of the climate crisis on a societal level, but also on an individual level, takes place as a series of aha-experiences, is significant enough in this respect. We react to the signals we receive from external reality with sudden realisations that the crisis is real; but at the same time, the world in which the signals occur is precisely the world in which we ourselves continue to behave more or less the same way. A world that reveals itself repeatedly, that is serially constructed for us and that we decompose each time through our practical actions, is an untenable world—and therefore each subsequent aha-experience is less intense and further sapped of content, reduced to a mere signal of existence. In this situation, the al-Jaber’s message (and of course he is not the first to convey such message) has a liberating effect on many. Since we do not know how to give up energy in practice, since we do not know how to give up cars, airplanes and cruise ships, the only way to solve the crisis is to return to a situation in which we can celebrate the unlimited use of energy without guilt. “We need to be real, serious and pragmatic,” al-Jaber urged us, and what can guide us, as he suggests to our unconscious, is the transfer of agency to an impersonal concept that will guide us in our future (in) decisions. Energy, al-Jaber suggests, knows the way out of the climate crisis it has caused. And if we pay attention to it, if we trust it, if we show it our respect, it will present us with the world we have been dreaming of and in which we can finally wake up: a world that has already solved the climate crisis.

The Lesson in Farsightedness

In 1975, three years before her death, forty years before the Paris Agreement and almost half a century before the present text, the eminent American anthropologist Margaret Mead, in collaboration with William Kellogg of the National Centre for Atmospheric Research (NCAO), organised a conference that even today would still be praised as a fresh and innovative contribution to the inter- and transdisciplinary discussion of the problem of climate change. The basic premise of the event, for which she wrote the position paper, sounds unusually contemporary in its ground-breaking character at the time. In order to effectively grasp what could become the central problem of the future and set the course for practical solutions as quickly as possible, close cooperation between natural scientists, social scientists, humanities scholars, technologists, decision-makers and the public is essential. Only in this way, Mead believed, would it be possible to break through some of the major impasses arising from the socially innate characteristics of human beings, from insensitivity to the suffering of the indeterminate and distant other to the logic of pursuing short-term gains and solving acute matters. “What we need to invent—as responsible scientists—,” she wrote, “are ways in which farsightedness can become a habit of the citizenry of the diverse peoples of this planet.”⁹

On paper, the path looked relatively straightforward at the time. Although social scientists were facing “a set of technical problems,” creating a new social paradigm that would consider the long-term consequences of seemingly harmless interventions in the environment, particularly the atmosphere, was not an impossible task in Mead’s eyes. However, and this is crucial, it depended entirely on the natural sciences being able to clearly formulate the exact scope of the problem as a first step. Even then, (natural) scientists could not rely on the automatism of knowledge production, where field researchers would aggregate and refine findings in peaceful coexistence—quite the opposite. Science is a social subsystem and is, therefore, inevitably subject to deeply rooted socio-psychological patterns, in particular, what is called, in a well-worn phrase, the narcissism of small differences.

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⁹ Margaret Mead, “Preface: Society and the Atmospheric Environment,” in William W. Kellogg and Margaret Mead, eds., *The Atmosphere: Endangered and Endangering* (London: Castle House Publications, 1980), xxi.

At the center of this problem lie the relationships between scientists, technologists, human scientists, and political decisionmakers. Inevitably, different political interests will seize upon disagreements among scientists to buttress their own interests and to discredit scientific advice. Scientists themselves may value making a fine point against a rival more than the possible consequences of the intra-scientific battle; or be extremely cautious so as to protect their reputations—among scientists—which is a modern equivalent of fiddling while Rome burns or dancing on the eve of the Battle of Waterloo; or they may simply despair of ever connecting effectively the nature of science, with its built-in requirement for validation by other scientists, into the political decision-making bureaucracies of the world.¹⁰

When individual scientists or scientific collectives find themselves in a field of pending consensus, the first casualty is their own directly acquired knowledge, which is artificially amplified and, in turn, significantly distorted in an effort to win the argument. The problem is thus not only that scientists are reluctant to give in and stick to their guns in the face of their opponents' perhaps more convincing arguments but also that they stick to their guns in such a way that they also lose their original point of view. The latter, therefore, is left without the typical scientific nuance that arises from humility towards the object (a prerequisite for any objectivism) and can become the building block of scientific truth about it. In response to the "prophets of doom," for example, who are accused of lacking an adequate scientific basis, more conservative scientists ultimately "tend to become in turn prophets of paradisiacal impossibilities, guaranteed utopias of technological bliss, or benign interventions on behalf of mankind that are none the less irrational just because they are couched as 'rational.'" The pragmatic realists, Mead makes clear, are themselves believers: believers "in the built-in human instinct for survival" or "in some magical technological panacea."¹¹

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The task of social scientists approaching a problem for which natural science is the primary authority is thus not simply to adhere to the already elaborated consensual understanding of natural science (which does not yet exist and to some extent never will). Neither is this task to select and combine partial views arbitrarily and form their own private pseudo-consensus (for which they are not

¹⁰ Mead, xix–xx.

¹¹ Mead, xxi.

qualified). The task is, rather, to invoke and instruct the primary domain of science in some way to form a consensus based on perhaps vague and ambiguous, but nonetheless factual, i.e. not yet distorted, insights. As Mead proclaims: “Only if natural scientists can develop ways of making their statements on the present state of danger credible to each other can we hope to make them credible (and understandable) to social scientists, politicians, and the citizenry.”¹² Consensus, Mead suggests, must be formulated differently: not as a secondary suppression of the conflict of irreconcilable positions that have clashed in struggle and turned into instruments, but as a synthesis of original perspectives that have been consciously recognised as partial by the scientist included.

Again, the role of the social scientist is not only to build on the findings of natural science in the second step and add a social perspective to a ready-made problem but also to help natural science formulate the first step appropriately, thus avoiding the virtually inevitable distortion caused by the sheer quest for dominance in an unmediated dispute, a result which leads to a delirious chaos of self-serving scientific fictions rather than a synthesis of nuanced partial insights. Mead’s critical insight, which was also the catalyst for the meeting she organised with experts in the field, lies—perhaps surprisingly—precisely in recognition of urgency, precisely in the realisation that the mediating intervention of the social sciences could not be delayed at all, even if it was as soon as 1975. The involvement of the social sciences in thinking about climate change and formulating policies is not and never has been optional but fundamentally necessary to arrive at comprehensive knowledge. It was, in fact, already urgent even in 1975 if policy-making and the social sciences themselves were to be prevented from being dominated by a distorted, incomplete or, in short, unrealistic view of the subject.

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First of all, it is clear that science, whether soft or hard, cannot absolve itself of responsibility for the behaviour of decision-makers and the public through passivity and silence. In this case, from zero does not follow a neutral zero; not even if the decision-makers join the scientific evasion of duty by bluntly insisting on “business as usual”; not even if the zero of the voice of science is used as a justification for the zero of transformation at the policy level.

¹² Mead, xxi.

Dr. Mead emphasized that the Conference was based on the assumption that policy decisions of tremendous depth are going to be made—*whether scientists provide input or not*. There is no way for scientists to avoid affecting the decisionmaking process on issues related to their discipline, even if they remain publicly silent. A decision by policymakers not to act in the absence of scientific information or expertise is itself a policy decision, and for scientists there is no possibility for inaction, except to stop being scientists.¹³

From today's perspective, another version of the same problem becomes visible, transforming Mead's gesture into a truly far-sighted, truly visionary one. The problem that runs through the entire history of the response to climate change is not just that decision-makers have done next to nothing; it is not just that they have ignored the science that has objectively been too quiet, but that in the last instance, they have not been entirely deaf to it.

It is probably already well known that a certain kind of science has been the basis for exactly the kind of climate scepticism that—with the help of oil industry—successfully crushed any idea (or rather, the idea of an idea) of quick action. In an effort to normalise the signals of an increasingly clear deviation from Holocene stability, any scientific *topos* that seemed eternal enough and cosmic enough to make human influence seem insignificant and laughable came in handy. The simpler minds have and will continue to emphasise the rise in solar radiation (we are near the minimum right now, but so what), while the more sophisticated will repeat to the end of times the eternal domination of the astronomic forcing, encapsulated in Milankovitch cycles, that shibboleth of climate scepticism (which themselves are not responsible of being overwhelmed by the human factor as the essential driver of system dynamics in the Anthropocene).¹⁴

¹³ J. Dana Thompson, "Summary of the First Day's Discussion," in Kellog and Mead, *Atmosphere*, 69.

¹⁴ "When did *H* [human activity, defined as a function of population, consumption, including production, and the Technosphere] come to dominate the astronomical and geophysical forcings and the internal dynamics of the Earth System? Although there have been several proposed start dates for the Anthropocene [. . .] none can match the mid-20th-century, global-level, synchronous step change in human enterprise and the simultaneous human-driven change in many features of Earth System structure and functioning. That is, anthropogenic impact crossed a critical threshold around 1950 with the beginning of the Great Acceleration, when *H* moved from being a force of similar or smaller magnitude to *A* [astronomic forcing] and *G* [geophysical forcing], to usurping them entirely [. . .] An

However, this fundamentally anti-scientific *modus operandi* of relying on science was and is not the only one. In fact, it could only survive because the other, having absolute majority, instead of advancing knowledge of the increasingly real objective danger that all would not end well, was incessantly preoccupied with the obsession of reaching the fullest possible consensus on the bare minimum: the existence of anthropogenic climate change.

The obsession itself eventually became farcical. In a 2021 study, based on a random sample of 3,000 scientific papers, the authors came to the following conclusions about the consensus on anthropogenic global warming (AGW):

Our estimate of the proportion of consensus papers was $1 - (4/2718) = 99.85\%$. The 95% confidence limits for this proportion are 99.62%–99.96% (see R code in supplementary info), therefore it is likely that the proportion of climate papers that favour the consensus is at least 99.62%. Recalculating at the 99.999% confidence level gives us the interval 99.212%–99.996%, therefore it is virtually certain that the proportion of climate papers that do not dispute that the consensus is above 99.212%. If we repeat the methods of C13 and further exclude papers that take no position on AGW (i.e. those rated 4a), we estimate the proportion of consensus papers to be 99.53% with the 95% confidence interval being 98.80%–99.87%.¹⁵

It is precisely this obsessional type of science that, dare be said, was the last thing Margaret Mead had in mind when, in 1975, she called on the natural sciences to agree on a lowest common denominator so that the social sciences could join in the search for an adequate response of social systems as quickly and as precisely as possible. Indeed, a certain current has succumbed to scepticism in terms of form and became entangled in the endless project of reaching a perfect consensus (which currently stands at a maximum of 99.87%), after which the human survival instinct will finally activate and miraculously abolish climate

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obvious, and critical, next step is to represent *H* as a sub-system of the Earth System because it is now the prime forcing driving the rate of change of the Earth System.” Gaffney and Steffen, “Anthropocene Equation,” 57. See also Will Steffen et al., “Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 33 (2018), 8252–59, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1810141115>.

¹⁵ Mark Lynas, Benjamin Z. Houlton, and Simon Perry, “Greater Than 99% Consensus on Human Caused Climate Change in the Peer-Reviewed Scientific Literature,” *Environmental Research Letters* 16, no. 11 (November 2021): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ac2966>.

change. However, the social sciences, decision-makers, the arts, the public and the world at large have not been that patient. While official climate science waited for decision-makers to give it the green light to finally tell the whole truth, all the protagonists reacted to the best of their ability and, above all, looked for substitute solutions that would give the impression of the absolute adequacy of their stance on the problem before a complete consensus was reached.

The Carnival of Social Reductionism

Once the opportunity was missed in the early days to establish a rational basic link between scientific knowledge and societal response, which would gradually evolve, which would generate its own acceleration and, because of its clear orientation, would be able to incorporate additional knowledge on an ongoing basis, the societal response turned into a race of miraculous solutions untethered from reality. In this move, there is no essential difference between the most heterogeneous of positions. The logic of miraculous solutions is always one and the same, and it can never escape the basic fact that it, put bluntly, takes place in a world that does not exist. We have already discussed above the COP 28 president's idea that the road to an energy transition must lead through a simultaneous reinforcement of the fossil fuel paradigm. Yet, a similar miraculous solution, which is blocked also in the short term, is also to be found at the other end of the politico-economic and class spectrum in the idea that the solution lies in the abolition of capitalism. The mobilisation of the climate crisis for the purposes of the overarching goal of building a fairer society does not end well, because it hits a practical impasse. Knowing that the climate crisis will certainly not be solved in a sufficiently just way, we are handed a ready-made ethical excuse not to solve the crisis at all. But because the solution to the climate crisis has nevertheless made its way to the foreground, and is perceived, at least declaratively, as the most urgent first step in the chain (but remains conditioned on the second step), the enthusiasm for the pursuit of justice disappears too.¹⁶

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There is, of course, another miraculous solution, another form of the illusion of the absolute adequacy of one's own attitude to the problem, namely the one that Hollywood produces from time to time. The fact that this only happens once in a while is quite telling, given the scale of the impending collapse. What is

¹⁶ See Tadej Troha, "Fetiš antropocena," *Problemi* 57, no. 1-2 (2019): 164-65.

even more remarkable, however, is that the trend, at least in terms of the most exposed and infamous cases, is exactly the opposite of what we would like to believe. We are supposed to know more and more, we are supposed to be more and more enlightened about the nature and urgency of the problem, and there is more and more direct social engagement from some of the most prominent climate scientists, but Hollywood itself is further away from effectively portraying the heart of the problem than it has ever been before. Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) still attempted to convey the basic fact that climate change, whether man-made or not, is a systemic process of change, but added the key characteristic of a complex system, namely its non-linear dynamics, which in the face of continuous perturbations sooner or later leads to an abrupt transition to *an alternative stable state*,¹⁷ in this case an abrupt “hyper” ice age. In contrast, Adam McKay's *Don't Look Up* (2021) avoids depicting a specific problem in its entirety, replacing it with a metaphor that should only be understood as the writers intended. The film's decision to shift the focus of the problem entirely to the depiction of a societal response to an impending threat is, to a certain extent, understandable. There is no doubt that the mechanisms of denial, evasion, wilful ignorance, and procrastination have become a popular topic of social and socio-scientific debate, particularly in recent years, but even more so since the pandemic, thus of interest to Hollywood. Ultimately, the decision to use the clichéd metaphor of a comet that manages to transform a strictly internal systemic problem into an external threat is certainly highly ambiguous. (Not least because it perpetrates the notion of climate change deniers, for whom only the sun as an external agent is capable of serious systemic change.) As a metaphor for the obviousness that we do not want to see and that will come crashing down on us even if we think it will not, the comet is undoubtedly appropriate. However, for a metaphorical representation of the coming climate collapse, which will be catastrophic even before the ultimate impact, even before it stops, even before it's over, the writers probably should have come up with something else.

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And yet, was the choice of a particular metaphor to frame the central focus of the film an unintentional product of creative laziness? Or, on the contrary, is it better to read it as a symptomatic, deliberate choice, a tool of the underlying

¹⁷ See Marten Scheffer, *Critical Transitions in Nature and Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 11–36.

ing intention to equate the response to climate change with the response to the coming comet in a real, entirely non-metaphorical way? Are the mechanisms of denial in both cases really so identical that a metaphorical substitution is possible? Is the denial of climate change that we have gradually become habituated into, often with the reassuring concessions of science itself, really the same as the denial of a comet impact, where the non-acceptance of the threat stems from an unwillingness to give up one's existence overnight because of an external triviality?

Even if these questions remain unanswered, there is no doubting the fundamental gesture of *Don't Look Up*. By choosing this framework, the movie has, whether it wanted to or not, legitimised the reduction of the climate crisis to an internal social problem and thus itself achieved precisely what it should not have done in obedience to science. It is difficult to judge the author's degree of self-reflection, but in the broadest sense *Don't Look Up* is less a critique of societal response than a sheer carnival of social reductionism that has managed to free itself from the grip of science, the very science that long ago predicted a crisis that is much more immediately palpable than it was only some years ago. This crisis will not end, it will drag on and become more and more unbearable. If we adapt to it socially and psychologically instead of reducing it to a minimum (whatever catastrophic the minimum may itself be), we will somehow look as attractive as the rich, old, naked people in this movie's post-apocalyptic appendix. The fact that the movie really starts to enjoy itself in its final frames, when science has become irrelevant history along with the comet, probably speaks for itself.

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Of Times, Religions, and Revolutions: One Unites into Two¹

Keywords

time, Islam, One, onto-theology, revolution

Abstract

Starting from the impact of biblical teachings on Islam, the first part of this article attempts to show the divergent paths that Christianity and Islam have taken when confronted with the three dimensions of time (*chronos*, *kairos*, *krisis*). The article aims to elucidate the distinct onto-theologies of the two religious discourses by analysing various examples that illustrate this divergence. Consequently, the onto-theology of Islam can be encapsulated as “One unites in two,” in contrast to the onto-theology of Christianity, which can be formulated as “One divides into two.” In the second part of the article, one of the political implications of the onto-theology of “One united in two” is examined in depth in a socio-political context, showing how the conceptualisation of such a context can only be done adequately if its onto-theological dimension is taken into account.

O časih, religijah in revolucijah: Eno se združi v dvoje

Ključne besede

čas, islam, Eno, ontoteologija, revolucija

Povzetek

Izhajajoč iz vpliva svetopisemskih naukov na islam si prvi del članka prizadeva pokazati različne poti, ki sta jih ubrala krščanstvo in islam, ko sta bila soočena s tremi raz-

¹ This article is a result of the research project J6-4623 “Conceptualizing the End: its Temporality, Dialectics, and Affective Dimension,” and the research project N6-0286 “Reality, Illusion, Fiction, Truth: A Preliminary Study,” which are funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

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sežnostmi časa (*chronos, kairos, krisis*). Z analizo vrste zgledov, ki ilustrirajo to razhajanje, si besedilo prizadeva osvetiliti različne ontoteologije obeh religiozних diskurzov. Posledično je ontoteologijo islama mogoče povzeti v frazo »Eno se združi v dvoje«, v nasprotju z ontoteologijo krščanstva, ki jo je mogoče formulirati kot »Eno se cepi v dvoje«. V drugem delu članka v družbenopolitičnem kontekstu podrobno raziščemo eno od političnih implikacij ontoteologije »Eno se združi v dvoje« in pokažemo, kako je konceptualizacija tovrstnega konteksta mogoča le z upoštevanjem ontoteološke razsežnosti.



Regarding the socio-politico-cultural milieu in which he came of age—where Zoroastrian and Judeo-Christian traditions held sway—certain scholars have underscored the impact of biblical teachings on the Prophet of Islam.² This influence is particularly evident in the development of his deeply apocalyptic perception of the prophetic mission. Substantiating this assertion requires no extensive search. The primary sources of Islam, specifically the Qur’anic suras and verses, promptly come to mind with their vibrant apocalyptic imagery and themes. “Indeed, the Quran insists on numerous occasions on the imminent end of the world. It is not the case of one or two verses, one or two suras, but dozens of suras and verses. This entails not only a large number of scattered verses, this is a case of more than thirty of the very last suras of the Quran, reputed to be the oldest and rightly called the ‘Qur’anic apocalyptic’ suras.”³ A substantial number of Hadiths also reflect the idea that “Muḥammad actually announces the imminent coming of the Messiah and the latter is none other than Jesus. At the same time, for some followers of the Prophet, ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib [the first Shi’a imam and the fourth Sunni caliph] seems to have been the Second Jesus,

² See Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002); Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, “Muḥammad the Paraclete and ‘Alī the Messiah: New Remarks on the Origins of Islam and of Shi’ite Imamology,” *Der Islam* 95, vol. 1 (2018): 30–64, <https://doi.org/10.1515/islam-2018-0002>; Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, “The Shi’is and the Qur’an: Between Apocalypse, Civil Wars, and Empire,” *Religions* 13, no. 1 (2022): article 1, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13010001>; Jonathan E. Brockopp, “The Rise of Islam in a Judeo-Christian Context,” in *Light upon Light: Essays in Islamic Thought and History in Honor of Gerhard Bowering*, ed. Jamal J. Elias and Bilal Orfali (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2020), 25–44.

