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DID SOMEBODY SAY TOTALITARIANISM?



FIVE INTERVENTIONS IN THE (MIS)USE OF A NOTION

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

DID SOMEBODY
SAY
TOTALITARIANISM?



WO ES WAR

A series from Verso edited by Slavoj Žižek

Wo es war, soll ich werden – Where it was, I shall come into being – is Freud's version of the Enlightenment goal of knowledge that is in itself an act of liberation. Is it still possible to pursue this goal today, in the conditions of late capitalism? If 'it' today is the twin rule of pragmatic-relativist New Sophists and New Age obscurantists, what 'shall come into being' in its place? The premiss of the series is that the explosive combination of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxist tradition detonates a dynamic freedom that enables us to question the very presuppositions of the circuit of Capital.

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**DID SOMEBODY
SAY
TOTALITARIANISM?**

**Five Interventions in the
(Mis)use of a Notion**



SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK



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CONTENTS

	Introduction: On Ideological Antioxidants	1
1	The Myth and Its Vicissitudes <i>Hamlet before Oedipus – The birth of beauty out of the abject – From comedy to tragedy – The myth of postmodernity – ‘Thrift, thrift, Horatio!’ – Agape – The enigma of/in the Other</i>	8
2	Hitler as Ironist? <i>Was the Holocaust diabolical Evil? – Laugh yourself to death! – The Muslim – Beneath tragedy and comedy</i>	61
3	When the Party Commits Suicide <i>'The Power of the Powerless' – The Communist sacrifice – Stalin–Abraham against Bukharin–Isaac – Stalinist jouissance – Lenin versus Stalin – When discourse implodes – Excursus: Shostakovich and the resistance to Stalinism – The radical ambiguity of Stalinism</i>	88
4	Melancholy and the Act <i>Lack is not the same as loss – 'Post-secular thought?' No, thanks! – The Other: Imaginary, symbolic, and real – The ethical act: Beyond the reality principle – A plea for materialist creationism – The Pope</i>	141

CONTENTS

versus the Dalai Lama – John Woo as a critic of Levinas: The face as a fetish

5 Are Cultural Studies Really Totalitarian? 190

The burning question – The two Reals – The 'Third Culture' as ideology – The impasse of historicism – Theoretical state apparatuses

Conclusion 229

'... and what are the destitute (totalitarians) for in a poetic time?'

Notes 257

Index 273

Introduction: On Ideological Antioxidants

which, while providing the impetuous reader with a preview of the book's contents, explains why 'totalitarianism is and was, from its very inception, a stopgap

On the 'Celestial Seasonings' green tea packet there is a short explanation of its benefits: 'Green tea is a natural source of antioxidants, which neutralize harmful molecules in the body known as *free radicals*. By taming *free radicals*, antioxidants help the body maintain its natural good health.' *Mutatis mutandis*, is not the notion of totalitarianism one of the main *ideological* antioxidants, whose function throughout its career was to *tame free radicals*, and thus to help the social body to maintain its politico-ideological good health?

No less than social life itself, today's self-professed 'radical' academia is permeated by unwritten rules and prohibitions – although such rules are never explicitly stated, disobedience can have dire consequences. One of these unwritten rules concerns the unquestioned ubiquity of the need to 'contextualize' or 'situate' one's position: the easiest way to score points automatically in a debate is to claim that the opponent's position is not properly 'situated' in a historical context: 'You talk about women – *which*

women? There is no woman as such, so does not your generalized talk about women, in its apparent all-encompassing neutrality, privilege certain specific figures of femininity and preclude others?'

Why is such radical historicizing false, despite the obvious moment of truth it contains? Because *today's (late capitalist global market) social reality itself is dominated by what Marx referred to as the power of 'real abstraction'*: the circulation of Capital is the force of radical 'deterritorialization' (to use Deleuze's term) which, in its very functioning, actively ignores specific conditions and cannot be 'rooted' in them. It is no longer, as in the standard ideology, the universality that occludes the twist of its partiality, of its privileging a particular content; rather, it is the very attempt to locate particular roots that ideologically occludes the social reality of the reign of 'real abstraction'.