³ Amir-Moezzi, “Shi’is and the Qur’an,” 12.

Christ and Messiah of the apocalyptic times.”⁴ Hence, considering the profound impact of the Judeo-Christian tradition on Muḥammad, it becomes plausible to characterize him as a prophet whose foremost mission was to herald the impending resurgence of the Messiah, rather than to establish an entirely novel religion. In essence, Islam not only fails to exist in isolation from preceding religious traditions, but also amalgamates diverse elements from them into a distinctive synthesis.

Even Franz Rosenzweig, who in his seminal work *The Star of Redemption* endeavors to delineate a clear demarcation between Islam and the Judeo-Christian tradition, portrays the three Abrahamic religions as *distinct* modes of expressing *shared* concepts, such as revelation, providence, and the triadic relationship between “God, world, and man.”⁵ While Islam shares fundamental ideas with the other two religions, the precise articulation of these concepts within Islam results in notable disparities between the latter and the Judeo-Christian tradition. In this context, we shall briefly examine one of these disparities: the divergent approaches of Christianity and Islam in addressing the interplay of various dimensions of time within their apocalyptic doctrines.

The French historian François Hartog identifies the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek in third-century BC Alexandria as a pivotal event that initiated a process culminating in the invention of what would eventually be known

⁴ Amir-Moezzi, “Muḥammad the Paraclete,” 31.

⁵ In contrast to Hegel, who argued that Islam is a more universal religion than Judaism, Rosenzweig aims to demonstrate that Judaism, when compared to Islam, shares a closer affinity with Christianity, which Hegel regards as the most universal religion. To substantiate this claim, Rosenzweig contends, for instance, that the nature of the relationship between God and humanity in Islam is characterized by a form of revelation that lacks a true dialogical aspect. In Rosenzweig’s view, the omnipresence of God in Islam leaves no room for meaningful communication between God and humans. He contends that Muḥammad’s understanding of revelation diverges significantly from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Although he incorporated the concept of revelation from that tradition, Muḥammad, due to a lack of a proper understanding, rearticulated this concept within a pagan context. In contrast, revelation in Judaism and Christianity marked a fundamental departure from paganism. Rosenzweig’s assertion stems from Islam’s distinctive manner of presenting concepts such as revelation and providence. He asserts, in an oxymoronic way, that “in spite of the idea of the unity of God, posited vehemently and proudly, Islam slips into a *monistic paganism*.” Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 134.

as Christian or Western time. By adopting and adapting the Greek concepts of *chronos*, *kairos*, and *krisis*, within the biblical framework, the initial translators of the Pentateuch, which held profound significance for early Christians, imbued these terms with meanings distinct from the original Greek intentions. While the Greeks associated *krisis* with a moment requiring a physician's critical decision about a patient's condition and viewed *kairos* as a decisive point when tragic heroes, having missed all earlier chances for triumph, met a tragic fate such as blindness, in the Christian interpretation of the Greek *trio*

thinking about crisis is [. . .] the business of [. . .] the prophet and the apocalypticist, both bearers of the speech of God, who announce the times to come and the approach of Judgment Day (Krisis), which is, strictly speaking, the sword that will cleave. Kairos takes on the role of the blast of apocalypse [. . .]. Yet the age that is coming, while routinely called the "Day of the Lord," is also known as *Kairos*. Just as *kairos* indicates a rupture within continuity, *Krisis*, acting as judgment, cleaves. While *krisis* places the stress on the very act of judging, *kairos* focuses on the temporal rupture that accompanies it.⁶

In essence, *kairos* ("opportunity, the decisive moment") encapsulates the apocalyptic disruption within *chronos* ("ordinary time"), signaling the impending onset of *krisis* ("the judgment that slices"). The intricate interplay of these three facets is such that by the time the Second Coming is proclaimed, the *kairos*, the apocalyptic juncture, is already underway. It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that while *kairos* signifies the suspension of *chronos*, it does not signify the termination of ordinary time. The conclusion of *chronos* takes place solely with the arrival of Judgment Day (*krisis*). This conception of the distinct dimensions of time posed a fundamental challenge to Christianity right from its inception: the interval between *kairos* and *krisis*, that is, the ordinary time of *chronos*, the time of misery, which is like a "wedge" between the time of the apocalyptic act and the time of judgment.

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While Christianity did not view the apocalyptic act (the Incarnation) as an outright negation of *chronos*, acknowledging the emergence of *kairos* time within it, two concerns regarding their relationship endured. One concern, on the one

⁶ François Hartog, *Chronos: The West Confronts Time*, trans. S. R. Gilbert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 11.

hand, was that believers might begin to doubt the assurance of the apocalyptic act (*kairos*), progressively eroding their faith in the Second Coming and becoming increasingly engrossed in the time of misery (*chronos*). On the other hand, a potential peril existed wherein believers might fervently fixate on apocalyptic time, endeavoring to bridge, if possible, the gap between *kairos* and *krisis* (Judgment Day), striving to merge them into a single time—the extensive history of Christianity presents a multitude of cases where individuals have claimed to be the Messiah, effectively highlighting the gravity and constancy of this threat.

However, rather than solely emphasizing the *Kairos* and *Krisis* and isolating *Chronos* from them, Christianity introduced a new regime of historicity in which the life of the believer is shaped by the interplay of three dimensions: *Kairos*, *Chronos*, and *Krisis*. St. Paul’s preaching to the Corinthians effectively illustrates that, in Christianity, Chronos time is not isolated from the other two times: “Those who have spouses should live *as though* they had *none*, and those who mourn *as though* they were *not* mourning.”⁷ This use of “as though not” (*hōs mē*), as highlighted by Hartog,

indicates the dual path that will allow one to live henceforth in both Chronos time and Kairos time [. . .]. None of these responses goes beyond the present. They indicate how to live, day after day, the mystery of Kairos, aware that the Judgment Day is coming but never succumbing to the apocalyptic feverishness nurtured by those whom the authors of the New Testament denounce as so many false prophets, false Messiahs, or anti-Messiahs.⁸

There is an aspect in Paul’s preaching that could be read in light of Hegel’s notion of *the infinite judgment*. While underscoring the interweaving of Kairos and Chronos, the preaching implicitly acknowledges that no common measure exists between the two. “There is no common denominator, no *tertium comparationis*, no basis for a relationship that could vouch for the asserted equivalence”⁹ between “*living in Chronos time*” (depicted as “those who have spouses”) and “*living in Kairos time*” (portrayed as “*should live as though they had none*”).

⁷ 1 Cor. 7:29–30, quoted in Hartog, *Chronos*, 46; emphasis added.

⁸ Hartog, 46–47.

⁹ Mladen Dolar, “The Phrenology of Spirit,” in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1994), 67.

Nevertheless, the “*as though not*” functions as a hinge through which a relation between the two parts of the preaching is established. Instead of a negative judgment where one of the predicates of the subject is simply negated, resulting in an *indeterminately determined* subjects, the preaching could be seen as an infinite judgment in which the predicate is affirmed in its negation; or in other words, the *non-predicate* (as though they *had no spouse*) is *affirmed* (should live),¹⁰ leading to the positing of the subject as an *indeterminately determinate determinateness*.

However, this does not mean that the infinite judgments provide more determinations of the subject-predicate relation. Rather, in contrast to “the famous thesis on “determinate negation,” [according to which,] one would expect negative judgment to *succeed* infinite judgment as a “higher,” more concrete form of dialectical unity-within-difference,”¹¹ “in infinite judgments one is dealing with a *relation to relationality* as such or to discursiveness as such. This is why it cannot simply be more determined; one here deals with the truth of discursiveness.”¹² Hence, in lieu of asserting “the positedness of the subject as continuing *itself* into *its* predicate,” one can say that the subject is posited in the very *gap* between the subject *and* the predicate. Similarly, the subject is the very *gap* between identity *and* difference, it is the very minimal difference inherent within every identity, dividing it into identity *and* difference. It is due to this irreducible minimal difference that the infinite judgment is defined as a judgment “dealing with a relation to relationality,” rather than providing further determination.

As a result, it could be proposed that in Paul’s preaching, the core locus of the subject resides in the “*as though not*,” which serves as an indicator neither of “living in Chronos” nor of “living in Kairos.” but rather of the unsurpassable gap between the two. To live in both Chronos and Kairos hinges on maintaining

¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek illustrates the distinction between the negative judgment and the infinite judgment by referring to the distinction that “lies [. . .] between ‘is not mortal’ and ‘is not-mortal’: what we have in the first case is a simple negation, whereas in the second case, a *non-predicate is affirmed*.” Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 111.

¹¹ Žižek, 21.

¹² Frank Ruda, “What Is to Be Judged? On Infinitely Infinite Judgments and Their Consequences,” in *Žižek and Law*, ed. Laurent De Sutter (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2015), 168; emphasis added.

this gap, which has nothing to do with further determinations by which those who live in Chronos are “posited as continuing *themselves* into *their* predicate [apocalyptic act].” Accordingly, it follows that one of the potential outcomes of such a positing might involve the emergence of “false prophets, false Messiahs, or anti-Messiahs” who seek to remove the wedge (*chorons*) between *kairos* and *krisis*, feverishly continuing themselves into their predicate (Judgment Day) in order to ultimately fuse Kairos and Krisis into a single dimension of time, that of the end of time.¹³

Viewing the entire narrative of the *division in time* from a Chronos-oriented standpoint, we might posit that this division, which, when seen from a Kairos-oriented perspective, was understood as an interval between Kairos and Krisis, has now transformed into a schism within Chronos time itself. While from the standpoint of Kairos, Chronos is perceived as a “wedge” *between* Kairos and Krisis, from the vantage point of Chronos, it is Kairos that becomes internalized within Chronos, cleaving it from within and thereby unveiling a distinct dimension of infinity within the finitude of Chronos time. In brief, the chasm between Kairos and Chronos should be thought of as a division that has been inherent in each of them from the very outset, even though it took a millennium and multiple centuries—from early Christianity to the modern era—for this *in itself* division to become *in and for itself*.

To return to the question of the apocalyptic in Islam, we maintain that the distinction between the apocalyptic doctrines of Christianity and Islam can be comprehended by examining their differing approaches to the structural division within time, brought about by the interposing of Chronos between Kairos and Krisis. In contrast to Christianity, where this division is addressed dialectically, Islam *disavows* such a division when faced with it.

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In the fourth session of *Seminar IV*, held on 12 December 1956, Lacan underscored a pivotal notion that not only serves as the linchpin for comprehending the mother-child dynamic but also proves advantageous for his later work in *Seminar X* concerning the unknowability of the mother’s desire as the anxie-

¹³ Paul’s preoccupation with the gap between Kairos and Krisis is also evident in his second letter to the Thessalonians, where he introduces the concept *katechon* from a theodical standpoint as a means of addressing and representing this gap.

ty-provoking *Thing* for the child. Additionally, this notion serves as an apt entry point for delving into the question of perverse disavowal:

Freud tells us that among a woman's essential missing objects is the phallus, and that this bears the closest relation to her relationship with her child. This is for the simple reason that if woman finds satisfaction in her child, it's precisely in-so-much as she finds in him something, the penis, that more or less succeeds in calming her need for the phallus, that saturates this need. Should we fail to take this into account we misconstrue not only Freud's teaching but also something that is manifest in experience from one instant to the next.¹⁴

As we can see, there is a lack in the mother (the first Other), to which she thinks her child can respond "more or less successfully." However,

the first Other of a pervert has such a strong and seemingly exclusive interest in the child that the pervert never comes to understand that he only "more or less" resembles the lack in the Other. In other words, the pervert never interprets the symbolic phallus (as the signifier of the lack in the Other) as the signifier of the Other's metonymic, ever sliding desire—which he could never hope to satisfy. Instead, so perfectly does he seem to resemble what the Other wants that he believes the Other lacks something which is present in the world (namely, him) rather than something which is absent.¹⁵

Hence, when confronted with his mOther, who requires him to have (or be) the phallus, the pervert disavows the lack in the mOther and reduces "the [m] Other's desire to demand [by] seeing himself as the answer to the question of what the [m]Other wants."¹⁶ Put differently, the pervert resorts to disavowal as a self-defense mechanism in the face of the lack in the Other. In contrast to the neurosis, where the subject, by accepting *the No of the Father*, yields to the *separation* from the source of *jouissance*, the mOther, and seeks replacements for lost enjoyment within the socio-symbolic order by embracing *the Name of the*

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¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Object Relation*, trans. Adrian Price (Cambridge: Polity, 2021), 62.

¹⁵ Stephanie S. Swales, *Perversion: A Lacanian Psychoanalytic Approach to the Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 64.

¹⁶ Stephanie S. Swales, "Neoliberalism and Liminality: Perverse Cruelties in the Age of the Capitalist Discourse," in *Lacan's Cruelty: Perversion beyond Philosophy, Culture and Clinic*, ed. Meera Lee (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 194.

Father, the pervert subject acknowledges *the No of the Father* as a signifier that alienates him. Yet, he is reluctant to accept *the Name of the Father*, or more precisely, *the Law of the Father*.¹⁷ This is why he disavows the lack in the Other, the structural schism within the socio-symbolic reality.

However, the distinct manner in which Islam addresses the lack in the Other as the One requires our cautious avoidance of hastily generalizing psychoanalytic concepts, which have their origins in both clinical and institutional practices. The disavowal of the lack in the One in Islam should thus be approached within its singularity, which, similar to the singular cases in clinical and institutional settings, can contribute to the ongoing constructing of the concept of perversion. Thus, one could say that there is a distinction between the concept of perversion and singular cases of perversion, and instead of a one-way path from the concept of perversion to Islam, an alternative route must be taken: from (the concept of) perversion to Islam and back. While it is imperative not to generalize the concept of perversion, this does not preclude us from exploring other implications of such a concept that extend beyond the scope of psychoanalysis, potentially leading to a productive crossroads between psychoanalysis and philosophy.

We find it useful to consider perversion as an ontological elucidation of the way in which our socio-symbolic reality is constituted¹⁸ and to read the lack in the

¹⁷ However, as Jacques-Alain Miller pointed out in his conceptualization of the term perversion, the pervert is the subject who seeks “to make the Other exist to be the instrument of its enjoyment.” Lacan, who was interested in homonymy and homophony, illustrates this relationship between perversion and the Other by introducing a modification of the word perversion. He refers to it as “père-version, a word which is untranslatable, made up of père, father, and version. It implies a turning to the father, a call to the father.” Jacques-Alain Miller, “On Perversion,” in *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan’s Return to Freud*, ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jaanus (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 308, 318. In the words of Bruce Fink, “perversion involves the attempt to prop up the law so that limits can be set to jouissance (what Lacan calls ‘the will to jouissance’). Whereas we see an utter and complete absence of the law in psychosis, and a definitive instatement of the law in neurosis (overcome only in fantasy), in perversion the subject struggles to bring the law into being—in a word, to make the Other exist.” See Bruce Fink, “Perversion,” in *Perversion and the Social Relation*, ed. Molly Anne Rothenberg, Dennis A. Foster, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 38.

¹⁸ For a comprehensive examination of the interplay between ontology and perversion, contextualized in the works of Lacan, Deleuze, and Agamben, see Boštjan Nedoh, *Ontology and Perversion: Deleuze, Agamben, Lacan* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).

Other as reflective of the incompleteness of the One, which is divided into the One and the not-One.¹⁹ From this perspective, we contend that what Muḥammad disavowed was, indeed, the very incompleteness of the One. Faced with this incompleteness, the Prophet of Islam did not emphasize the originary, inherent division in time; instead, he highlighted the contrasting extremities of Chronos and Kairos, stemming from this division. In essence, Islam *projects* the inherent *contradiction* in time *onto* the *opposition* between the two poles of Chronos and Kairos, and thus making of this opposition a fetish that veils the inherent contradiction—we will see later how in Iran under the Islamic Republic, opposition and its ramifications, such as parallelism, evolved into the primary form of fetishism.

In summary, differing from Paul’s preaching that underscores “*a relation to relationality*” between Chronos and Kairos, Muḥammad emphasizes the two endpoints of this relation. This emphasis is most apparent in the fact that while the Qur’an vividly portrays apocalyptic imagery, Islam does not overlook the opportunity to comment on and engage with the minutiae of everyday life within ordinary time, Chronos. In contrast to the Christian God, who descends to undergo division upon the cross, the God of Islam, molded after the neo-Platonic concept of the One, ascends above Being to reach the pinnacle of transcendence. This ascent serves to render the God of Islam, in a certain sense, more resilient against the division that structurally affects the constructing of our socio-symbolic reality. However, when we turn to the appellations attributed to this supremely transcendent God, we discern the presence of opposing poles. As an illustration, the God of Islam is concurrently referred to as *Al-Zahir* (The Manifest) and *Al-Batin* (The Hidden); or He is concurrently recognized as *Al-Rahim* (The Most Merciful) and *Al-Muntaqim* (The Avenger). To provide further explanation, the Oneness of God is maintained in such a way that while philosophical and

¹⁹ One might rightly object that the endeavor to establish a connection between Islam and perversion contradicts Octave Mannoni’s take on “religious faith,” according to which the problems linked to religious faith are distinct from mere belief and should be distinguished from the realm of fetishistic disavowal. However, we will strive to demonstrate how Islam’s approach to the inquiry into the lack in the Other effectively clarifies the resonance between the onto-theological account of Islam and the ontological account of perversion. See Octave Mannoni, “I Know Well, but All the Same . . .,” in *Perversion and the Social Relation*, 72.

theosophical traditions envisage a neo-Platonic God²⁰ transcending the realm of Being, this same God is also characterized by dualistic attributes, represented by these opposing poles.

We have now arrived at a point where, drawing on Žižek's reinterpretation of Mao's contradiction thesis,²¹ we can encapsulate the preceding discussions in a dictum of fetishistic disavowal, akin to Mannoni's approach, as follows: "*I know very well that two divides into One, but all the same One unites into two.*" Taking this dictum as an onto-theological declaration on Islam, we will endeavor in the subsequent discussion to explore the political implications of such a declaration within the context of Iran under the Islamic Republic.

Before embarking on this analysis, however, we would like to briefly allude to the intricate tiling of the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, a masterpiece of Islamic architecture, which serves as a remarkable embodiment of the concept "One unites into two." When observing the ceiling of the mosque dome from any perspective, a division becomes evident at a specific juncture. Emerging from this division point, two symmetrical arabesque lines gradually extend, each branching out in opposing directions. These initial lines generate new lines, which in turn give rise to additional lines, resulting in an elaborate network that cov-

²⁰ We can mention the name of Plotinus, who is the main source of influence of Neoplatonism on Islamic philosophy and theology. It is very interesting that Plotinus not only plays a key role in the formation of Islamic philosophy by providing the latter with the idea of the One, but also, as Andrew Cole explores in detail in his account of Hegel's debt to the Middle Ages, he is one of the main sources of the Hegelian dialectic, which is strongly influenced by the dialectic of identity and difference conceptualized by medieval thinkers such as Plotinus. One could say that these two different influences of Plotinus led to the emergence of two major different kinds of philosophy in Christian and Islamic contexts. See Andrew Cole, *The Birth of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

²¹ "Mao opposed the revolutionary motto 'One divides into two' to the conservative motto 'Two unites into one'; perhaps, however, one should propose a different revolutionary motto: 'Two divides into one,' and oppose it to the conservative 'One unites into two.' From the strict dialectical standpoint, 'One' is not the name for unity but for a reflexive self-division, so 'two divided into one' means that the external opposition of two complementary poles whose harmony is the unity of the One is transposed into the immanent contradiction of the One. The conservative move is, on the contrary, to resolve the self-division of the One by way of positing the two poles as the opposed poles of some higher unity: harmony (or 'eternal struggle') between the two sexes replaces the immanent rupture of sexuality, harmony of classes which form a social Whole replaces class struggle, etc." Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 220.

ers the entirety of the ceiling surface. The intricate arrangement of arabesques shares a likeness with a biological phenomenon called *dendrite tiling*, a process by which “multiple arbors of neurons innervating the same surface are often arranged in a tiled pattern that maximizes coverage of that surface while minimizing overlap between neighboring arbors.”²² This neural network mechanism is facilitated by “repulsion [or self-avoidance] between sister dendrites of a single neuron, ensuring that they splay apart to cover a large area.”²³

Žižek adopts the Möbius strip as the elementary topological structure embodying the concept “Two divides into one,” where “a twisted or convoluted space in which a line, brought to its extreme, punctually coincides (or, rather, intersects) with its opposite.”²⁴ The Möbius strip’s topology is further elaborated upon in the more intricate cross-cap form, which is subsequently redoubled in complexity, reaching its zenith in the Klein bottle.²⁵ The entire dynamic of this topology is determined by the coincidence of a line with *its* opposite at the juncture of an *inner cut* that convolutes and twists the surface. In contrast, the tiling of the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque does not manifest a convoluted surface; rather, it presents a configuration where the inner cut is disavowed, projecting itself onto the *speculative* liminality between the lines. The arabesques are intricately arranged so that no line, branch, or dendrite coincides with its opposite; instead, this arrangement *maximizes surface coverage, minimizes overlap, and avoids coincidence*. As we observe, this architectural masterpiece is also rooted in the mechanism of disavowal of the division, the cut, the schism, and the lack in the Other. This prompts us to briefly acknowledge that the scarcity of comedy works in classical Persian literature, when compared to the abundance of tragic and epic works, could potentially be interpreted as stemming from a tendency to disavow what makes us and things irreparably imbalanced. Drawing from Alenka Zupančič’s insights in her classic work on comedy, we can posit that a good

²² Wesley B. Grueber and Alvaro Sagasti, “Self-avoidance and Tiling: Mechanisms of Dendrite and Axon Spacing,” *Cold Spring Harbor Perspectives in Biology* 2, no. 9 (September 2010): 6, a001750, <http://doi.org/10.1101/cshperspect.a001750>.

²³ Zhiqi Candice Yip and Maxwell G. Heiman, “Duplication of a Single Neuron in *C. elegans* Reveals a Pathway for Dendrite Tiling by Mutual Repulsion,” *Cell Reports* 15, no. 10 (June 2016): 2109, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.celrep.2016.05.003>.

²⁴ Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 226.

²⁵ According to Žižek, these three topological configurations correspond to the three doctrines of Being, Essence, and Concept in Hegel’s *The Science of Logic*. See Žižek, 222.

comedy stages a “short-circuit between heterogeneous orders.”²⁶ This principle can lead to the emergence of a range of elements on stage, including collisions, stumbling, coincidences, overlaps, imbalances, repetition, minimal differences, asymmetry, and more. Comedy provides the stage on which the actor continually experiences her “self-othering” (*Sichanderswerden*), to use Hegel’s term, and where “the universal concretizes.” Notably, in the tiling of the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, there is no room for coincidence, short-circuits, or imbalance. Everything is meticulously arranged to showcase the utmost balance, symmetry, and homogeneity.

The tiling of the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque provides an illustrative example of the concept “One unites into two.” Here, “one” unsplit, symmetrical, homogeneous arabesque unites into its “two” lines. Bringing our attention back to Paul, we could argue that unlike the trajectory of the lines (arbors) within the arabesques, his preaching does not present us with the juxtaposition of two opposing poles into which One unites. Instead, within his preaching, we witness a statement that internally *coincides with its own* opposite, mirroring the topological structure of the Möbius strip, which illustrates the concept “Two divides into one.” It could be argued that the “as though” in Paul’s statement operates in a manner akin to the *inner cut* of the Möbius strip. In this context, one side of the statement (“those who have spouses”) *coincides with its own* opposite side, (“should live *as though* they had *none*”), which is not a *projected* opposing pole.

Shifting our focus to the sociopolitical context of Iran, we can now try to read the occurrence of 11 February 1979 as a rupture within ordinary time, Chronos, when the revolution erupted into history. In this “interim period,” positioned between the Islamic Kairos and *Al-Sa’a* (the Hour, Judgment Day), between *already* and *not yet*, time is once again torn asunder. The fact that revolutions are often commemorated by the time or the place in which they occurred (such as the *French* Revolution, the *Haitian* Revolution, the revolutions of 1848, the *October* Revolution) points to two significant aspects.

The first point to consider is that a revolution involves the redistribution of “the transcendental conditions for the possibility” of a new sociopolitical order. The materialism of the revolution denotes a radical rupture within the established

²⁶ Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 8.

regime of “the distribution of the sensible” (*la partage du sensible*), as Jacques Rancière phrases it. This rupture provides the conditions of possibility for reconstructing the socio-political order on the foundation of a *new signifier*. Consequently, this observation highlights the *structural difference* between the transcendental conditions that make it possible to reconstruct the sociopolitical order when a revolution occurs *and* the actual manifestation of such an order. The 1979 Revolution, as a radical disruption of the prevailing *status quo*, laid down the transcendental conditions for the possibility of reconstructing the sociopolitical order. This was achieved by unleashing the *in itself* negativity that had been manipulated and exploited by the Pahlavi’s monarchy and its regime of signifiers, representing a fusion of an archaic tendency rooted in pre-Islamic Persian heritage and a state-initiated modernization program from above.

The second aspect highlights that revolution foregrounds *the inherent untimeliness of time* itself. This fundamentally challenges the foundational tenets of the Kantian notion that time and space serve as the transcendental conditions for the possibility of synthesis. Revolution unleashes the untimeliness of time, accentuating inherent out-of-jointness and prompting us to realize that time, as the transcendental condition for synthesis, is itself incurably contaminated by a structural delay—an untimeliness. There is a non-existent time that begets time itself and is incorporated into time from its very inception. Here, we can cite three “slogan-like adages” proposed by Mladen Dolar in his compelling exploration of the untimeliness of time: “1. ‘There were times when there was time.’ 2. ‘Time is the afterlife of time.’ 3. ‘We are human, so we come too late; we are never on time.’”²⁷ There is no such thing as being on time; we are always either too early or too late. This structural nonsynchronicity or untimeliness inherent in time is the reason why thought is always belated or premature to the events, resulting in a persistent aspect that eludes synthesis. In this context, Rebecca Comay, in her remarkably innovative interpretation of Hegel’s account of the French Revolution, asserts that

because the present is never caught up to itself, we encounter history virtually, vicariously, voyeuristically—forever latecomers and precursors to our experiences,

²⁷ Mladen Dolar, “What’s the Time? On Being Too Early or Too Late in Hegel’s Philosophy,” in “Hegel 250—Too Late?,” ed. Mladen Dolar, special issue, *Problemi International* 4 (2020): 33.

outsiders to our most intimate affairs. [. . .] Historical experience is nothing but this grinding nonsynchronicity, together with a fruitless effort to evade, efface, and rectify it: we measure ourselves against standards to which we cannot adhere and that do not themselves cohere, and subject ourselves to timetables to which we cannot adjust and that we keep trying vainly to adjust. The experience of “revolution in one country” makes this syncopation painfully explicit.²⁸

Revolution serves as the quintessential event to illustrate this nonsynchronicity, precisely revealing why there is no distinct *right* time for a revolution. This is because a revolution encapsulates a moment when the inherent structural *un-rightness* of time itself is brought to the fore:

If the French Revolution is the epochal marker of modernity—a “world” event in that it sets the schedule and tempo against which past and future history is henceforth measured—this is not because it provides a fixed or objective (strictly speaking, ahistorical) standard of comparison, but rather because *it introduces untimeliness itself as an ineluctable condition of historical experience*. [. . .] There is no right time or “ripe time” for revolution (or there would be no need of one). The Revolution always arrives too soon (conditions are never ready) and too late (it lags forever behind its own initiative).²⁹

The 1979 Revolution was untimely because it brought to the fore the very structural untimeliness of Iranian society in its modern era. On a collective scale, Iranians gained awareness of this untimeliness through the series of disastrous defeats in the early nineteenth-century Russo-Persian wars, which culminated in the loss of substantial portions of the northern territory of the country. Continuing along this line of reasoning, another significant facet of the 1979 Revolution can be highlighted.

In our discussion of the first aspect, we proposed that the revolution made it possible to reconstruct the sociopolitical order by redistributing the transcendental conditions of experience within this order. At this juncture, we are still grounded in the Kantian perspective of transcendental conditions of synthesis.

²⁸ Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 4–5.

²⁹ Comay, 7.

Nevertheless, as previously noted, another distinctive feature of the revolution comes into play. Embedded within time itself is an inexorable, irreducible un-timeliness, which constitutes the residue of a time we have never experienced but is retroactively postulated. In other words, our engagement with it remains exclusively negative—perceiving it as a non-existent time that irrevocably corrupts time with a structural delay, thus unsettling both time and anything conditioned by it. In contrast to “the lingering eighteenth-century German hellenophilic aesthetic fantasies,” which posited the existence of a flawless, untainted, and harmonious time experienced during the Hellenic era, the truth remains that there has never been a perfect and uncorrupted time. As Comay persuasively highlights,

the [French] Revolution brings modernity to its turning point by reactivating the unfinished project of antiquity. It inherits the theological-political crisis of legitimacy that had ruined the illusory tranquility of the Greek polis. Hegel’s analysis of *Sittlichkeit* had shattered every nostalgia for an original transparency and plenitude. The beautiful polis turns out to have been a fragile edifice constructed on the hidden fault line between two irreconcilable orders. Beauty sustained the fiction of equilibrium by masking the dissonance between competing grounds of legitimacy—divine and human, sacred and secular, Antigone’s law and Creon’s. Beauty was in this sense the first aesthetic ideology: it supplied the suture or hyphen of the theological-political.³⁰

The French Revolution marks a pivotal moment wherein the inherent un-timeliness of time, which was always already *in itself*, came to the fore and became *in and for itself*. From the inception of the so-called perfect, harmonious, and uncorrupted time of the Greek *polis*, time itself bore an inherent un-timeliness, and it did not take much patience for this disturbing un-timeliness to unfold dramatically, revealing above all that the foundation of the *polis* was rooted in an inexorable antagonism. In her extremely insightful book on Antigone, Zupančič highlights a crucial point regarding this antagonism:

The figure of Antigone seems to be emblematic of a particular kind of social antagonism that touches on the question of the very constitution, and being, of the social [. . .]. But antagonism should in this case be understood not as hostility and

³⁰ Comay, 58.

conflict between two (or several) elements but rather in the sense in which Marx talked about “class antagonism”: not simply as conflict *between* different classes and their interests but as something that pertains to the very logic of the space, or reality, in which these classes exist—in this case, the reality of the capitalist mode of production. In other words, talking about antagonism in the case of Antigone is meant to direct our attention not to her conflict with and opposition to Creon but rather to something that surfaces *in* and *through* this conflict, something that brings to the fore a singular torsion, or crack, which defines the very ground they stand on in their conflict.³¹

The torsion that “surfaces *in* and *through* the conflict between Antigone and Creon” constitutes the fissure into which the Greek *Sittlichkeit* crumbled. At this point, the era had arrived for the aesthetic ideology of Beauty to give way to the Roman ideology of Law; yet, as is often the case, it was *too late*. The damage done was irreversible, and the Roman legalism represented an ineffectual endeavor to glue together the shattered pieces of the “harmonious,” “divine” world, employing “the abstract force of a law stripped of all legitimacy [the execution of which, required] the military prowess of a ruler whose own authority had been reduced to an ostentatious display of destructive, orgiastic excess.”³²

Rather than invoking “the abstract force of a law,” the French Revolution shed a dazzling light on the underlying structural out-of-jointness of the order, its irreparable delay, thereby unleashing the originary negativity previously buried under a pile of obsolete odds and ends. Prior to extolling the French Revolution for its triple signifier (*liberté, égalité, fraternité*), or condemning it for the Jacobin or Thermidorian terror, the pivotal aspect of the French Revolution that demands our serious consideration is the realization that, for the first time, the *in itself* negativity became the *in and for itself* negativity through a collective emancipatory act.

As mentioned earlier, the 1979 Revolution, which brought the originary negativity to the fore, not only provided the transcendental conditions for the possibility of reconstructing the sociopolitical order, but also affirmed that these

³¹ Alenka Zupančič, *Let Them Rot: Antigone's Parallax* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2023), 2–3.

³² Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, 59.

very transcendental conditions are conditioned by the inherent untimeliness that structurally imbalances time. Faced with this untimeliness, the Islamic Republic followed a trajectory analogous to our earlier explanation of how Islam confronted the division in time. The mechanism of disavowing the inherent division in which the socio-symbolic reality is grounded was brutally suppressive from the outset. If we regard the 1979 Revolution as emblematic of the concept “Two divides into one,” then the Islamic Republic can be seen as emblematic of the concept “One unites into two.” The oxymoronic combination of its opposing poles—namely, “Islamic” and “Republic”—serves as a significant manifestation of this second concept where two opposing poles are brought together to disavow the inner cut, the division that made its emergence as a government possible. Hence, since its inception, the Islamic Republic has never stopped disavowing the 1979 Revolution as the pivotal moment that brought the irreversible division in time back to the fore.

On 1 March 1979, less than a month after the revolution’s victory, Ayatollah Khomeini, the architect of the Islamic Republic, addressed the clerics who were gathered to celebrate his return to the city following a fifteen-year exile period at the *Feyziyeh* religious school in Qom: “What our nation aspires to is an “Islamic republic”—not just a simple republic, not a democratic republic, nor even an Islamic democratic republic, but a pure Islamic republic.”³³ As emblematic of the concept “One unites into two,” the Islamic Republic, as its name suggests, *in principle*, rests on two pillars. On one hand, it is rooted in the religious doctrine of *Imāmiyya Shi‘a*, intended to grant it divine legitimacy. On the other hand, by upholding the sovereignty of Iranian citizens in sociopolitical decision-making, as emphasized by the term “Republic” in its title, the post-revolutionary government establishes its second source of legitimacy. In the subsequent discussion, our aim is to illustrate that after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, a new government intended to reshape the sociopolitical framework following the revolution, the structural out-of-jointness of the socio-symbolic reality *self-externalizes* in a form of dualism: Islamic/Republic. This very government

³³ Interestingly, Khomeini’s initial proposition was not the term “Islamic Republic,” but rather “Islamic Government.” This very phrase was the title of his treatise, published a year prior to the revolution’s victory—a manifesto in which he delineated his ideal governmental model. It was only at a later point, under the sway of his inner circle, that he relinquished his original proposal and embraced the suggestion of an “Islamic Republic,” put forth by a member of this close-knit group.

draws its foundation from a theory known as *wilāyat al-faqīh*, translating to the “guardianship of the Islamic jurist.” *Wilāyat al-faqīh* “advocates a kind of political system relying upon a just and capable jurist (*faqīh*) to assume the leadership of the government in the absence of an infallible *imām*.”³⁴ It “is based on the four epistemological and anthropological assumptions of guardianship, Divine appointment, jurisdiction, and absolutism. This theory defends the unconditional right of just jurists, as the general vicegerents of the Hidden *imām*, to wield political power over the community of believers.”³⁵ The role ascribed to the Supreme *faqīh* (Guide, Jurist) is analogous to the role assigned by the *Imāmiyya Shī’a* doctrine to the twelve *Shī’a imāms*. According to this doctrine, the holy realm of the *Shī’a imāms* is determined in the intermediary space between earth and the heavens—known as *Malakut*. This unique position enables the *Shī’a imāms* to derive the names and attributes of God from the heavens and then reflect them onto the earth like a mirror. In a similar vein, acting as the general vicegerent of the Hidden *imām*, the Supreme *faqīh* (Guide, Jurist), much like the *Shī’a imāms*, is envisioned as a mediator between the heaven and the earth, the theological and the political, and the spiritual and the temporal. The Supreme *faqīh* (Guide, Jurist) is intended to serve as the pivotal link bridging the two facets of “Islamic” (signifying the divine and heavenly dimension, *Nasut*) and “Republic” (representing the human and earthly dimension, *Lahut*). The intermediary position of the Supreme *faqīh* (Guide, Jurist) is, indeed, the very place that corresponds to the “One” in the concept “One unites into two.” It is the place where the One that unites into two is signifierized within the sociopolitical order. However, the duality encapsulated by “Islamic/Republic” extends beyond the mere nomenclature of the government. Over the course of the last forty-four years, it has consistently replicated itself, resulting in the pervasive contamination of the entire sociopolitical structure.

Let us pause here and closely examine the fundamental components of the Islamic Republic, along with their specific interactions within a distinctive hybrid structure. At the pinnacle of such a pyramid-shaped government resides the role of the Supreme Leader (the Supreme *faqīh*, Guide, Jurist), whose authority and

³⁴ Leila Chamankhah, *The Conceptualization of Guardianship in Iranian Intellectual History (1800–1989): Reading Ibn ‘Arabī’s Theory of Wilāya in the Shī’a World* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 258.

³⁵ Chamankhah, 172.

guardianship over the community of believers are *absolute*, as established by a constitutional amendment in 1988.³⁶ However, the Constitution does not expound upon all the intricacies concerning the complete scope of the Supreme Leader's powers. In addition to the powers enumerated in Article 110 of the Constitution, the Supreme Leader assumes a pivotal role in the procedures for electing the president, the members of the *Majlis* (the Islamic Consultative Assembly), and the Assembly of the Experts—positions that are filled through general elections. It can be asserted that the Supreme Leader indirectly designates the elected president and the members of the *Majlis* and the Assembly. This is achieved through his appointment of the twelve members of the Guardian Council of the Constitution. He directly appoints six jurists while indirectly selecting the remaining six legal scholars. The latter are presented to the *Majlis* by the head of the judiciary (himself directly appointed by the Supreme Leader), and subsequently elected in a vote by the members of the *Majlis*. The Guardian Council bears the responsibility not only of interpreting the Constitution and ensuring the alignment of legislation passed by the *Majlis* with the criteria of *Imāmiyya Shī'a* jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the Constitution, but also of overseeing the election process and the qualifications of candidates vying for positions in the Assembly of Experts, the presidency, and the *Majlis*. In accordance with the Constitution, all candidates participating in *Majlis* or presidential elections, as well as those contending for seats in the Assembly of Experts, must undergo qualification by the Guardian Council. The Council interprets the term “supervision” in Article 99 of the Constitution as “approbative supervision” (*nezarat-e estesvabi*), which entails the authority to approve or invalidate the eligibility of candidates and the outcomes of elections. As a result, individuals elected by the public to hold positions such as the president, members of the *Majlis*, and the Assembly, have already been scrutinized and qualified under the approbative supervision of the Guardian Council, whose members are directly and indirect-

³⁶ To show what is meant by the *absoluteness* of the authority and guardianship of the Supreme Leader, we can refer here to Khomeini's initiative to add the clause “*muṭlaqa*” (“absolute”) to the theory of *wilāyat al-faqīh*, transforming it into *wilāyat-i muṭlaqa-yi faqīh* (“the absolute authority and guardianship of the jurist”). A few months before his death, Khomeini publicly declared that “obedience to the ruling jurist [is] as [obligatory for] the believer as the performance of prayer, and his powers extend even to the temporary suspension of such essential rites of Islam as the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca).” Hamid Algar, “Velayat-E Faqih: Theory of governance in Shi'ite Islam,” in *Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East and North Africa*, updated August 23, 2023, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/velayat-e-faqih>.

ly appointed by the Supreme Leader. Following election, the president must receive formal approval from the Supreme Leader before proceeding to the *Majlis* for the inauguration. The narrative persists. Despite being the head of the executive office, the president lacks complete control over it. For instance, unlike presidential systems wherein the head of government appoints military commanders, the Iranian president holds no such authority. Nonetheless, the Iranian president differs from his counterpart in a parliamentary system, where the president's role is predominantly non-executive and ceremonial in nature.