Another of these rules, in the last decade, was the elevation of Hannah Arendt into an untouchable authority, a point of transference. Until two decades ago, Leftist radicals dismissed her as the perpetrator of the notion of 'totalitarianism', the key weapon of the West in the Cold War ideological struggle: if, at a Cultural Studies colloquium in the 1970s, one was asked innocently, 'Is your line of argumentation not similar to that of Arendt?', this was a sure sign that one was in deep trouble. Today, however, one is expected to treat her with respect – even academics whose basic orientation might seem to push them up against Arendt (psychoanalysts like Julia Kristeva, on account of Arendt's dismissal of psychoanalytic theory; Frankfurt School followers like Richard Bernstein, on account of Arendt's excessive animosity towards Adorno) engage in the impossible task of reconciling her with

their fundamental theoretical commitment. This elevation of Arendt is perhaps the clearest sign of the theoretical defeat of the Left – of how the Left has accepted the basic co-ordinates of liberal democracy ('democracy' versus 'totalitarianism', etc.), and is now trying to redefine its (op)position within this space. The first thing to do, therefore, is fearlessly to violate these liberal taboos: So what if one is accused of being 'anti-democratic', 'totalitarian'. . . .

Throughout its entire career, 'totalitarianism' was an ideological notion that sustained the complex operation of 'taming free radicals', of guaranteeing the liberal-democratic hegemony, dismissing the Leftist critique of liberal democracy as the obverse, the 'twin', of the Rightist Fascist dictatorship. And it is useless to try to redeem 'totalitarianism' through division into subcategories (emphasizing the difference between the Fascist and the Communist variety): the moment one accepts the notion of 'totalitarianism', one is firmly located within the liberal-democratic horizon.' The contention of this book is thus that the notion of 'totalitarianism', far from being an effective theoretical concept, is a kind of stopgap: instead of enabling us to think, forcing us to acquire a new insight into the historical reality it describes, it relieves us of the duty to think, or even actively prevents us from thinking.

Today, reference to the 'totalitarian' threat sustains a kind of unwritten *Denkverbot* (prohibition against thinking) similar to the infamous *Berufsverbot* (prohibition against being employed by any state institution) in late 1960s Germany – the moment one shows the slightest inclination to engage in political projects that aim seriously to challenge the existing order, the answer is immediately: 'Benevolent as it is, this will necessarily end in a new

Gulag! The 'return to ethics' in today's political philosophy shamefully exploits the horrors of **Gulag** or Holocaust as the ultimate bogey for blackmailing us into renouncing all serious radical engagement. In this way, conformist liberal scoundrels can find hypocritical satisfaction in their defence of the existing order: they know there is corruption, exploitation, and so on, but every attempt to change things is denounced as ethically dangerous and unacceptable, resuscitating the ghost of 'totalitarianism'.

This book does not aim to **provide** yet another systematic exposition of the history of the notion of totalitarianism. Rather, it tries to follow the dialectical movement from one particular content of the universal notion to another, the movement constitutive of what **Hegel** called 'concrete universality'. In *Why Do Women Write More Letters Than They Post?*, Darian Leader claims that when a woman says to a man 'I love you', she ultimately always means one of the following three things:

- *I have a lover* (as in 'Yes, I had an affair with him, but that doesn't mean anything, I still really love you!');
- *I am bored with you* (as in 'Yes, yes, I love you, everything is OK, just, please, leave me alone a bit, I want some peace!');
- and, finally, a simple *I want sex!*²

These three meanings are interconnected as terms in the chain of reasoning: 'I got a lover because I was bored with you, so if you want me to love you, give me better sex!' **Along** the same lines, when – today, after the demise of the standard Cold War liberal rantings against Stalinism as the direct and necessary outcome of