Functioning as the head of the executive branch, the Iranian president assumes the responsibility of appointing ministers, the governor of the Central Bank (based on the recommendation of the Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance), governors-general (following the Minister of the Interior's recommendation), the vice president, and Iranian ambassadors to foreign nations. Furthermore, the president issues executive orders and, as the head of the Supreme National Security Council, is vested with the constitutional power to declare a "state of emergency," entailing the suspension of all laws or the imposition of martial law. This unequivocally underscores that the president is fundamentally more than a ceremonial figure and possesses considerable executive powers. Nevertheless, even these powers are markedly influenced by the pervasive authority of the Supreme Leader. Notably, an unspoken guideline within the Iranian power structure designates the Supreme Leader as the one responsible for selecting ministers overseeing defense, intelligence, foreign affairs, science, and culture. Additionally, over the past two decades, Iran's ambassadors to certain neighboring countries, including Iraq and Syria, have been designated by the Quds Force, an extraterritorial division of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) that directly reports to the Supreme Leader. Most significantly, the Constitution explicitly entrusts the Supreme Leader with the determination of the "overall politics of the Islamic Republic system of Iran." This encompasses establishing the strategic framework for both domestic and foreign policy, along with economic and cultural orientations. This effectively means that the executive authority is already defined by these frameworks, leaving the president and his cabinet to align their actions with these orientations and policies.

Considering these insights into the power dynamics within the Islamic Republic, examining the fluctuations in the relationship between the Supreme Leaders and various presidents over the past forty years reveals a level of complex-

ity that resists facile characterization. Attempts to simplify this relationship by merely asserting that the Iranian president acts as a “buffer zone” between the Supreme Leader and the citizens, or by dismissing the presidential elections as insignificant and merely “a matter of window dressing,” are insufficient. Indeed, there is a certain level of truth in these simplifications, and as attested by the majority of Iranians, the president’s practical impact remains constrained despite the ostensibly comprehensive scope of powers associated with the position. Nevertheless, despite the disparity between his executive authority and the presumed stature of his role as the head of the cabinet, alongside his commitment to following the directives of the Supreme Leader, the events of the past four decades suggest a tension that has significantly and adversely impacted their relationship. The fact that his presidency is owed to the intervention of the Supreme Leader in “engineering” the elections did not preclude the emergence of the conflict that has been inherent in their relationship since the early days of the Islamic Republic. This conflict does not arise from personal or psychological discrepancies between the two most senior officials in the Islamic Republic’s system. Instead, it is a *structural* conflict rooted in the very roles they occupy within the system. From this perspective, one could assert that the distinctiveness of the Islamic Republic lies in its composition of two positions, each endowed with executive power. To elaborate, the executive authority is bifurcated between the president and the Supreme Leader, resulting in the coexistence of two *legitimate* governance structures: one, more potent and led by the Supreme Leader, and the other, comparatively weaker and led by the president. The Supreme Leader effectively operates a parallel government alongside the administration headed by the president. Consequently, every president has confronted the existence of another legitimate government whose pervasive influence shapes his own government’s strategies and policies. This is the underlying reason for the persistent tension observed in the relationship between the Supreme Leader and the presidents—a tension arising from the simultaneous presence of these two governance entities. The president, who gains his mandate through popular election, consistently finds himself in a situation where the greater concentration of executive power within the hands of the Supreme Leader and his affiliated institutions impedes his ability to fulfill the promises made during his electoral campaign. As a result, a structural conflict prevails between the functions of the presidency and those of the Supreme Leader, regardless of the extent of political alignment between the occupants of these positions.

Indeed, this tension vividly underscores that beyond the duality ingrained in the name of the Islamic Republic, dualism permeates its entire system. However, in contrast to those who label the government led by the Supreme Leader as the “deep state,” it is crucial to recognize that this hybrid structure does not indicate the existence of a clandestine government within the system, running alongside the official government represented by the president. This hypothetical notion of hidden power networks, operating independently from the official government and driven by distinct interests and agendas, does not accurately reflect the reality. What is referred to as the deep state constitutes a legitimate and official segment of the Islamic Republic’s state apparatus. It does not represent a hidden government within the official government but rather serves as a legitimate and central component of the entire system of the Islamic Republic. All the institutions within this sector, known as *nahadha-ye movazi* (parallel institutions), hold a specific position within the Constitution. It is evident in the annual budget bill presented by the president to the *Majlis*, where budget allocations are clearly designated for each of these institutions. However, unlike the arabesques of the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, where the lines minimize, overlap, and avoid each other, the dual structure of the Islamic Republic entails the presence of at least two institutions for each function, leading to constant interference in each other’s operations. As an example, alongside the Iranian Army, which serves as the official armed forces organization, there exists another military entity, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), encompassing ground, air, and naval forces similar to the Iranian Army. Rather than a deep state or a government within a government, there exists a dual structure where this duality stands not merely as a characteristic, but as an integral essence of the Islamic Republic itself. This is a structure that does not stop at the division into two segments: the parallel institutions under the guidance of the Supreme Leader and the institutions overseen by the president. It goes so far as to subdivide the institutions of each segment into new institutions. As a consequence, through these continual divisions and subdivisions, the Islamic Republic navigates the sole path to preserve its distinct “identity,” its “Oneness.”

99

As noted earlier, with the 1979 Revolution, the very dissonance that makes us “constantly racing ahead of” and “forever lagging behind” was unleashed from being merely the *in itself* negativity manipulated and exploited by the Pahlavi regime of signifiers. The structural dissonance that surfaced introduced a new dimension within time, dividing it again into Chronos time and Kairos time. It

led to the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy, which tenaciously sought to patch up this dissonance with materials produced by its *mythological machine*. This is a traumatic dissonance that has made Iranians both latecomers and forerunner to their experience. It is traumatic because it “marks a caesura in which the linear order of time is thrown out of sequence. *We compound this temporal disorientation every time we try to quarantine trauma by displacing it to a buried past or a distant future.*”³⁷ The Pahlavi regime and the Islamic Republic have both responded similarly in the face of such traumatic nonsynchronicity.

In seeking to alleviate this traumatic dissonance, the mythological machine of the Pahlavi regime endeavored to quarantine and displace it into a long-buried past, ancient Persia, and in doing so, ended up amplifying the dissonance even further. An exemplary instance of this phenomenon can be found in October 1971, when Shah Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi extended invitations to leaders from over seventy countries to convene in Iran and celebrate the 2500th anniversary of the Persian Empire at the historical site of Persepolis. During this event, a long-buried past was glorified and fetishized in a pompous spectacle that appeared to serve as a mask against the traumatic dissonance causing Iranian society to face a structurally irreparable out-of-jointness. In other words, while the Shah of Iran’s “modernization from above” project, funded by petrodollars, aimed to transform Iran into a “developed,” industrialized nation, on an ideological level, the glorification of ancient Persia in a mythological and pastoral manner exemplified the Pahlavi regime’s fetishistic approach to concealing and simultaneously manifesting the traumatic nonsynchronicity of Iranian society. This is precisely where the figure of tyranny enters the picture. As Joan Copjec maintains: “Whenever the always already lost past is recast as a once actual past of which a people have been robbed or which they themselves have squandered, the figure of tyranny presents itself in the engineering of efforts to recover the loss.”³⁸

The more the Shah attempted to alleviate the traumatic dissonance by quarantining it in a “harmonious,” “non-contradictory” mythologization of ancient

³⁷ Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, 25; emphasis added.

³⁸ Joan Copjec, “Battle Fatigue: Kiarostami and Capitalism,” in *Lacan Contra Foucault: Subjectivity, Sex, and Politics*, ed. Nadia Bou Ali and Rohit Goel (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 148–49.

Persia, the more he intensified it. Then came a dramatic turn in the winter of 1979, merely six years after the lavish celebrations in Persepolis. Neither the return to the glorified past nor the petrodollar-driven modernization could offer a corrective solution to the structural nonsynchronicity; the revolutionary moment provided the most suitable outlet for the traumatic dissonance. The revolution, in suspending this specific form of tyranny, brought the inadequacy of both approaches to the forefront, allowing the traumatic dissonance to assert itself and become *in and for itself*. Although the traumatic dissonance managed to escape from the quarantine in which it was only *in itself* due to the manipulative and exploitative operation of the Pahlavi regime and became *in and for itself* at the moment of the revolution, it was once again quarantined under the Islamic Republic by being displaced onto a *distant future*. In accordance with the messianic doctrine of Twelver Shi'a, the Twelfth Imam (Muhammad al-Mahdi) is anticipated to reappear at an undisclosed time, establishing a government that will usher in global peace and justice. Grounded in this messianic conviction, the Islamic Republic, operating as a Shi'a theocracy, has regarded itself since its inception as a precursor to the rule of Muhammad al-Mahdi. Consequently, much like the Pahlavi regime, the Islamic Republic, in its struggle with the traumatic dissonance brought back to the fore at the moment of the revolution, quarantines it by displacing it into an unspecified, messianic future.

Undoubtedly, the revolution served as the decisive endpoint to the rule of the Pahlavi regime. However, it should not be construed as an example of "repression proper" in the Freudian sense, where repression pertains to repressing a signifier related to an already experienced trauma. Instead, the revolution should be understood as "primary repression" (*Urverdrängung*), which is not *a posteriori* but, if we are allowed, *a priori*. Primary repression "is not the repression of the affect or its representation," but rather a form of *repression* that provides the condition for the possibility of experience itself, not of this or that experience. At the risk of oversimplification, we can differentiate between primary repression and repression proper with an analogy. In a football game, the whistles that the referee blows during the game are *subsequent* occurrences, like repression proper. First, a foul or an offside goal occurs, and then the referee blows the whistle to nullify it. However, the whistle blown by the referee at the beginning of the game is *a priori* incident, akin to primary repression. This whistle does not negate specific action, but rather provides the condition for the possibility of the game itself. In this context, Zupančič emphasizes that

what is primarily repressed is not the drive itself, or the affect, or its representation, but the subject's marker of this representation. The critical point about this is not to confound this marker with something that the subject saw or experienced in reality, and repressed because of its intimate connection with the affect in its traumatic pressure. The "primarily repressed" marker or representative of the drive is something that has never been conscious, and has never been part of any subjective experience, but constitutes its ground. The logic of repression by association is the logic of what Freud calls repression proper, whereas primary repression is precisely not a repression in this sense. In it the causality usually associated with the unconscious is turned upside-down: it is not that we repress a signifier because of a traumatic experience related to it, rather, it is because this signifier is repressed that we can experience something as traumatic (not simply as painful, frustrating, and so on), and repress it. In other words, at some fundamental level the cause of repression is repression.³⁹

Within this Freudian framework, we can read the unleashing of the untimeliness of time with the occurrence of the revolution as a primary repression that paved the path for a fresh sociopolitical order, wherein the lives of Iranians were destined to be overdetermined by the signifying logic of the Islamic Republic. Therefore, we may analyze the structurally intertwined connection between the revolution and the Islamic Republic by employing a Lacanian elaboration of Freud's theory of repression. According to this elaboration, which delves into the process of signifierization,

the logic of the signifier (and the subject as what one signifier represents for another signifier) starts only with two, it starts with the signifying dyad. On the level of the first signifier there is as yet no subject and not signifying logic or chain. The latter, however, does not occur by means of a second signifier being added to the first; it emerges by means of the "repression" of the first signifier, and emerges *at its place*.⁴⁰

Continuing along this line of reasoning, we can assert that the revolution, acting as the primary repression that brings to the fore the immense negative facet of sociopolitical reality, stands for the very first signifier that is retrospectively pos-

³⁹ Zupančič, *On Comedy*, 165.

⁴⁰ Zupančič, 165.

ited as an always already lost signifier, leaving behind an empty space. This is precisely the empty space in which the untimeliness of time bursts forth during the revolutionary moment. The revolution, emblematic of the untimeliness of time, brings to the fore the empty space of the first signifier in which the signifying chain (the Islamic Republic) is retroactively provided with the ground for its emergence. As a result, the dyadic structure of the signifier leads us to a conception of the One in which the latter is ontologically incomplete, riddled with contradiction from within so that it is simultaneously and inseparably *the One and the not-One*. What is precisely disavowed under the Islamic Republic is this very ontological incompleteness. The distinctiveness of the Islamic Republic, as discussed above, becomes evident in the process where the signifying dyad advances through the act of disavowing primary repression to uphold the oneness of the One. Rooted in a specific interpretation of Shī'a Islam, the Islamic Republic, when faced with the rupture that unveiled the domain of Kairos time during the revolution and thereby laid bare the structural untimeliness of time, followed a trajectory akin to Islam's response to the apocalyptic act.

Much like (Shī'a) Islam, which disavowed the Division that causes divisions (the theological/the political, the spiritual/the temporal, the esoteric/the exoteric), the Islamic Republic disavows this Division, which was brought to the fore at the moment of the revolution, not only by quarantining it in a messianic future but also by dividing and subdividing its administrative structure into parallel institutions and the presidential institutions. It is through these dual actions that the Islamic Republic seeks to maintain the oneness of the One—the One that unites into two.

Certainly, this phenomenon extends beyond the confines of the administrative structure; it has permeated the entire sociopolitical landscape. In one of his first films following the revolution, *Hamshahri* (Fellow Citizen, 1983), which bears the signature of his realist cinema, the so-called *cinéma vérité*, Abbas Kiarostami provides us with an exemplary illustration of the application of the mathematical statement “One unites into two” within the everyday life of Iranian citizens. Due to traffic congestion resulting from the revolution and the Iraq-Iran war, a law was enacted restricting vehicle passage in certain congested areas of Tehran from 6 a.m. to 3 p.m., allowing entry only with a permit. The film portrays the interactions between drivers lacking a traffic permit and a traffic officer, as they attempt to convince the officer to accept their excuses for entering

the restricted zone. With the insights from the previously discussed signifying dyad, the actions of the drivers who seek to convince the traffic officer, rather than complying with the traffic restriction, could be read as the failure of the signifier “traffic permit” to represent the “empty space” of the first signifier. Its failure to represent the negative dimension of the signifying logic and to refer it to the next signifier, leads to the dysfunctionality of the traffic law to successfully persuade the drivers to submit to such a law. This is because the “empty space” of the first signifier, which internally contradicts the signifier “traffic permit,” dividing it into “traffic permit” and “not-traffic permit” (the signifying dyad), is *projected onto* the conjunction between the traffic officer *and* the drivers without a traffic permit. In other words, the “not-traffic permit” of the signifier “traffic permit” is now dissociated from it and *self-externalized onto* the *liminality* between the *opposing* poles of “traffic permit” *and* “not-traffic permit” in such a way that both sides are *equally recognized*. This is why the drivers without a traffic permit do not see themselves as transgressors of the traffic law. We are not dealing here with the dialectic of rule and exception in which a violation of the traffic law is an exception that occurs within a framework that is still governed by the same traffic law. Rather, as mentioned above, the failure of the signifier “traffic permit” to represent, to tarry with, its internal negative dimension, the “not-traffic permit,” leads to the self-externalizing of the structural impasse of the law and provides those who do not have a traffic permit with a “not-traffic permit” and enables them to act in a way as if they knew that “the law does not cover all circumstances.” This dynamic puts them on an equal footing when conversing with the traffic officer, leading to calm and sometimes humorous exchanges aimed at convincing him. Their behavior stands in stark contrast to that of individuals who have violated the law. In one scene, a female motorist whom the officer refuses to let through even says to him: “*Damn the one bothering people!*” In many other cases, however, the officer is convinced to allow the motorists to proceed. In her insightful take on the film, Copjec asserts:

None of the motorists displays any disrespect for the officer or the law, indeed what is striking is the way a kind of respect or at least a faith in her pact with the law seems to invite the endearing ingenuity with which each attempts to skirt it. The consistency of the responses—not one fails to engage in ruse—in combination with the demeanor of the drivers leads us to understand that what we are witnessing does not go under the name of exception. None of these citizens (the title defines them as such and thus links them to the law and to state power) con-

siders him or herself to be above or outside the law; rather, each seems to take it for granted that the law does not cover all circumstances, that there is in the law itself something that is not decided by law and that this emancipates those subject to it from rote conduct.⁴¹

Today, four decades after Kiarostami's film, the situation remains unchanged at the very same street intersection where the traffic officer once enforced the new traffic law. Vehicle movement is still restricted during office hours, but now, instead of the traffic officer, traffic control cameras oversee the area. What sets the present situation apart is that a few hundred meters from the intersection, kiosks sell "traffic permit cards" that, when obtained, grant drivers legal access to the restricted traffic zone during working hours. In other words, after all these years, the projected "not-traffic law" of the "traffic law" still persists, not as an internal exception to that law, but as an opposing, if not parallel, pole. The difference now is that the "not-traffic permit" has become a monetized entity. During the time of the film's production, motorists without a permit would attempt to convince the traffic officer using various forms of sophistry, crafting lies and excuses. However, today's sophist motorists are distinct from their Greek predecessors who were paid. Instead, these modern sophist motorists are required to pay a fee in order to legally traverse a route that is otherwise prohibited—needless to say, the officials and administrators of the Islamic Republic can pass through these traffic zones without any obstruction. The realm of Internet access in Iran presents another facet of this phenomenon. While the government officially filters certain platforms like Twitter, it is noteworthy that all authorities of the Islamic Republic maintain official pages on such platforms. Moreover, government-licensed companies legally sell anti-filters and VPNs to citizens, enabling them to access otherwise filtered websites and platforms. This transition from the neo-Platonic God to the Money God is a comprehensive topic that merits deeper exploration. For now, let us conclude with the *liminality* between the traffic officer *and* the drivers without permits, a juncture where One unites into two.

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⁴¹ Joan Copjec, "The Imaginal World and Modern Oblivion: Kiarostami's Zig-Zag," *Filozofski vestnik* 37, no. 2 (2016): 36.

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Haptic Contagion: The MateReal of Touch in a (Post-)Pandemic World

Keywords

idealism, materialism, haptic studies, psychoanalysis

Abstract

During the pandemic there were many ways of handling the contagious SARS-CoV-2 virus, most of them in haptic terms, or in terms of touch: masks, hand disinfection, social distancing, quarantines, (self)isolations. Touch thus became not only the privileged object of the new bio-politics, striving to preserve life at all costs, but also what was lost during the pandemic. To be sure, a loss of something we never had that even the vaccine, which promised a return to normal, but actually paved the way for a “brave new post-pandemic world,” could not rehabilitate. In short, one of the elements that radically changed with and in the (post-)pandemic world is precisely the elusive object of touch, which we propose to conceptually grasp through the coinage of the concept of its “mateReal hapticity.”

Haptična okužba: mateRealno dotika v (post-)pandemskem svetu

Ključne besede

idealizem, materializem, haptične študije, psihoanaliza

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Povzetek

V času pandemije so bili v veljavi številni načini obvladovanja kužnega virusa SARS-CoV-2, večinoma navezani na haptično, na dotik: maske, razkuževanje rok, socialno distanciranje, karantene, (samo)izolacije. Dotik tako ni postal le privilegirani objekt nove biopolitike, ki si je prizadevala za ohranitev življenja za vsako ceno, temveč tudi tisto,

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kar je bilo med pandemijo izgubljeno. Šlo je, seveda, za izgubo nečesa, česar nikoli nismo imeli; tega ni moglo povrniti niti cepivo, ki je obljubilo vrnitev v normalnost, a je dejansko utrlo pot »krasnemu novemu post-pandemskemu svetu«. Skratka, eden od elementov, ki so doživeli radikalno spremembo med in v (post-)pandemskemu svetu, je natanko izmuzljivi objekt dotika, ki ga skušamo konceptualno zajeti s pojmom »mate-Realne haptičnosti«.



Introduction

In the *intermezzo* between the first and second wave of the pandemic of 2020, I managed somehow to get to Venice. *La Serenissima* was flooded. Not with tourists, but rather quite literary with water, for the MOSE was not yet operational. Movement was at the same time limited by the *acqua alta*, but also facilitated due to the lack of masses that usually overflow the city. Despite the waters and thanks to the emptiness, I could enjoy not only the architecture, but also—and especially—the museums and galleries, which were almost empty. It was an experience like something from a long gone age, when the world was not yet overflowing with people, and one could enjoy the classic arts in solitary, silent contemplation, which seems like an unbelievable privilege nowadays. Art, so it seemed at that moment, could touch us once again, and we were willing to bend the knee in front of the sublime—but at what cost? The answer, in the form of another question, came right away, on our way back from the museum to the hotel: a street artist, dressed in hippie style, was standing alone on a small *piazza*, with an elaborate and decorative panel, on which it was written: *Può una poesia sostituire un abbraccio?*

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“Can a poem replace a hug?” I think this question goes directly to the kernel of the problem we are facing nowadays in the post-pandemic era, namely, a mutually connected, two-fold phenomena that has one negative and one positive moment: on the one hand we have lost touch with each other, we have experienced an “absence of hugs,” so to speak, an absence of “human touch” if I may generalize—but on the other hand, we have (re)gained the ability to touch upon and be touched by art, enjoy it once again, as it was meant to be. It seems as if the loss of the one allowed for a (re)emergence of the other, without being

able, however, to completely fill the gap that was left in its stead, and, moreover, producing a gap of its own. A gap between hugs and poems, or, again generally speaking, between touch and the art of language.

A “poem” and a “hug,” at least at first glance, appear to be two very different things, one opposed to the other in an almost perfectly symmetrical way, as if everything that pertains to one is lacking in the other, and vice versa: a poem is a musical being made of words, thoughts, sounds and soundings-together—while a hug, on the other hand, is something worldly, bodily, physical, which has apparently nothing to do with language or sounds or thoughts, but rather pertains to the domain of the haptic. And conversely, if a hug is at home in the realm of the senses, more precisely that of the haptic—then poetry resides in the same residence, but in two different apartments, namely: in senses of hearing, and of seeing. Poetry pertains to the activities of writing and reading (be it reading in the quiet of one’s own mind, or an inter-subjective reading aloud that aims at the other as listener). However, in both instances we find elements that seem to mirror each other, thus allowing a translation, as it were, of a hug into a poem and a poem into a hug, or more conceptually speaking, of language into touch and touch into a language: do not we speak of a certain language of the body, which is learned as a “mother’s touch” in the same vein as one learns one’s “mother tongue”? And don’t we say of a poem, if it managed to move us, that it “touched” us?

In what follows, what I will be interested in will be a translation of one realm into the other by way of analogy with the contagious nature of a virus, all in order to extrapolate what both poetry and a hug have in common, namely: something that pertains to the realm of language as well as to the realm of the haptic, and that I propose to name the *mateReal of touch*, in order to define its material, contagious character, as well as its ideal (in)tangibility.

The original meaning of the word “contagion” as *contagium* directly links touch and a virus on their immediate material basis, since a virus contagiously spreads through touch and all its more abstract, elusive derivatives of “coming into contact.”¹ So it probably comes as no surprise to learn that in its origin the word

¹ *Contagium* comes from *con* + *tagium*, where the basis is *tango* (“I touch”), and therefore means “contact” or “touching” as well as “contagion.”

“virus” as *virus* meant “poison,”² but that since 1728 it came to define the “agens that causes contagious diseases,” originally meaning especially venereal, sexual diseases.³ A virus thus denotes an excess of pleasure, an excessive touch dedicated to pleasure, itself “contagious” in terms of both materiality and mimesis (it is grounded in the realm of the body, always wants “more” of it, and supposedly gives a “bad” example). In this context, is also noteworthy that materialism and virology share the same historical birthmark: in the year 1726 J. G. Walch in his *Philosophische Lexikon* coined the term “materialism” in order to name the new philosophy that was contagiously spreading through Europe, moralistically denouncing its blasphemous reduction of everything spiritual to mere “mechanical” materialism, the main target of this misguided attack supposedly being Descartes, but in fact it was La Mettrie with his infamous *Le Homme Machine*.

Materiality therefore functioned not only as the haptic basis for the contagion of a virus, but was also itself, as a philosophical doctrine, articulated, promoted, and circulated through language, understood as a contagion that spreads on a spiritual level:⁴ ideality and materiality are thus set on collision course—where the mind is ideally always already *affecting* the body, as is the body *infecting* the mind—and this course of action of course unsubtly leads us back to the age old philosophical problem of the “spiritual” mind vs. “material” body, as first best articulated by Plato and Aristotle.

Hugging the Mind

Plato spoke about something akin to the “touch of the soul” sporadically in his dialogues, most notably in his *Phaedo*, which deals with the “immortality of the soul.”⁵ At a certain point, Socrates asks the question: “When then [. . .] does the soul grasp the truth? For whenever it attempts to examine anything with

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² *Virus* has the Indo-European core of **ueis-*, which in Sanskrit becomes *viša*, “poison,” from where also the various Slavic terms of “višnja” for cherry (the hard core of which is full of cyanide).

³ *Venus* as theonym derives from the noun *venus* (“love”), both stem from a form reconstructed as **wenos-*, itself from Proto-Indo-European **wenh-* (both meaning “desire”).

⁴ One cannot but think, in this regard, about the Laurie Anderson song *Language Is a Virus*.

⁵ For all the quotes from Plato, the standard reference system of the Stephanus pagination is used, while the English translations are taken from Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

the body, it is clearly deceived by it.” (65b) The Greek text says explicitly “to touch the truth”: πότε οὖν, ἢ δ’ ὅς, ἢ ψυχὴ τῆς ἀληθείας ἄπτεται. And the answer is: when the soul gets out of touch with the body: “And indeed the soul reasons best when none of these senses troubles it, neither hearing nor sight, nor pain nor pleasure, but when it is most by itself, taking leave of the body and as far as possible having no contact or association with it in its search for reality.” (65c) The soul can “reach out” or “touch reality”—ἀπτομένη ὀρέγεται τοῦ ὄντος—only on the condition that it forfeits its contact with the tangible body, or the soul can benefit from this ideal touch only on the condition that it relinquishes its bodily touch. Does Plato use the bodily touch in order to metaphorically describe what is going on within the soul when it reaches out towards the otherwise untouchable realm of ideas?⁶

However, I would like to argue that the “touch of the soul” is not a metaphor at all, but rather that touch—the *mateReal touch*—is something common to both instances, to the soul as well as the body, for it is that element that enables the contact between these two different substances: it is, in short and speaking Spinozistically, the medium of their consubstantiality.

Aristotle developed a more down-to-earth theory of the soul in his *De anima*, where the soul is understood as part of the body.⁷ Even the more theoretical senses of seeing and hearing are defined as forms of tactility, thus developing the theory of a “common sense” based precisely on touch (425a30). Another similar and also most influential reference comes from *De generatione et corruptione*, wherein Aristotle assumes that the “first mover” is in itself not only “unmovable,” but also “untouchable” (322b–323b), thus articulating something like an untouchable touch of the “first mover.” The “first mover” or “God,” if you will—

⁶ In Homer one also finds similar passages where the inner life of the soul is described by metaphors that pertain to the realm of the senses—for instance, when he compares Agamemnon’s troubled soul with Zeus’s “lightning in token of great rain or hail or snow” (Homer, *Ilias*, trans. Panagiōtēs E. Giannakopoulos (Athens: Kaktos, 1992), bk. 10, v. 1–5)—while the opposite, interestingly enough, does not work, for the poet never describes the physical phenomena using the language of the inner life of the soul, as if their relation is neither symmetrical nor reversible.

⁷ For all the quotes from Aristotle, the standard reference system of the Bekker pagination is used, while the English translations are taken from Aristotle, *Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

or rather, if God himself wills it—moves other things by touching them, but is himself untouchable, is something much in tune with the later Christian tradition that stretches from Augustine to Malebranche, among others, and as best illustrated by Michelangelo in his famous fresco *La Creazione di Adamo*. A similar discussion on the “first cause” is of course also found in the *Metaphysics*, where Aristotle argues for a certain touch that is peculiar to the mind—mind you: not the *psycé* but rather the *nous*—when he states that thinking relates to itself by apprehending thought itself as the object of thought, and that this is the way in which the mind apprehends itself through its other:

And thought in itself deals with that which is best in itself, and that which is thought in the fullest sense with that which is best in the fullest sense. And thought thinks itself because it shares the nature of the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought in coming into contact with and thinking its objects, so that thought and object of thought are the same. For that which is capable of receiving the object of thought, i.e. the substance, is thought. (1072b)

The haptic element is not explicitly stated, but is, however, implicit in the way in which thinking thinks itself. As Aristotle implies, thought thinks itself through *participation* (μετάληψιν) in the object of thought, for it becomes an object of thought by the act of apprehension—θιγγάνω(ν)—from the verb which means “touch,” “handle,” and most importantly, also “hug.”

And once again I want to point out that this specific “touch of the mind,” the way that thought “hugs itself” through thinking and taking—or rather quite literarily: “apprehending”—itself as the object of thought, is, again, not a metaphor at all: it is not as if we first have a physical, bodily hug . . . and then the metaphorical transposition to the level of the mind that hugs itself through thinking, but rather that the one and the same *mateReal of touch* is at work in both instances.

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And the same goes for the contagious virus, for if we take just one example from Plato, that of *mimesis*, we can see how registers of both the soul and the body mutually “infect” each other precisely at the point of touch: in the famous passage from his *Politeia* where he banishes all art from the polis (except the art of philosophy, of course), Plato states that the guardians of the state must not imitate anything unworthy of free men, for “imitations practiced from youth become part of nature and settle into habits of gesture, voice, and thought.” (395d)

The problem of art in general, and especially theatre, lies in the paradox that art and its imitation affects—and infects—the mind through the body: “Touch possesses a secret power that infects the untouchable,” as Mladen Dolar elegantly puts it in a slightly different context.⁸ Even if art works at a distance—by affecting our eyes and ears—it materially infects us via the mateReality of touch, which transforms, or rather translates, a bodily phenomenon into a soul-like effect. And Plato’s solution to the problem—the banishment of arts in general and the affirmation of philosophy—does operate within the same *millieu*, for he merely replaces one type of mimesis with another while promoting the imitation of “what is appropriate to them, namely, people who are courageous, self-controlled, pious, and free, and their actions.” (395c)

The philosophical *logos*, despite apparently being on the other side of the arts, nevertheless operates through the same viral process of mimesis, itself dependent on the mateReal of touch, and this logic can be easily applied to one of the problems that arose during the second, post-vaccine phase of the Covid-19 pandemic: in order to counter the negative effects of “bad examples” (public scepticism at best, and “anti-vax” conspiracy theories at worst), science, fighting on the side of *logos*, promoted the vaccine through “good examples”—by publishing its research and reports, but also by showing statesmen and stars being vaccinated—thus relying on essentially the same contagious mimesis.

The *Begreifen* of Touch

Hegel, by modernizing the ancient dialectics of soul and body in tune with the *Zeitgeist* of the Enlightenment movement, which philosophically began with Descartes’s thinking subject and was further developed by Spinoza’s conception of subject and substance, *volens nolens* also offers us such a conception of touch that we are interested in—albeit if only as a collateral or bonus.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, touching is first encountered as a bodily experience, and is discarded at the very beginning as something inherent to mere consciousness in the form of “perception and sense certainty,” and only later on, in the “self-consciousness” part, where the notion of subject is introduced via an inter-subjective relation with the other, most notably demonstrated in his

⁸ Mladen Dolar, “Virus, ideja in -ek,” *Problemi* 60, no. 5–6 (2022): 161.

famous master-and-slave dialectics, does touching become an intersubjective experience.⁹ Thus, one could say that a hug given to the other is always already a narcissistic self-hugging-of-oneself, and conversely, there is no self-hug that is not always already alienated, for a self-hug is a hugging-of-the-other (as we have seen also with Aristotle when the mind hugs itself by apprehending thinking as its best and most appropriate object). A hug is therefore a modus of touch through which the subject apprehends itself through its own alienating othering, thus implying an active subject of thinking that apprehends itself as a passive object, the mind thus touching itself through a self-touch, a touch of the self that is, however, its own otherness.¹⁰

However, and almost as a Platonic echo, one cannot miss the repression of physical touch in its sublimated metaphysical counterpart, since we can find it incorporated into one of Hegel's pivotal concepts, the very concept of *begreifen*, meaning "conception" or "naming," but at the same time also "perception," and even "handling" or "grasping."

Hegel himself, in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, makes the connection through a singular reflection on the origin and nature of metaphors, which developed out of ordinary words that denote something sensuous, and paved the way to the most abstract concepts of pure meaning: "If, for example, we are to take *begreifen* in a spiritual sense, then it does not occur to us at all to think of a perceptible grasping by the hand."¹¹ Language as such, not only the metaphysical one, is supposed to have an inherently dialectical tendency towards pure meaning, while in order to purify itself of any physical residuum it needs metaphors as an

⁹ See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), § 178–96, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/phindex.htm>.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty gives a brilliant practical example of this in his *Phenomenology of Perception* while trying to deconstruct the traditional division between subject and object precisely through one of the many peculiarities of the sense of touch: "I can, with my left hand, feel my right hand as it touches an object, the right hand as an object is not the right hand as it touches: the first is a system of bones, muscles, and flesh brought down at a point of space, the second shoots through space like a rocket to reveal the external object in its place. In so far as it sees or touches the world, my body can therefore be neither seen nor touched." See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), 105.

¹¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 404.

intermediate step from sensorial towards spiritual: first we have a word in its literal meaning, “for instance, *fassen* or *begreifen*,” denoting the physical act of “grasping”; then we have its metaphorical use, for instance when we say that “a poem touched our hearts”; and finally, we have the pure metaphysical meaning of “grasping” in the sense of “conceiving.” Speaking in these Hegelian terms, one could say that touch is here *aufgehoben*: first dismissed on a physical level as mere sensorial *begreifen*, then metaphorically transposed into the realm of poetics, where it functions as a metaphor, and finally spiritually purified into the metaphysical concept, *Begriff*.¹²

Armed with such dialectics of touch, one could answer the Venetian question we posed at the very beginning—*Può una poesia sostituire un abbraccio?*—simply by stating: “Of course a poem can replace a hug!” For it is, in last analysis, the mateReal of touch that is moving underneath this dialectical process of the purification of meaning, a certain residuum of a real touch, which is simply not “sublatable,” a residuum of the sensorial insisting even in the realm of pure metaphysics precisely because it is mediated by its metaphorical transposition (the old Greek word μεταφορά comes from μεταφέρω, “to transfer” or “carry over”).

However, there is at least one problem here, a problem that Jean-Luc Nancy does not fail to address in his book dedicated to Hegel’s dialectics under the title of *The Speculative Remark*, where he deals with the concept of *Aufhebung* that marks the crucial centre of Hegel’s philosophical system, understood as a mastodontic self-development of spirit in nature, religion, art, and philosophy, where each phase abolishes the previous one by way of incorporating it in its own sphere, until we reach the “Absolute Spirit,” which in turn incorporates all the previous stages, all their concepts and contradictions. Except for one, of course, namely, the concept and contradiction of *Aufhebung*: everything proceeds as if everything can be dialectically *aufgehoben* but the dialectics of *Aufhebung* itself: “*Aufheben* does not capture itself, it does not close in itself and thus avoids its own identification; *aufheben* insists, persists, moves beyond itself, goes out of itself, slides through the text, untouched, so to speak, not preserved nor eliminated.”¹³ Thus, *Aufhebung* functions, at the same time, as a syn-

¹² Hegel, 404–5.

¹³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le remarque spéculatif* (Paris: Galimard, 1973), 58. All translations from Nancy’s works are my own.

onym for Hegel's dialectics, and at the same time the name for Hegel's error that shows, paradoxically, an exit from Hegel's system—an opening at the very point of foreclosure, the explosive in the middle of the cement that holds the system together, and the outer border of conceptuality itself that cannot be conceptualized from the outside, but only from the very inside.¹⁴

And it is in this sense that one can understand the logic behind Nancy's conception of the body from perhaps his greatest book, entitled *Corpus*:¹⁵ the self-realization of the body through the other—and its own otherness—has no way of abolishing the outerness of its own experience, no *Aufhebung* of the body into the concept is possible, so that the body is, structurally speaking, nothing less than the same as *Aufhebung* itself. *Corpus* is the embodiment of *Aufhebung*, and that is why at the end of the process of sublating the sensorial into the conceptual as exemplified by the example of *begreifen*, we encountered a certain residuum of haptic materiality, the *mateReal touch*, since touching, as a sensory experience, must not only be discarded as a supposed source of perpetual falsehood, but also preserved as the truth inherent in the very “conception of the concept,” or the *begreifen* of *Begriff* itself.

Thus, as we can see, the process of sublating *begreifen* into *Begriff*, touching into concept, implies a certain tactile quality of language, especially metaphorical language—as our answer to the “Can a poem replace a hug?” question demonstrates—since it is located mid-way between the common language of everyday usage and the spiritual conceptual one, where the *mateReal of touch* persists as its un-abolishable residuum of the Real.

¹⁴ This struggle to find an exit from the “Platonic Cave,” understood as metaphysics in general and Hegel's system in particular, coinciding with a search for an exit from the post-war capitalistic ideology of the period, is one of the distinctive hallmarks of structuralism. See Jean-Claude Millner, *Le periple structural: Figures et paradigme* (Paris: Seuil, 2002). Almost every author proposed his own exit: Althusser's *révolution*, Badiou's *événement*, Derrida's *déconstruction*, Lacan's *inconscient* . . . including Nancy, who at a certain point of his thought gambled everything on the concept of *corpus*.

¹⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (Paris: Métailié, 1992).

The Extimity of Touch

But what is most other and at the same time most intimate—what is, in short, most *extime* (a concept coined by Lacan in order to denote a peculiar and paradoxical external intimacy and intimate externality at the same time)—to the mind if not precisely the body? This is the point that Nancy makes in his *Corpus* while trying to circumvent the dilemma of the age-old problem of soul vs. body: either we affirm the soul against the body (as Plato did), or reverse the relation by affirming the body against the soul (as Nietzsche did), but in both instances we miss the point . . . as we miss it if we simply affirm a plurality of meanings of the body against a meaning that is one, or vice-versa, by evoking *corpus christi* and the *hoc est enim corpus meum* as *the* meaning.

Nancy's initial linguistic saturation of the various meanings pertaining to the body (a *corpus* of work, a military *corpus*, society as a *corpus*, etc.) has one primary purpose: to destitute the immediacy of the body, to show how the body matters, but not as mere matter, not as something biological or physiological, and especially not as something certain and assured, as opposed to soul, spirit, mind. A proper body, a foreign body, *étrange corps étrangers*, “strange foreign bodies,” as Nancy puts it, means that a body is not something given, clear, homely, but rather something strange and foreign, “*le corps' est nôtre angoisse mise à nu*,” “the body is our naked anxiety.”¹⁶ And “how naked we are!”—he cries at a certain point—when we want to affirm our bodies against meaning, religion, ideology . . . by denuding ourselves, by making our bodies seen to the point where exhibitionism coincides with voyeurism, and both with pornoscopia. Do I really need to give the example of social networks such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, *TikTok* . . . which functioned as a kind of surrogate for touching during the pandemic, a surrogate for all the contacts (in all its meanings) that we lost while in quarantine and self-isolation? Do I really need to remind readers of all the manic manual practices—like the washing of hands—that functioned as a kind of fetishistic denial during the anxious first waves of the pandemic in the sense of the “I know that . . . but just the same”?