Marxism – theorists use the term 'totalitarianism' approvingly, they are taking one of five stances:

- 'Totalitarianism' is modernism *going* awry: it fills the gap opened up by the very modernist dissolution of all traditional organic social links. Traditionalist conservatives and postmodernists share this notion – the difference between them is more a matter of emphasis: for some, 'totalitarianism is the necessary outcome of the modernist Enlightenment, inscribed in its very notion; while for others, it is more a threat which consummates itself when the Enlightenment does not fully realize its potential.
- The Holocaust as the ultimate, absolute crime, which cannot be analysed in terms of concrete political analysis, since such an approach already trivializes it.
- The neo-liberal claim that any radical emancipatory political project necessarily ends up in some version of totalitarian domination and control. Liberalism thus succeeds in bringing together new ethnic fundamentalisms and (whatever remains of) radical Left emancipatory projects, as if the two were somehow 'deeply related', two sides of the same coin, both aiming at 'total control' . . . (this combination is the new form of the old liberal notion that Fascism and Communism are two forms of the same 'totalitarian' degeneration of democracy).
- Today's postmodern claim (foreshadowed already in Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) that political totalitarianism is grounded in phallo-logocentric metaphysical closure: the *only* way to forestall totalitarian consequences is

to insist on the radical gap, opening, displacement, that can never be contained within any closed ontological edifice.

- Finally, in a recent cognitivist backlash, postmodern Cultural Studies themselves are denounced as 'totalitarian', as the last island on which the Stalinist logic of unconditionally obeying the Party line survived, impervious to any rational argumentation.

What is interesting to note here is how even the predominant 'critical' philosophical response to hegemonic liberalism, that of the postmodern deconstructionist Left, relies on the category of 'totalitarianism'. The deconstructionist political doxa goes something like this: the social is the field of structural undecidability it is marked by an irreducible gap or lack, forever condemned to non-identity with itself; and 'totalitarianism' is, at its most elementary, the closure of this undecidability – does not the postmodern Left here reformulate, in its own jargon, the old liberal wisdom of Isaiah Berlin, Robert Conquest & Co.? 'Totalitarianism' is thus elevated to the level of ontological confusion; it is conceived as a kind of Kantian paralogism of pure political reason, an inevitable 'transcendental illusion' which occurs when a positive political order is directly, in an illegitimate short circuit, identified with the impossible Otherness of Justice – any stance that does not endorse the mantra of contingency/displacement/finitude is dismissed as potentially 'totalitarian'.

The philosophical notion of *totality* and the political notion of *totalitarianism* tend to overlap here, in a line that stretches from Karl Popper to Jean-François Lyotard: the Hegelian totality of Reason is perceived as the ultimate totalitarian edifice in philos-

ophy. Rationality as such gets a bad press today: New Agers condemn it as Cartesian mechanistic/discursive 'left-brain' thinking; feminists reject it as the male-based stance which implicitly relies on its opposition to feminine emotionality; for postmodernists, rationality involves the metaphysical claim to 'objectivity', which obliterates the power and discourse mechanisms determining what counts as 'rational' and 'objective'. . . . It is against this pseudo-Leftist irrationalism that one should recall the subtitle of Lacan's *écrit* 'The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious': *ou la raison depuis Freud* – or Reason After Freud.

In 1991, after the anti-Ceaușescu coup staged by the *nomenklatura* itself, the Romanian secret police apparatus, of course, remained fully operative, pursuing its business as usual. However, the effort of the secret police to project a new, kinder, image of itself, in step with the new 'democratic' times, resulted in some uncanny episodes. An American friend of mine, who was in Bucharest on a Fulbright scholarship at the time, called home a week after his arrival and told his girlfriend that he was now in a poor but friendly country, where people were pleasant and eager to learn. After he hung up, the phone immediately rang; he picked up the receiver, and a voice told him in slightly awkward English that this was the secret police officer whose duty it was to listen to his phone conversation, and he wanted to thank him for the nice things he had said about Romania – he wished him a pleasant stay and said goodbye.

This book is dedicated to that anonymous Romanian secret police operative.

1 The Myth and Its Vicissitudes

in which the reader will be surprised to learn that myth is a secondary phenomenon which follows social comedy; as a bonus, he will also get to know the secret of the emergence of a beautiful woman

Back in the late 1960s and 1970s, in the heyday of Lacanian Marxism, a lot of Lacan's French followers were attracted by his anti-Americanism, discernible especially in his dismissal of the ego-psychological turn of psychoanalysis as the ideological expression of the 'American way of life'. Although these (mostly young Maoist) followers perceived Lacan's anti-Americanism as a sign of his 'anticapitalism', it is more appropriate to discern in it the traces of a standard conservative theme: in today's bourgeois, commercialized, 'Americanized', society, authentic tragedy is no longer possible; this is why great conservative writers like Claudel try to resuscitate the notion of tragedy in order to put dignity back into human existence. . . . It is precisely here, when Lacan endeavours to speak in favour of the last vestiges of an old authenticity which is barely discernible in today's superficial universe, that his words sound like (and *are*) a heap of ideological platitudes. However, although Lacan's anti-Americanism represents what is most 'false' and ideological in his work, there is none the less a 'rational kernel' in this ideological theme: the advent of modernism, in effect, undermines the traditional notion of tragedy and the concomitant notion of the mythical Fate which governs human destiny.

Hamlet before Oedipus

When we talk about myths in psychoanalysis, we are in fact talking about *one* myth, the Oedipus myth – all the other Freudian myths (the myth of the primordial father, Freud's version of the Moses myth) are variations of it, albeit *necessary* ones. With the Hamlet narrative, however, things become complicated. The standard, pre-Lacanian, 'naive' psychoanalytic reading of *Hamlet*, of course, focuses on Hamlet's incestuous desire for his mother. Hamlet's shock at his father's death is thus explained as the traumatic impact the fulfilment of an unconscious violent desire (in this case, for the father to die) has on the subject; the spectre of the dead father which appears to Hamlet is the projection of Hamlet's own guilt about his death-wish; his hatred of Claudius is an effect of narcissistic rivalry – Claudius, instead of Hamlet himself, got his mother; his disgust for Ophelia and womankind in general expresses his revulsion at sex in its suffocating incestuous modality, which arises from the lack of the paternal interdiction/sanction. . . . So, according to this standard reading, Hamlet as a modernized version of Oedipus bears witness-to the strengthening of the Oedipal prohibition of incest in the passage from Antiquity to modernity in the case of Oedipus, we are still dealing with incest; while in *Hamlet*, the incestuous wish is repressed and displaced. And it seems that the very designation of Hamlet as an obsessional neurotic points in this direction: in contrast to hysteria, which is found throughout all (at least Western) history, obsessional neurosis is a distinctly *modern* phenomenon.

While one should not underestimate the strength of such a

robust heroic Freudian reading of *Hamlet* as the modernized version of the Oedipus myth, the **problem** is how to harmonize it with the fact that although – in the Goetheian lineage – Hamlet may appear to be the model of the modern (introverted, brooding, indecisive) intellectual, the myth of Hamlet is *older than* that of Oedipus. The **elementary** skeleton of the narrative (the son avenges his father against the father's evil brother, who murdered him and took over his throne; the son survives the illegitimate rule of his uncle by playing the fool and making crazy' but truthful remarks) is a universal **myth** found everywhere, from old Nordic cultures through Ancient Egypt up to Iran and Polynesia. Furthermore, there is enough evidence to sustain the conclusion that the ultimate reference of this narrative concerns not family traumas, but celestial events: the ultimate 'meaning' of the Hamlet myth is the movement of stars in precession – that is to say, the Hamlet myth threads into the family narrative highly articulated astronomical observations. . . .³ However, this solution, convincing as it may appear, also immediately becomes entangled in its own impasse: the movement of stars is meaningless in itself, **simply** a fact of nature with no libidinal resonance, so why did **people** translate-metaphorize it in the guise of precisely such a family narrative, which generates a tremendous libidinal involvement? In other words, the question of 'what means what?' is **by** no means decided **by** this reading: does the Hamlet narrative 'mean' stars, or do **stars** 'mean' Hamlet's narrative – that is to say, did the Ancients use their astronomical knowledge in order to encode insights into the fundamental libidinal deadlocks of the human race?