If we cannot get to the body through a mere opposition with the soul . . . how can we grasp what is bodily in the body? Nancy's solution: the body is always

¹⁶ Nancy, 10.

already outside itself, and the soul is the way the body goes beyond itself, out of itself, an out-of-itself-ness of the body—spirit not as an external “foreignness” or “strangeness,” but rather as an inner one where one can come back to oneself only through the experience of another body that goes through the same process of externalization.¹⁷ This is the point where sexuality comes into play, for when we say “sexuality” we speak about a body that is marked by sexual difference through the incision of the signifier, the latter the topic of Nancy’s book on Lacan entitled *La titre de la lettre* (*The Title of the Letter*),¹⁸ while the former is the title of a lecture he gave upon the centenary of Lacan’s birth: *L’“il y a” du rapport sexuel* (*The “There Is” of the Sexual Relation*):

Sexual difference is not a difference between two or more things, where each would exist as “one” (one sex): it is neither a difference in species, nor a difference between individuals, nor a natural difference, nor a difference in grade, nor a cultural difference or a difference in gender. It is the difference of sex [*la différence du sexe*] inasmuch as it differs from itself. Sex is, for every living sexual being, and in all senses, a being that differs from itself: a differentiating as differentiating itself in concordance with all the plurality of elements and complex becomings denoted by “man/woman,” “homo/hetero,” “active/passive,” etc. And differentiating (itself) inasmuch as the species thus multiplies the singularity of its “representatives.”¹⁹

Nancy’s *différer* echoes the logic of Derrida’s *différance*: sex is at the same time that which is differed, and that which differs, a difference that anticipates its own parts, the principle of differentiating, the differentiation itself—before we arrive at its different entities. The problem being—and here Nancy apparently follows more Lacan rather than Derrida—that the very principle of differentiation is always already marked with sexual difference, it is always already sexualized,” inasmuch as “sexuality” is precisely the name of the difference par excellence: “Sexuality is not a special kind of species in relation to the genus of relation, but rather it is the relation that has its integral extension or exposi-

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¹⁷ A case in point: Nancy’s *L’intrus*, a philosophical reflection about his own experience of heart-transplantation, also turned into a movie with the same title by Claire Denis: “Whose heart, whose heartbeat is beating in my chest?” See Jean-Luc Nancy, *L’intrus* (Paris: Galilée, 2000).

¹⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le Titre de la lettre: Une lecture de Lacan* (Paris: Galilée, 1973).

¹⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *L’“il y a” du rapport sexuel* (Paris: Galilée, 2001), 30–31.

tion in sexuality,” or “sexuality relates to that which is at stake in the relation [*le sexuel rapporte ce qu’il en est du rapport*], but its relation—its balance and its story—does not totalize, and does not close.”²⁰ Again, as we can see, there is a structural equivalence between the body, which is the corpoReal embodiment of the impossibility of a conceptual sublation, and sexuality that marks the body with this impossibility (which is, in the final analysis, why the Lacanian *il y a du rapport sexuel* is supplemented and must be thought together with the more infamously scandalous *il n’y a pas du rapport sexuel*).

How can we, then, speak, or write, about such a sexualized body that cannot be sublated into the concept? That is precisely what is at stake in *Corpus* as a philosophical and linguistic experiment in thinking the body, or rather, as Nancy himself puts it, “writing the body”: “Writing not about the body, but rather writing the body. Not corpority, but rather the body. Not the signs, images, codes of the body, but rather, again, the body.”²¹ This is, or at least was, Nancy adds, the “programme of modernity,” whereupon nowadays there is no programme anymore, just television programmes, where one could see, especially during the pandemic, a “multitude of bodies”—and corpses—from where “a necessity, an urgency” emerges, demanding a “writing of the body.”²² And as the “body is on a limit, on an extremity,” so must “writing the body” be extreme: “writing: touching the extremity”—and Nancy’s question, and a challenge, is: “How therefore to touch the body, instead of signifying it or making it signify?”²³ The question is clear, critical, punctual—the answer not that much, at least at first, since instead of the Lacanian “letter” (*la lettre*) we are given the Derridaian “writing” (*écriture*) which, however, structurally holds the same place: “Writing isn’t signifying.” Furthermore: “We ask: How are we to touch upon the body? Perhaps we can’t answer this ‘How?’ as we’d answer a technical question.”²⁴ Meaning: the question of “touch” is not a technical question, it is not a question of touching understood as bodily technique, but something else. What? “Finally, it has to be said that touching upon the body, touching the body, touching happens in writing all the time,” which is something that takes place on “the border, on the limit, on the extreme,” so that “if anything at all happens to writing,

²⁰ Nancy, 26.

²¹ Nancy, *Corpus*, 12.

²² Nancy, 12.

²³ Nancy, 12.

²⁴ Nancy, 12.

nothing happens to it but touching.”²⁵ And the final point is of the utmost importance: “More precisely: touching the body (or some singular body) with the *incorporeality of ‘sense.’* And consequently, to make the incorporeal a touching, to make a touch out of meaning.”²⁶ As we can see, “touch” is Nancy’s answer to both Derrida and Lacan as far as the relation between language and the body is concerned, and that is why he returns to it in his further “writing the body” by playing on the double meaning of the French *sens*: sense pertains to the “senses,” and sense also means “meaning”—and where touch touches this extremity where both senses of sense make sense of the body . . . and language.

The opposition here runs between the untouchable and the touchable, the realm of the intangible and the realm of the tangible, with touch itself marking the dividing line, and that is why Nancy can say, in his book on touch entitled *Noli me tangere*, that the μή μου ἅπτου with which Jesus Christ addresses Maria of Magdala’s attempt at a touch, in any variant or language we take it—from the latin “*Noli me tangere!*” to the English “Do not touch me!”—not only addresses or represents the issue of touch here at stake, but also embodies touch itself: “To say it in one word and to make a word-play out of it—difficult to avoid” (Pour le dire d’un mot et en faisant un mot—difficile à éviter), the phrase “Do not touch me’ touches, cannot not touch, even out of any context,” “It announces something of touching in general where it touches at the sensible point of touching,” the phrase points at “a point that it constitutes par excellence (it is the point of sensibility) and that is constituted in it as the sensible point.” And this point is precisely the point where “touch does not touch, must not touch in order to exercise its touch, its art, its tact, its grace,” the point where touch becomes “the space without dimension that separates that which touch brings together, the line that divides touch from the touched and therefore touch from itself.”²⁷ Sensibility from the regime of the touchable, corporeal, bodily, and sense from the regime of the untouchable soul, spirit, mind, concept . . . both coincide in touch as the sense of sensibility. Sensibility can make sense only on the presupposition of a sense of tact, which is the condition *sine qua non* for a sensorial being—without touch no other sense is possible. Nancy’s sensible point of sensibility where touch must not touch in order to exercise “its art, its tact” is

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²⁵ Nancy, 13.

²⁶ Nancy, 13.

²⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli me tangere* (Paris: Galimard, 2003), 25.

why the sensibility of sense and the sense of sensibility—in one word: *sense*—is in linguistic and philosophical accord with itself: sense does not mean an “either/or” of the body and mind, but rather both together, namely, the bodily activity of making sense and the thinking activity of sensing.

What is the sense of this “sensual supra-sensorial” object of touch(ing) that Nancy is pointing towards if not Lacan’s object *a*, which is itself marked by its *eximity*? Dolar proposed a “partial concept” in order to define this “partial object” with which he tried to grasp the elusive “ideal materiality” or “material ideality” of a virus, starting from the etymology of *contagion* as *con-tango*: “Here we propose a new concept: *-ek*. Actually, not even a complete concept, but rather a partial concept, in tune with the partial object, one of the fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis.”²⁸ The concept of *-ek*, which works only in the Slovenian *lalangue*, could in this sense help us define the *mateReal* of touch precisely as such a partial object.²⁹

A Knot of Touch

Lacan’s seminar on the *sinthome*—another *lalanguistic* concept, this time denoting the linguistic character of bodily symptoms—is, as is well-known, dedicated to Joyce, but in it, and this is less known, one can also find Hegel’s concept of *Begriff* employed in such a way that it exploits a certain tactile quality of language.

One occasion where Lacan employs *Begriff* presents itself in the middle of the seminar during a lecture when he posed the question: *Was Joyce crazy?* While introducing the concept of *objet petit a*, a residuum of the real that cannot be comprehended in the register of the imaginary, Lacan explicitly states that it “is *ob*, it constitutes an obstacle to the expansion of the concentric imaginary, that is, the englobing imaginary. The object is conceivable, that is, graspable in one’s

²⁸ Dolar, “Virus, ideja in *-ek*,” 155.

²⁹ In Dolar’s text “Virus, ideja in *-ek*,” the third concept in the Slovenian title, “*-ek*” (present and connecting such disparate words as *prebitek*, *izvržek*, *izrodek*, *dodatek*, *presežek*, *izcedek*, *ostanek*, *odkrušek*, *odpadek*, *vrinek*, *spaček*, *izpljunek*, *nameček*, *izmeček* . . .) is understandably missing in the English version: Mladen Dolar, “Virus and Idea,” in *Ideas and Idealism in Philosophy*, ed. Jure Simoniti and Gregor Kroupa (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 269–82.

hand—this is the notion of *Begriff*—in the manner of a weapon,” and this weapon is “far from being an extension of the arm,” but rather “was a ranged weapon from the start. There was no need to wait for roundshot to lob a boomerang.”³⁰ Lacan is very well aware of the German meaning of *Begriff*, of conceiving and grasping at the same time, but the interesting thing is that he employs this touch-concept while discussing the object *a* as the border of the imaginary.

Another occasion presents itself in the lecture entitled “Logical Usage of the *Sinthome*,” more precisely, while introducing the problem of the body in relation to the signifier: “*More geometrico*. Because of form, the form that was so dear to Plato, the individual presents himself just as he has been put together, as a body. And this body possesses such a power of captivation that up to a certain point one should be envious of the blind. How might a blind man, assuming he knows how to use braille, read Euclid?”³¹ To be sure, *braille* is a system of writing for the blind and visually impaired that already itself implies a certain tactile quality of language, distinct from its traditional linguistic definitions of sound and image, as embodied in the spoken and written form. However, what is central here is the concept of body, illustrated as a sack that inflates and deflates itself, moving in binary successions from 0 to 1, the 1 pertaining to the *S* index 1, the master-signifier, of which Lacan here says that “it does not form the unity of one, but it indicates that it is an empty bag, since it is able to contain nothing. It nonetheless remains that an empty bag is still a bag, namely the *one* that can be imagined only on the basis of the ex-sistence and the consistence that the body possesses,” both “to be held to be real,” since the real is “the fact of holding them together”; thus “the word *Begriff*, which means precisely that.”³² Despite not explicitly mentioning Hegel, we can clearly see how Lacan employs the same logic by redoubling the French *tenir*, used to translate *Begriff*: “*Cette existence et cette consistance, il faut les tenir pour réelles, puisque le réel, c’est de les tenir.*” The existence and consistence of the body should not be understood as anything bodily, but rather as a sack, imagined as skin in terms of existence and consistence, both held to be real because it is the real that holds them together.

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³⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Sinthome*, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 70.

³¹ Lacan, 9.

³² Lacan, 10.

The role of the Borromean knot is that it enables Lacan to illustrate the interdependence of the registers of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary (RSI): it expresses the interrelation of the three rings where a break in any one of them renders the two others free, thus geometrically demonstrating the general apprehension of the human experience, where, however, Lacan adds that “it is not the break between the symbolic, the imaginary and the real which defines perversion, it is that they already stand apart in such a way that a fourth term has to be supposed, which on this occasion is the *sinthome*.”³³ Perversion is therefore not the perverse desire to break the Borromean knot, but rather its very ontological “breakability,” the fact of it being distinguishable and therefore the very distinction between the three registers themselves. Perversion, which at first glance appears to be a specificity of the human being as sexual, is already inscribed in the theory of the RSI scheme itself, more precisely, in the very distinction between the three registers that implies a fourth, *sinthome*; sexuality and ontology go hand in hand.³⁴

Lacan calls this ontological perversion *pèreversion*, *la version vers le père*, which he connects first to Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, by interpreting the very last sentence of the novel, “Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead,” and then to *Ulysses* and the role Bloom plays as Stephen’s surrogate father: “Ulysses is the testimony of how Joyce remains deeply rooted in his father while still disowning him. That’s precisely what his symptom is. I said that Joyce is the symptom. His entire life’s work vouches for this at length.”³⁵ And among all of Joyce’s oeuvre there is this longest testimony that is *Finnegans Wake*, of which Vladimir Nabokov, among others, wrote that it is “one of the greatest failures in literature.”³⁶ Precisely as a failure it should be interesting for psychoanalysis, since it is fundamentally oriented towards the unconscious failures of consciousness, as emblematically embodied in the linguistic phenomena of *lapsus linguae*. And does not *Finnegans Wake* read exactly like an enormous compendium of lapsus? Let us take an example from the very beginning where the main character (if one may call him so) is introduced: “Mister Finn, you’re

³³ Lacan, 11.

³⁴ See Alenka Zupančič, *What Is Sex?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).

³⁵ Lacan, *Sinthome*, 55–56.

³⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harvest, 1980), 349.

going to be Mister Finnagain! Comeday morm and, O, you're vine! Sendday's eve and, ah, you're vinegar! Mister Funn, you're going to be fined again!"³⁷

In a similar humorous vein, Lacan says that despite the fact that Freud conceptualized all of human sexuality as perverse, psychoanalysis was never capable of inventing a new perversion: "Because after all if perversion is the essence of man, what infecundity in this practice. Well then, I think that, thanks to Joyce, we are touching on something that I had not dreamt of right away, but it came to me in time while considering Joyce's text, which is constructed altogether as a Borromean knot."³⁸ Lacan repeats many times that "Joyce is a writer," and that we are dealing with "Joyce's text" as a demonstration of the "power of writing." Consequently, we should say that if *Wake* is a lapsus, it is a *lapsus calami*, a "slip of the pen" and not of speech, where Lacan himself clarifies the relation in the following manner: "The *lapsus calami* is not primary in relation to the lapsus linguae, but it may be conceived as a touching upon the real,"³⁹ referring to an earlier statement where the difference between speaking and writing consists in their relation to truth and real: "When one writes, one may indeed touch on the real, but not the true."⁴⁰ Writing can touch the real, but it is through speech that one can touch the true and speak it out, if only half of it, as half-said, as *mi-dit*.

I am tempted to leave my *mi-dit* here as it is, in mid-sentence, but let me overcome the temptation by throwing another articulation regarding our issue of touch and language. The whole of Joyce's oeuvre, especially *Finnegans Wake*, is written in what Lacan called *lalangue*, in which one can quite literary grasp the haptic quality of language as such. This sensorial moment inside language, in tune with the rules of phonetics, was conceived by Lacan—following Jakobson's *Six Lectures of Sound and Sense*, themselves a constructive critique of Saussure's linguistics—through the concept of *lalangue* in order to demonstrate how language-based meaning arises from phonetic non-meaning, a poetic characteristic of language itself: "Language is, no doubt, made of lalanguage [*lalangue*]. It is knowledge's hare-brained lucubration (*élucubration*) about lalan-

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³⁷ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Bloomsbury House, 1975), 5.

³⁸ Joyce, 127.

³⁹ Lacan, *Sinthome*, 132.

⁴⁰ Lacan, 64.

guage.”⁴¹ Lacan’s *lalangue* can be conceived as a demonstration of how “words touch each other,” and thus can also help us discern a certain tactile quality of language, previously unconceivable in linguistics.⁴²

The concept of *lalangue* enable us to see how the mateReal of touch can function as a contagion, only this time not as a proliferation of meaning, but rather as a proliferation of sounds that “touch each other.” A certain surplus of meaning is thus produced through this haptic quality of language as a collateral side-effect, as a meaning that is collateral to or contingent on the original one. Contingent, another strong “haptic concept,” for *contingere* derives from the same *con-tangere* as *contagio*, with which we started this discussion in order to pinpoint the mateReal of touch at work at the intersection between body and mind and the poetic (la)language in between.

Conclusion

Now, to return to our post-pandemic world, where it seems that everything is back in order only because the contingent character of the contagious virus was domesticated, thus becoming a necessity we are supposed to live with for the rest of our lives. However, what we are still dealing with is not so much the virus and its variants, but rather the effects of everything we did in order to prevent its proliferation in the name of preserving bare life, such as, for instance, forfeiting our ability to touch and be touched.

⁴¹ Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge: Encore 1972–1973*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 139.

⁴² Saussure, as the founding father of modern linguistics, started from the axiom that the sign—composed of the signifier as a sound-image and the signified as a mental image—is linear, differential, and arbitrary. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959). Jakobson then demonstrated that signs neither do not hold meaning in themselves nor do they refer to any given reality, but rather, if linearly chained to each other, produce meaning by their contingent sounding together. See Roman Jakobson, *On Language*, ed. Linda R. Waugh and Monique Monville-Burson (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1990). Lacan based his theory of *lalangue* precisely on Jakobson’s theory of the sign as an essentially phonetic entity, and it was on this basis that a further elaboration of a certain haptic quality of language was finally put forward by a group of Lacanian researchers. See Mirt Komel, ed., *The Language of Touch: Philosophical Examinations in Linguistics and Haptic Studies* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2019).

Nancy, in one of his last public discussions, said that the virus “offers us a magnifying mirror of our planetary contagion.”⁴³ Meaning that the pandemic just amplified what was already present in the world before, including the volatile reshaping by social media of what it means “to be in contact with each other.” In short, we did not lose touch because of the pandemic, but rather we just realized touch was always already lost. If there is any chance of rehabilitating touching, then it is by way of touching upon the *mateReal* of touch that runs, as I have tried to demonstrate, underneath our own intersubjective, philosophical, linguistic, artistic, and bodily experiences. And if there is a proper illustration of such a *mateReal* of touch, then it is what one can find “finnagain” in the *Wake*:

He went without saying that the cull disliked anything anyway approaching a plain straightforward standup or knock down row and, as often as he was called in to umpire any octagonal argument among slangwhangers, the accomplished washout always used to rub shoulders with the last speaker and clasp shakers (The handtouch which is speech without words).⁴⁴

Since we are living in “perverted times” where the hand of God has been replaced by the “invisible hand of the market,” where modern biopolitics regulate even our everyday practices of touching, and where we forfeit our own ability to touch and be touched by uploading our haptic capacities online on social media . . . perhaps precisely such a Joycean perversion—or rather *pèrversion*—of touch is needed. Joyce’s *handtouch* may very well be “speech without words,” but, on the other *handtouch*, the *lalangue* in which this statement is written, demonstrates how words touch not only each other, but also upon us, and how the poetics of *lalangue* can therefore be “Joycefully” defined as a “touch without hands,” where both senses of *sense* combine in the *mateReal* of touch.

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Thus, instead of a straight answer to the initial question of *Puo una poesia sostituire un abbraccio?*, I can offer only a re-articulation: the real issue in our post-pandemic world is not “Can a poem replace a hug?” but rather “Can a hug ever replace a poem?”

⁴³ Nancy’s quote in Daniel Villegas Vélez, “Allegories of Contagion: Jean-Luc Nancy on (New) Fascism, Democracy, and Covid-19,” *Homo Mimeticus*, May 27, 2020, <http://www.homomimeticus.eu/2020/05/27/allegories-of-contagion-jean-lucnancy-on-newfascism-democracy-and-covid-19/>.

⁴⁴ Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 174.

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The Object as a Series of *Its* Acts

Keywords

object, project, concept, ideal object, subject

Abstract

Our intention is to construct the conditions for a new position that more closely explains the reality of the object (its location, concreteness, possibility of being seen, extension, instantaneousness, etc.), but also the object's movement, the "situation" in which it is or becomes a potential agent that "works," influences us and incites us to *movement* towards us, indeed gives us a *turn* towards an ideal object and its realization. Using a variety of texts that thematize the object, a few passages from Hegel, we attempt to reveal connections between key architectural (and not only architectural) concepts, form a given epistemological order, and differentiate amongst basic acts and operations that could be ascribed to the object.

Objekt kot serija *svojih* dejanj

Ključne besede

objekt, projekt, koncept, idealni objekt, subjekt

Povzetek

Naš namen je ustvariti pogoje za novo zastavitev, ki natančneje pojasnjuje realnost objekta (njegovo umestitev, konkretnost, možnost biti viden, ekstenzijo, hipnost itd.),

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pa tudi gibanje predmeta, »situacijo«, v kateri je ali postane potencialni dejavnik, ki »deluje«, vpliva na nas in nas spodbuja h *gibanju* proti nam, nam dejansko daje *obrat* k idealnemu predmetu in njegovi realizaciji. S pomočjo različnih besedil, ki tematizirajo objekt, in nekaj odlomkov iz Hegla poskušamo razkriti povezave med ključnimi arhitekturnimi (in ne samo arhitekturnimi) pojmi, oblikovati določen epistemološki red ter razlikovati med osnovnimi dejanji in operacijami, ki bi jih lahko pripisali objektu.



Although Hegel's metaphysics of objectivity is neither complementary nor analogous to his metaphysics of subjectivity, we are going to experiment with one or two of his famous claims from the *Philosophy of Right*, assuming a few different protocols that decisively determine an entirely uncertain *status* of the object. Our intention is to construct the conditions for a new position that more closely explains the reality of the object (its location, concreteness, and possibility of being seen, its extension, instantaneousness, etc.), but also the object's movement, the "situation" in which it is or becomes a potential agent that "works," influences us, and incites us to *movement* towards us, indeed gives us a *turn* towards an ideal object and its realization. This position, in which it is possible to orient oneself towards the object and ensure conditions for the *object* to be oriented, assumes a kind of repetition of forcing and foregrounding the object in Brentano and Central European philosophy. The differentiation between the object and *Gegenstand*¹—very difficult to express in English and some other languages tied to Latin—seems to provide the decisive step that reveals the importance of various acts and verb forms at the root of the noun "object." To

¹ Kasimir Twardowski differentiates the object towards which one attempting to represent it is directed from an immanent object, which is the content of that representation. *Gegenstand* (or in Serbo-Croatian *predmet*; in that language one word for subject is *podmet*, both are strictly analogous to the Latin) would be that which is held against and towards which attention or representation is directed; while the object would be an image or a pseudo-image or symbol of "this *Gegenstand*, which is here 'real.'" Jean-François Courtine, "Presentation," introduction to *Théorie de l'objet et Présentation personnelle*, by Alexius Meinong (Paris: Vrin, 1999), 18–24. Paradoxically, in contrast with much more precise options used by authors of early debates on the topic, such as Eckhart (*Widerwurf*) or Böhme (*Gegenwurf*), *Gegenstand* is not synonymous with *object*. Rather, *Gegenstand* is already fixed, standing in place, attending or waiting to be represented; furthermore, *Gegenstand* does not cease to be present and permanent.

understand the situation in which the object is recognized as object, we would like to privilege a basic act or gesture, which is difficult to determine because it is sudden and quick—the act of throwing. The action does not necessarily concern the hand nor what is in the hand, nor even what is being struck, missed, its landing, or the end of the trajectory. The sudden gesture or operation, above all creative and precise, leaving different traces in time and space, must decide on the construction of a scene with myriad actors. It is for this reason that the throwing is necessarily an architectural operation, not merely an athletic or war operation or technological means. When Lacan situates anything that might concern architecture and all its related concepts, they include above all the gaze or perspective whence seen (seeing something, seeing one’s own gaze, etc.), the space in which an internal process initiated from the outside and vice versa are exchanged—this magic taking place between the interior-exterior is always a matter of projection!—and emptiness or void (*vide*). The architectural is necessarily about emptiness and occurs always around the emptiness (“*autour d’un vide*,” “*entoure un vide*,” etc.). Penetrating into the emptiness and the ability of the architect to construct and create an object (not even necessarily an architectural object)² can certainly change the notions of the object we have acquired from ontology and social ontology.

Here are the bullet point protocols for any possible theory of the object:

- a) Subject, object, project, eject, reject, conject, etc.—all concern the verb or action of *iacio* (to throw) and necessarily imply both a temporal and spatial construction in which such an act or collection of acts takes place. The tacit agent or demiurge that launches something³ (e.g., casts its gaze, or even merely goes through the motion of throwing) or expels something, actually places or displaces their act of throwing into space and time, marking it

² We are referring to the important book by Petra Čeferin in which she carefully distinguishes amongst the object, the “resistant objectal moment,” the theory of two objects, and the architectural object important for any future philosophy of architecture. Petra Čeferin, *The Resistant Object of Architecture: A Lacanian Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2021), 75–76. Furthermore, we have in mind the various texts by Rado Riha on architecture and the object.

³ This “something” is the first and perhaps closest alternative to the word “object.” See Tim Crane, *Objects of Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3; Charles Travis, “Etre quelque chose,” *Philosophiques* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 229, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1048623ar>; Roland Barthes, “Sémantique de l’objet,” in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Éric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 1994–2002), 2:65–73; Courtine, “Presentation,” 24–25.

and determining it with various prefixes that today often confound and cannot be clearly differentiated. The prefixes *sub*, *ob*, *pro*, *con*, *tra*, and *inter* are supposed to show that the act of throwing organizes or engages various elements in time and space.

- b) A set of names or labels for these operations of different gestures could have, first of all, its epistemological justification and a specific order, and also might have a given succinct conceptual harmony. Namely, the theater of positive things, representations, and content, would, in its origin, have to have two basic models of movement towards something else (indicated as “other,” as outside or beyond), which in the Middle Ages would have been designated with a distinction between a formal and an objective concept (*conceptus formalis et obiectivus*).⁴ Simultaneously with the throwing as movement *out*, there is the gesture of catching or gathering (*conceptio*); only these two movements together can better locate all the elements of this theater.

⁴ Heidegger provides a brief reconstruction of this medieval distinction: “The concept of *ens*, as Scholasticism says, *conceptus entis*, must be taken in a twofold way, as *conceptus formalis entis* and as *conceptus obiectivus entis*. In regard to the *conceptus formalis* the following is to be noted. Forma, *morphé*, is that which makes something into something actual. Forma, formalis, formale do not mean formal in the sense of formalistic, empty, having no real content; rather, *conceptus formalis* is the actual concept [*der wirkliche Begriff*], conception [*das Begreifen*] in the sense of the *actus concipiendi* or *conceptio*. When Hegel treats the concept in his *Logic* he takes the term ‘*Begriff*,’ ‘concept,’ contrary to the customary usage of his time, in the Scholastic sense as *conceptus formalis*. In Hegel, concept (*Begriff*) means the conceiving and the conceived in one (*das Begreifen und das Begriffene in einem*), because for him thinking and being are identical, that is to say, belong together. *Conceptus formalis entis* is the conceiving of a being; or, more generally and cautiously, it is the apprehending of a being [. . .]. But what does *conceptus obiectivus entis* mean? The *conceptus obiectivus entis* must be distinguished from the *conceptus formalis entis*, the understanding of being, the conceiving [*Begreifen*] of being. The *objectivum* is that which, in apprehending [*Erfassen*] and in grasping [*Greifen*], is thrown over against [*entgegengeworfen*], lies over against [*entgegenliegt*] as the graspable [*Greifbare*], more exactly, as the grasped [*be-griffene*] *objectum*, that which is conceived as such in the conceiving, the conceptual contents or, as is also said, the meaning.” Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 83–84; bracketed original German terms are sourced from Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phenomenologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1975), 117; see Marco Forlivesi, “La distinction entre concept formel et concept objectif: Suarez, Pasqualigo, Mastri,” *Les Études philosophiques* 60, no. 1 (January–March 2002): 3–30, <https://doi.org/10.3917/leph.021.0003>.

- c) The history of the use of objects or thinking about the object⁵ is the history of inversions, analogic disorders, and manipulations with insufficiently articulated relations between subject and object (“*Cette relation est polymère*”).⁶ The connection between thing and object, between a positive item that can be touched or destroyed and a fictional or ideal, imaginary object is unclear;⁷ and often the characteristics of what we today call the object used to belong to the subject.⁸ If, in addition to the concept, we add the protocols of “project” or “projection” to the eternal antagonism between the subject and object, it becomes perhaps possible to reconstruct or explain the subject/object shift with an entirely new and entirely real momentum when the object ceases to be the object (it ceases to be counter to the subject, when it slips away, when it is no longer the object, when it stops being an obstacle and object in the sense of the limit or terminus of an agent’s action) and moves into a field that can be designated with the notion of project.
- d) Forcing various analogies and counter-analogies in the context of objects is always above all a consequence of the entirely unclear status of the body (“body” being actually the first object or thing suffering the action of the subject, whether mine or of another, changing and growing, which desires or is desired, etc.) in relation to the subject and one producing acts. The body is a totality of various details, just as the object is always a set or collection of a plurality of objects. The object is thus always plural and always missing something, something else.⁹ All known definitions of the object—that which

⁵ “*Obiectum*” is the neuter of the present participle of *obicere*, to place in front, to present. Some texts about the object are unsurpassed in their wealth and diversity. Lawrence Dewan, “‘Obiectum’: Notes on the Invention of a Word,” *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 48 (1981): 37–96; Jacques Lacan, “La relation d’objet et les structures freudiennes,” *Bulletin de psychologie* 516, no. 6 (2011): 503–18, <https://doi.org/10.3917/bupsy.516.0503>.

⁶ Alain de Libera, *Archeologie du sujet III: L’act de penser 1; La double révolution* (Paris: Vrin, 2014), 491.

⁷ See Gilbert Ryle, Richard Bevan Braithwaite, and George Edward Moore, “Symposium: Imaginary Objects,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 12 (1933): 18–70.

⁸ Alain de Libera’s analysis of Heidegger’s seminars in Zurich shows well this inversion from the medieval subject into object. Libera, *Archeologie du sujet III*, 491–96.

⁹ “How a being (*être*)—*une totalité*—can feel a lack of something that, by definition, it does not have (*il n’a pas*).” Lacan, “La relation d’objet,” 504. In his 1967 PhD thesis, Jean Baudrillard evokes (incompletely, not entirely) the famous scene from Godard’s 1968 film

can be represented or personified or divided or incorporated, or that an object is an object if it can be anything else—allow for uncertainty as to its existence and its latent absence (*heimatlose Objekt*).¹⁰

- e) The figure of the architecture or architecture, as our own additional protocol in the reconstruction of the status of the object, ought to indicate a constant “desire of the architectural” (since Gregotti as far back as 1972 equates desire with design or *progetto*) and to ignore and crush any resistance and fixedness of the object (which is its fixedness across or on the path, *gegen/encontre/against*; the desire of the architect produces the object, “*un objet fascinant*,”¹¹ immediately modifying, distancing, and destroying it; and vice versa). The desire of the architect (the person who daily alters their *object* training at the gym; Shakespeare’s Lord Bardolph in *Henry IV*, part 2, who secretly prepares the project of usurping the king and constructing a new kingdom; the designer of a new automobile, etc.) always creates the object anew, destabilizing in the process its primary characteristic: permanence.¹²

Le Mépris (Contempt). Jean Baudrillard, *Le système des objets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 142. The English translation of the dialogue between Camille and Paul is as follows: “See my feet in the mirror? Think they’re pretty? Very. You like my ankles? And my knees, too? I really like your knees. And my thighs? Your thighs, too. See my behind in the mirror? Do you think I have a cute ass? Really. Shall I get on my knees? No need to. And my breasts. You like them? Yes, tremendously. Gently, Paul. Not so hard. Sorry. Which do you like better, my breasts, or my nipples? I don’t know. I like them the same. You like my shoulders? I don’t think they’re round enough. And my arms? And my face? Your face, too. All of it? My mouth, my eyes, my nose, my ears? Yes, everything. Then you love me totally. I love you totally, tenderly, tragically. Me too, Paul.” The issue is of course not only the necessity of the existence of the other that completes the totality with their profession of love (“I love” here means only +, addition, connecting body parts)—as early as 1588, Robert Green says in *Perimedes* that “women are more glorious objects” (quoted in the entry “object, n.” of the Oxford English Dictionary)—it is exclusively a question of crisis, counting and computing, intonation and collecting “cast glances,” of “une révolution totale de l’objet.” André Breton, “Crise de l’objet,” in *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 687.

¹⁰ This is A. Meinong’s phrase from a 1906 text. See Roderick M. Chisholm, “Homeless Objects,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 27, no. 104–5 (1973): 207–23.

¹¹ “Comment inventer un objet fascinant, un objet qui tient l’homme en respect [an object that keeps a respectful distance from man]?” Georges Didi-Huberman, *L’Homme qui marchait dans la couleur* (Paris: Minuit, 2001), 20.

¹² Permanence is the basic characteristic of the object as such. See Jim Gabaret, *La permanence de l’objet: Une analyse de l’identité spatio-temporelle et intersubjective des objets* (PhD diss., Centre de philosophie contemporaine de la Sorbonne, 2018).

The architect produces an event or change (two synonymous words), by always manipulating four crucial moments of their action: concept, project, coniect, and object.¹³

Still, what does the object do and how does it create this desire for the new and for change? Does the object act? And if so, how?

In paragraph 124 of the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel explains subjective satisfaction of the individual, defining the subject in the process as a series or totality of their various acts. Here is the passage:

The subject is the series of his acts. If these are a series of worthless productions, the subjectivity of the will is also worthless; if the acts are substantial and sound, so likewise is the inner will of the individual.¹⁴

To Hegel, the important word is the italicized “is” (*ist*). The existence of the subject is constituted by a series of acts, which can be of one kind or another. Such acts determine the substance of the individual; or, the collection of these acts constructs the subject as such. Hegel collects and thinks that these acts can reflectively act on their author, that they cannot only be ascribed to the author, but even when completed, they remain bound to the author. If the subject can be defined as someone or something that performs the action of a sentence, or as someone under (*sub*) everything that is (as the subject holds everything, sets it up, giving

¹³ Four moments or concepts corresponding to the architect’s desire to be blind and focus on the invisible (the production of concepts), to design—with others!—what is not there (projective mind meeting the coniect, institutional mind), producing an entirely new object (expressive mind). It would appear that this could provide a new definition for “the creative thinking practice of architecture.” Čeferin, *Resistant Object of Architecture*, 73. See Petar Bojanić, “The Acts of Project(ion) / Project Acts or Projects,” *Rivista di Estetica* 71 (2019): 92–100, <https://doi.org/10.4000/estetica.5521>; Snežana Vesnić and Miloš Čipranić, “The Concept: A Map for Generations,” *Rivista di Estetica* 71 (2019): 101–16, <https://doi.org/10.4000/estetica.5529>.

¹⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. S. W. Dyde (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2005), 107, § 124. “Was das Subjekt *ist*, ist die Reihe seiner Handlungen. Sind diese eine Reihe wertloser Produktionen, so ist die Subjektivität des Wollens ebenso eine wertlose; ist dagegen die Reihe seiner Taten substantieller Natur, so ist es auch der innere Wille des Individuums.” G. W. F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), 233.

it stability), in this case, Hegel insists that it is a collection of successive gestures across a period of time that represents the subject. Less important here is the rhetoric of the use of time and temporal perspective; rather, more important is the idea that the acts together are actually objects that might be collected, gathered, counted, held together in a single subject. Looking further at the text that explains paragraph 124 of the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel's subject is entirely like the character of Camille from Godard's *Le Mépris*. Her lack, the search for the portion of the body and the object that is not there, her counting and searching for the new, the as yet unnamed and unloved, her search for the object as a thirst for satisfaction (*Befriedigung*) or the right to satiation or satisfaction,¹⁵ can only be realized through recognition of the community or by others. In this case, Paul, Godard's hero, who incessantly repeats and confirms (through his speech, through his gaze) that the subject is ultimately constituted in the totality of their acts. The claim that the object is always plural or part of a multiplicity of elements (a totality comprising several objects) indicates a grandiose complication of the relation subject-object. The acting of the object, in this case, is the constitution thereof into a totality, into a whole, which is supposed to be the crucial characteristic of the subject. There can be no subject without a plurality of objects¹⁶ (which is a pleonasm) or without organizing an object into a totality. Still, it is insufficient, as something seems to not work in this construction. What is it? Why does Paul, suddenly, at the end say "I love you totally, tenderly, tragically" (Je t'aime totalment, tendrement, tragiquement)? What is the catch? What is it that makes it tragic or uncontrolled? Is it a lack of Paul's acts that leave him unconstituted as a subject? Does Paul in his acts towards Camille not produce subjects? Are his tenderness and love towards Camille as a totality of objects insufficient to establish harmony in this theater of an exchange of acts that do not transform into so-called "social objects"? It would seem that here again Hegel has an answer. In the annex to paragraph 119 of the *Philosophy of Right*, where he deals with intention and well-being, Hegel writes:

Manifestly more or fewer circumstances may be included in an act. In the case of arson, e.g., the fire may not take effect, or it may spread farther than the agent intended. Yet in neither case is the result due to good or bad fortune, since man

¹⁵ "The right of the subject's particular being to find himself satisfied [. . .]" (Das Recht der Besonderheit der Subjekts, sich befriedigt zu finden). Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 107, § 124; Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, 233.

¹⁶ "'Le sujet naît de l'objet [The subject arises from the object].'—Michel Serres." Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 1.

in acting must deal with externality. An old proverb rightly enough says, “A stone flung from the hand is the devil’s.” In acting I must expose myself to misfortune; that also has a right to me, and is the manifestation of my own will.¹⁷

When the subject or a person is doing something, “they must deal with externality,” which leads them to a tragic situation. Still, far more important here is that the space of action is necessarily to be found on the outside and that the external is the site of uncontrollable things. “A stone flung from the hand is the devil’s” (Der Stein, der aus der Hand geworfen wird, ist des Teufels). Unequivocally, Hegel predicts that what is external and the scene initiated by the act of “throwing” (the object) and which confirms the existence of what is external (“action,” “external,” “throwing,” and “stone” are all registers not under human or the subject’s control or responsibility) confirm the possibility of something we could call “the acts of the object.” We do not know where the stone will ultimately end up, or better still, where it ends and in what way the action as such of throwing unfolds. Paradoxically, we know even less than we think we know, since we do not know how any action of the subject ends. What does this mean? That all action endangers the basic principle of reality, which is causality. In a word, we cannot “gather,” “collect,” or “glean” all the consequences of our actions (gestures). The significance of “throwing” (the stone and Devil are merely cosmetic additions to Hegel’s constructions) implies immediately a new analogy or counter-analogy of “catching” or “gathering,” which is what Godard’s Camille does, in her attempt to hold herself firm, entirely thanks to her partner.

Hegel’s proverb thus becomes an introduction to two operations or two movements that directly concern the object (or at least would appear to): the first is the act of throwing itself, which implies various domains, the best known among which are the subject, object, project, conject, etc.¹⁸ The second, reflex-

¹⁷ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 104–5, § 119. “Es ist allerdings der Fall, daß bei einer Handlung mehr oder weniger Umstände zuschlagen können: es kann bei einer Brandstiftung das Feuer nicht auskommen oder auf der anderen Seite dasselbe weiter greifen, als der Täter es wollte. Trotzdem ist hier keine Unterscheidung von Glück und Unglück zu machen, denn der Mensch muß sich handelnd mit der Äußerlichkeit abgeben. Ein altes Sprichwort sagt mit Recht: der Stein, der aus der Hand geworfen wird, ist des Teufels. Indem ich handele, setze ich mich selbst dem Unglück aus; dieses hat also ein Recht an mich und ist ein Dasein meines eigenen Wollens.” Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, 225.

¹⁸ Across various books in the last decade, Peter Sloterdijk varies and thematizes the figures of throwing and thrower, first appearing in *Nicht gerettet: Versuche nach Heidegger* (Frankfurt

ive action, is entirely conceptual, where something from the outside “comes in” or where something is accepted and captured from externality itself, thus becoming the representation or concept. Be that as it may, thrown objects or the Devil’s objects arrive constantly, because what is thrown necessarily returns and is caught. Here is how Thomas Aquinas, in an entirely different register, regardless of the Devil being a symptom and present in every miss, explains the act of the object or the conceptualization of the thrown object:

For what is conceived in the intellect (*intellectu concipitur*), since it is a likeness of the thing understood, representing the thing’s form, seems to be an offspring of the thing. Therefore, when the intellect understands something other than itself, the understood thing is like a father of the word conceived in the intellect, and the intellect more resembles a mother, whose property is that conception takes place in her. But when the intellect understands itself, the word conceived is related to the one understanding as an offspring is to a father.¹⁹

The father or the object or what comes from the outside is really the subject that actively, and in this case very precisely, hitting the mark, arrives at *its proper place*.

The two sets of operations or series of acts initiated by Hegel’s proverb are simultaneous and permanent, meaning that this theater of connections and relations usually leads to various distribution of roles, terms, and meanings. Thus, the history of the world could probably rather neatly fit into four verbs: approach, move away, hit, and miss. If we consider “missing” the rule, as after all Hegel (and not only Hegel) constantly does, the simultaneous nature and continuous contact (and friction) between the external and the internal, throwing

am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001) as a stone that is thrown. Here is Sloterdijk’s breakdown of roles: “The throw that hits the mark is the first synthesis of subject (stone), copula (action), and object (animal or enemy).” Peter Sloterdijk, *Not Saved: Essays after Heidegger*, trans. Ian Alexander Moore and Christopher Turner (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 116.

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, trans. Richard. J. Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 36. “Quando igitur intellectus intelligit aliud a se, res intellecta est sicut pater verbi in intellectu concepti; ipse autem intellectus magis gerit similitudinem matris, cuius est ut in ea fiat conceptio. Quando vero intellectus intelligit se ipsum, verbum conceptum comparatur ad intelligentem sicut proles ad patrem.” Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium theologiae*, Corpus Thomisticum, bk. 1, chap. 39, <https://www.corpusthomicum.org/ott101.html>.

and catching, requires us to introduce the alternative as well, that is, the option or idea of the ideal, analogously, the idea of the concept. Hegel's Devil implies the existence of some "ideal object" (an ideal throw, a perfect stone that arrives where it is intended, taking only its charted course, perfectly embodying the concept of stone as such when it lands), which never comes to pass, but nevertheless continues to exist and fascinate. Its ideality is protected by the project or the projective mind. This is the moment when any idea of the object is really erased in the project (the project lasts longer, it does not assume any kind of opposition or reflexivity, nor does it shy away from the Devil). In any mention of any object she finds and names, Camille *a priori* sets the concept of each and evokes the ideal object. There can be no totality of all or the whole unless each object is not individually ideal.

What then is the ideal object? Is it in Camille's mind or does it appear in encountering every individual object? Is it moved by the object as such? Is it an objective act?

The "ideal object," or for example the "ideality of the architectural object" (Peter Eisenman's text "Misreading Eisenman" contains the phrase "the object as ideal essence")²⁰ is actually a paraphrase of the title of Jacques Derrida's 1957 unwritten doctoral thesis, "The Ideality of the Literary Object" (*L'idealité de l'objet littéraire*). Derrida's sentence from "Introduction to Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*," "the ideal object is the absolute model of the object in general" (*l'objet idéal est le modèle absolu de l'objet en general*),²¹ implies that this ideal is actually regulative and opposed to objects not purely intentional or objects that are intentional *cum fundamento in re* (a distinction we borrow from Roman In-

²⁰ Peter Eisenman, "Misreading Eisenman," in *Eisenman Inside Out: Selected Writings, 1963–1988* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 211.

²¹ Jacques Derrida, introduction to *L'origine de la géométrie*, by Edmund Husserl (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1962), 57.

garden),²² or opposed to ordinary physical objects (which, for example, Peter Eisenman also calls “things in themselves”).²³

The head (Camille’s and other) does not contain objects (this would be nonsense), nor even the ideal or ideas (for this would be trivial—everyone has ideas, heads are brimming with ideas, meaning that such an explanation is insufficient). Rather, it contains the “ideal of the object as such.” The idea of something that has physical presence is precisely the conceptual or the concept. In his famous text on conceptual architecture, Peter Eisenman finds that “the idea within the thing itself” is synonymous with the “conceptual structure” of the thing itself, and finally that “physical reality itself does have a conceptual aspect.”

What is the novelty here? Projecting (to project is to throw something forth, in front of oneself) is not projecting/designing an object (one does not throw forward an object). The object is, rather, discovered, revealed, selected, exposed, presented before (*vis-à-vis*; *Gegenstand*) by way of the concept. In that sense, the project is a projection of the concept that is always the concept of the object (the “ideal of the object as such”). The task of philosophy and architecture is to reveal the concepts of physical things and to realize objects in time (process and design are two protocols that only appear at this point).

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²² “The architectural work can be not merely thought or imagined but also realized to a certain degree, that it can be an intentional object, but *cum fundamento in re*.” Roman Ingarden, “The Architectural Work,” in *Ontology of the Work of Art: The Musical Work, the Picture, the Architectural Work, the Film*, trans. Raymond Meyer and John T. Goldthwait (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989), 271.

²³ Eisenman, “Misreading Eisenman,” 215. Levinas’s book on intuition in Husserl contains the phrase “*une structure idéal de l’objet*” and it displays rather well the nature of the ideal. Emmanuel Levinas, *Théorie de l’intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris: Vrin, 1930), 117.

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Echoes

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Wind on the Beach: Vestiges of Biopolitics Unthought; Review of *On Biopolitics: An Inquiry into Nature and Language* by Marco Piasentier¹

Marco Piasentier's book is an attempt at "critical naturalism,"² with the aim of better understanding "the intertwining of society and science, politics and biology."³ Piasentier makes it clear from the outset that he is following Michel Foucault, or more precisely what Foucault took from Friedrich Nietzsche, namely the idea of a philosophical perspective that combines the historical and the physiological. From this perspective, one tries to think beyond the bipolar structure of philosophical-biological and philosophical-philological, or to try to answer the question of what it is that prevents us from thinking biologically *and* philologically of biopolitics.

For, as Foucault, the father of modern biopolitics, points out, whenever we start talking about biopolitics, questions of biological life and politics, nature and language come into play, and the key is not only to define these concepts, but to define the relations between them.⁴

The methodological aspect of Piasentier's work also needs to be addressed. As we have already mentioned, his focus is on Foucault, or more precisely, he wants "to reveal the flaws of two philosophical positions that inform, but do

¹ This article is a result of the research programme P6-0014 "Conditions and Problems of Contemporary Philosophy," which is funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

² Davide Tarizzo, "Cosa chiamiamo naturalismo," *Prometeo* 29, no. 115 (2011): 41.

³ Marco Piasentier, *On Biopolitics: An Inquiry into Nature and Language*, (New York: Routledge, 2021), 8.

⁴ Piasentier, 1.

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not exhaust, his [Foucault's] work."⁵ Therefore Piasentier's methodology ranges "from the Heideggerian linguistic turn to neo-Darwinian naturalism."⁶ Instead of limiting himself to certain philosophical traditions that are otherwise considered incompatible, he seeks, according to the principle of the best of both worlds, to find the commonality that cannot be ignored. This commonality is precisely what allows us to think more precisely, or even to think at all, what was hitherto unthought.

Piasentier's work departs both methodologically and in terms of content from the dominant debates in the field of biopolitics, attempting with his specific approach to address what he identifies as one of the main shortcomings of the biopolitical debate, i.e. a thought that is both philosophical and biological. In other words, Piasentier joins two "dangerous" metaphorical ends, Foucault's famous face "drawn in sand at the edge of the sea"⁷ and Darwin's "blowing of the wind."⁸

With the first, "the interplay between sea and sand—namely the interplay between subjectivation and desubjectivation,"⁹ he refers to the definition of the human being, which is always a product of the "ontology of actuality"¹⁰ or rather "ontologies of actuality," in which any "analytics of truth" about the human being is kept or, that there is no nature of the human being "before or beyond *ek-sistence*."¹¹ The second refers to the potential of Darwin's theory of evolution, which "allows us to open up a non-teleological view of the organic world,"¹² a decline in prominence of the argument of design in nature after the discovery of the law of natural selection or with Darwin:

We can no longer maintain that, for example, the beautiful hinge of a shell must have been made by an intelligent being, like the hinge of a door by man. There

⁵ Piasentier, 1.

⁶ Piasentier, 2.

⁷ Piasentier, 68.

⁸ Piasentier, 87.

⁹ Piasentier, 58.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–1983*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2010), 21.

¹¹ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 57.

¹² Piasentier, 87.

seems to be no more design in the variability of organic beings and in the action of natural selection than in the course in which the wind blows.¹³

The meeting point of the two is language, or rather, “the command of language,”¹⁴ in which no metaphor is *just* a metaphor. This language which, throughout the book, returns again and again to its beginning, where it is always reappearing: anthropomorphism. Thus, it is no coincidence that Piasentier’s first, introductory chapter is entitled “Vestiges of Anthropomorphism.” Piasentier’s work shows the dimensions of the metaphorisation of biology, the extent to which biology is precisely dependent on tropology, and the crucial role it plays in mediating biological teleology’s “purposive and normative views of the organic world.”¹⁵ However, before we delve into this extremely important focus of the book, a question that could easily be said to be primarily stylistic in nature, let us first, in the next two paragraphs, briefly outline the overall trajectory of the book.

Roughly speaking, the book can be divided into two parts. The first three chapters are devoted to Martin Heidegger’s biopolitical influence on both Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, or more precisely, the legacy of his thought on the importance of language as “the home of the essence of the human being.”¹⁶ Heidegger’s linguistic turn is addressed by Piasentier through his reading of the development of the concept of “voice,” or more precisely, the transition from the voice of conscience (*Stimme des Gewissens*) to the voice of being (*Stimme des Seins*),¹⁷ which at the same time illustrates the transition from logocentrism to logomorphism, where the former is characterised by the fact that it “entails a voice more authentic and original than everyday language” and the latter is “the pure will to signify which ‘dictates’ the impossibility of stepping outside everyday language.”¹⁸ In short, and with regard to one of the main emphases of this

¹³ Charles Darwin, *Autobiographies*, ed. Michael Neve and Sharon Messenger (London: Penguin, 2002), 50.

¹⁴ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 23.

¹⁵ Piasentier, 7.

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: From “Being and Time” (1927) to “The Task of Thinking” (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 2010), 424.

¹⁷ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).

¹⁸ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 13.

work, in the first three chapters of the book, Piasentier outlines the anthropomorphism that characterises the command(ment) of language.

In the second set of three chapters, Piasentier addresses the question of biological teleology and its biopolitical implications. Indeed, he sees the question of teleology as crucial to the philosophical-biological biopolitical perspective that he seeks to develop in his work. In particular, he devotes himself to a critique of those biopolitical theories that are nourished by “purposive and normative views of the organic world.”¹⁹ The question at the centre of these chapters is the question of life or, as Davide Tarizzo puts it, “the willfulness of life.”²⁰ Piasentier is again on the trail of *human, all-too-human* worldviews, right up to one of Agamben’s favourite passages from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.²¹ In this passage Aristotle “wonders about the function of man,” because the answer to the question of whether man has a function like that of the hand or the eye, i.e. the question of purposiveness and teleology, is in fact also crucial to Aristotle’s conception of politics.²²

Much of the focus of the third chapter is on Heidegger’s legacy of the definition of language in the work of Foucault’s “outside” and Agamben’s “paradise of language.”²³ The latter, following the opening words of the Gospel of John—“In the beginning was the Word”—places language at the beginning,²⁴ as “the most radical dimension of the outside one can conceive.”²⁵ In the wake of Agamben’s analysis, Piasentier points out, “by posing signification absolutely at the beginning, the revelation of language introduces an anthropomorphic principle, a pure will to signify, which keeps enchanting the world.”²⁶ Thus, the only outside

¹⁹ Piasentier, 7.

²⁰ Davide Tarizzo, *Life: A Modern Invention*, trans. Mark William Epstein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

²¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11.

²² Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 110.

²³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

²⁴ See Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

²⁵ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 63.

²⁶ Piasentier, 63.

of language, the only “in-significance”²⁷ that can be imagined, is where Bartleby, the scrivener,²⁸ Agamben’s angel, dwells: pure *Dichtung*, the essence of the in-human.

Moreover, just as there is no way out of language, or rather, it is precisely this command(ment) of language, “the impossibility of stepping outside it,”²⁹ that Piasentier calls logomorphism, there is no way out of anthropomorphism, or rather, anthropomorphism is a constant spoiler both of the idea of life and of the idea of language. According to Piasentier, it is only by undermining anthropomorphism that we can “weaken the conflict between the two [historical and biological] Foucauldian perspectives.”³⁰ Further, this anthropomorphic residue manifests itself above all in the Heideggerian fact that man is always supposed to have already existed in language, that it is language that is decisive for world-making. Yet, “in order to occur essentially,”³¹ language needs a human being, and it is this essential lack on which the event of language rests.

As already mentioned, if man is always a product of an “ontology of actuality” in which every “analytics of truth” about man is kept, and if it is crucial for the definition of anthropomorphism to define, with Heidegger, “who is man?”³² then who is this *anthropos* that defines anthropomorphism? If we are always in search of “the last man,” so is anthropomorphism. Therefore, as much as “man [. . .] is a historical invention resulting from specific regimes of discourse and power,”³³ the same could be said of anthropomorphism. However, when Piasentier refers to anthropomorphism in his book, he never *explicitly* encourages this idea, but rather gives the impression that anthropomorphism is an omnipresent and transhistorical phenomenon.

²⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains. A Commentary on the Letter to Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 103.

²⁸ Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 2016).

²⁹ Piasentier, 65.

³⁰ Piasentier, 1.

³¹ Piasentier, 65.

³² Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes One and Two*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 102.

³³ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 4.

The anthropomorphic remnant also and necessarily lurks in the in-human, and it is here that we can observe its pervasive logic. Piasentier proposes two definitions of the in-human: the first is the in-human already briefly mentioned, whose essence lies in the in-significance of language, and the second is the in-human whose essence can be found in the natural world. Piasentier addresses the criticism of this second definition in the second chapter of his book, and this criticism is informed by Heidegger's rejection of biologism, or more precisely the error of biologism, which for Heidegger is linked to anthropomorphism, in a sense that biologism forgets that it "is itself an attempt undertaken by human beings."³⁴

Nietzsche's philosophy is "characterized by a strong criticism of anthropomorphism."³⁵ For Nietzsche it is crucial to de-anthropomorphize nature, but in order to de-anthropomorphize it, it also has to undergo the process of de-deictification. At this point we can see one of the key historical connections between the anthropomorphism of nature and deities, or as Lorraine Daston points out, anthropomorphism was first a theological sin before it became a scientific one.³⁶ Similarly, Jacques Derrida speaks of anthropo-theo-morphism.³⁷ It is precisely this "organic" connection that informs Piasentier's critique of natural theology and its successors.

Heidegger claims that Nietzsche's attack on anthropomorphism is an attack on all forms of traditional natural theology and also on its substitutes, but Nietzsche's conception of nature—in making purposes and norms an inescapable feature of the biological world—is, according to Piasentier and Heidegger, still anthropomorphic. Crucially, this is the point of connection between biologism and anthropomorphism, or rather, according to Heidegger, a point of overlap: "Biologism

³⁴ Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 100.

³⁵ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 78.

³⁶ Lorraine Daston, "Intelligences: Angelic, Animal, Human," in *Thinking Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*, ed. Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 39.

³⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

is anthropomorphism not because it fails to free biology from the teleological ‘shadows of God,’³⁸ but because it forgets the question of language.”³⁹

Therefore, any biopolitics informed by an “anthropomorphic conception of biological life,”⁴⁰ by normative and purposive views of life, whether it is the biopolitics of error or its opposite, could also be seen as “a form of secularized political theology.”⁴¹

Here we can recall the passage from Matthew Ratcliffe’s critique of David Dennett’s questionable use of Mother Nature as the personification of natural selection, which Piasentier analyses.⁴² Not to mention that the trope with which anthropomorphism is most closely associated is precisely personification, to the point that it is often difficult, if not impossible, to draw a line between the two. Personification is already implied in Foucault’s famous face drawn in the sand, and as Piasentier notes, “since Darwin, the imaginary personification of natural selection has had a useful heuristic value.”⁴³ It is therefore not surprising that Piasentier detects an excessive use of anthropomorphism in Dennett’s use of Mother Nature, to the extent that Matthew Ratcliffe writes: “Remove Mother Nature and everything else collapses.”⁴⁴ We could add to this: remove anthropomorphism and everything collapses.

Since one of the main focuses of Piasentier’s research is tropological, we can now turn to another Nietzschean passage on anthropomorphism, quoted in Paul de Man’s essay “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric.” De Man begins his essay by quoting Nietzsche’s characterisation of truth as an army of tropes: “Was ist also Wahrheit? Ein bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Meton-

³⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 110.

³⁹ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 79.

⁴⁰ Piasentier, 114.

⁴¹ Piasentier, 115.

⁴² Matthew Ratcliffe, “A Kantian Stance of the Intentional Stance,” *Biology and Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (January 2001): 29–52, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1006710821443>. See also Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

⁴³ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 7.

⁴⁴ Ratcliffe, “Kantian Stance,” 36.

ymien, Anthropomorphismen [. . .].”⁴⁵ De Man recognises in Nietzsche’s statement “the gesture that links epistemology with rhetoric.”⁴⁶ In this martial metaphor, anthropomorphism can be understood primarily as a means of power, which in a sense brings us back to Foucault.

In Piasentier’s work, anthropomorphism resembles de Man’s sense of the term. Anthropomorphism is something that precedes or even enables tropology and is, therefore, not on the same level as metaphor and metonymy, not on the same level as tropes.

In addition to anthropomorphism (and, inevitably, personification), much of the second half of the book is devoted to a specific use of metaphor, namely the analysis of “metaphors of design.” Not only the relevance but also the precision of his findings regarding, on the one hand, the persistence of teleology and, on the other, the dimensions of the inevitable and dangerous metaphorisation of evolutionary sciences, which is crucially linked to it, can be observed by bringing into the paradigm the most recent developments in the field of evolutionary theory. Take, for example, the concept of symbiogenesis developed by Lynn Margulis. According to Margulis, symbiogenesis means “the origin of new tissues, organs, organisms, even species, with the formation of long-term or permanent symbiosis.”⁴⁷ Through symbiosis, bacteria gave rise to eukaryotic cells (those of protocists, fungi, animals, and plants).⁴⁸ In her book *Acquiring Genomes: A Theory of the Origin of Species*, Margulis not only described her theory in “highly racialised terms,” as Zakiyyah Iman Jackson observes in her work *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*,⁴⁹ but also used the same metaphorical and anthropomorphic devices that are at the centre of Piasentier’s critical inquiry.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn,” in *Werke in drei Bänden*, ed. Karl Schlechta (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1966), 3:314.

⁴⁶ Paul de Man, “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric,” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 239.

⁴⁷ Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 6.

⁴⁸ Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *Acquiring Genomes: A Theory of the Origin of Species* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 55–56.

⁴⁹ Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

⁵⁰ “The co-opting of strangers, the involvement and infolding of others into ever more complex and *miscegenous* genomes [. . .]. The acquisition of the reproducing other, of the

Symbiogenesis is already being used in “scientific discourse”⁵¹ as a new teleological story for our time, characterised by the “crisis of the commons” and thus the “crisis of the community” and, ultimately, the crisis of (also conceptual) excavations from these states. Donna Haraway and Graham Harman have used the concept of symbiogenesis as a metaphor to build on the already accepted idea of symbiosis as a paradigm for understanding (human) relations.⁵²

Thus, to end with what else but ends, in the end, the ends of ends are, according to Piasentier, following Nietzsche, to circumvent *horror vacui* and it is the idea that man has no purpose that is the reason that feeds the literal and metaphorical explanations of natural ends. It is only “in light of this lack of any ultimate ends for biological life that we can start thinking about a new way to place our existence as living beings at the center of political intervention.”⁵³ Furthermore, this “unfolding of the lack [. . .] can allow us to imagine new ways of being-in-common.”⁵⁴ In the end, Piasentier equips us with the possibility of a new vision, a Sellarsian stereoscopic vision,⁵⁵ with the possibility of *the answer that is blowing in the wind*,⁵⁶ perhaps *the wind of change*.

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microbe and genome, is no mere sideshow. Attraction, merger, fusion, incorporation, co-habitation, recombination—both permanent and cyclical—and other forms of *forbidden couplings*, are the main source of Darwin’s missing variation.” Margulis and Sagan, *Acquiring Genomes*, 205; italics added.

⁵¹ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 46.

⁵² Donna Haraway wrote about symbiogenesis in her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016) and Graham Harman in *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).

⁵³ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 115.

⁵⁴ Piasentier, 8.

⁵⁵ Piasentier, 118. See also Wilfrid Sellars, “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (New York: Routledge, 1963), 4.

⁵⁶ Piasentier, 110.

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