Nevertheless, one thing is clear: temporally and logically, the Hamlet narrative *is* earlier than the Oedipal myth. We are dealing here with the mechanism of the unconscious displacement well known to Freud: something that is logically *earlier* is perceptible (or becomes so, or inscribes itself in the texture) *only* as a later, secondary *distortion* of some allegedly 'original' narrative. That is the often misrecognized elementary matrix of the 'dream-work', which involves the distinction between the latent dream-thought and the unconscious desire articulated in the dream: in the dream-work, the latent thought is ciphered/displaced, but it is through this very displacement that the *other*, truly unconscious thought articulates itself.

So, in the case of Oedipus and Hamlet, instead of the linear/historicist reading of *Hamlet* as a secondary distortion of the Oedipal text, the Oedipus myth is (as Hegel had already claimed) the founding myth of Western Greek civilization (the suicidal leap of the Sphinx representing the disintegration of the old pre-Greek universe); and it is in Hamlet's 'distortion' of the Oedipus myth that its repressed content articulates itself – the proof being the fact that the Hamlet matrix is found everywhere in pre-Classic mythology, up to Ancient Egypt itself, whose spiritual defeat is signalled by the suicidal leap of the Sphinx. (And, incidentally, what if the same goes even for Christianity is it not Freud's thesis that the murder of God in the New Testament brings to light the 'disavowed' trauma of the Old Testament?) What, then, is the pre-Oedipal 'secret' of Hamlet? One should *retain* the insight that Oedipus is a proper 'myth', and that the Hamlet narrative is its 'modernizing' dislocation/corruption; the lesson is that the Oedipal 'myth' – and,

perhaps, mythic 'naivety' itself – serves to obfuscate some prohibited *knowledge*, ultimately the knowledge about the father's obscenity.

How, then, are act and knowledge related in a tragic constellation? The basic opposition is between Oedipus and Hamlet: Oedipus accomplishes the act (of killing his father) because he doesn't know what he is doing; in contrast to Oedipus, Hamlet knows and, for that very reason, is unable to go on to the act (of taking revenge for his father's death). Furthermore, as Lacan emphasizes, it is not only Hamlet who knows, it is also Hamlet's father who mysteriously *knows* that he is dead and even how he died, in contrast to the father in the Freudian dream, who doesn't know that he is dead – and it is this excessive knowledge that accounts for the minimal melodramatic *flair* of *Hamlet*. That is to say: in contrast to tragedy, which is based on some *misrecognition* or ignorance, melodrama always involves some unexpected and excessive knowledge possessed not *by* the hero but *by* his or her other, the knowledge imparted to the hero at the very end, in the final melodramatic reversal.

Recall the eminently melodramatic final reversal of Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, in which the husband who for many years has harboured an illicit passionate love for Countess Olenska, learns that his young wife *knew* about his secret passion all the time. Perhaps this would also offer a way of redeeming the unfortunate *Bridges of Madison County*: if, at the end of the film, the dying Francesca were to learn that her allegedly simple-minded, down-to-earth husband knew all the time about his wife's brief passionate affair with the *National Geographic* photographer, and how much this meant to her, but kept silent about it in order not

to hurt her. That is the enigma of knowledge: how is it possible that the whole psychic economy of a situation changes radically not when the hero learns something (some long-repressed secret) directly, but when he *gets to know that the other* (whom he thought of as ignorant) *also knew it all the time*, and just **pretended** not to know, to **keep** up appearances – is there anything more humiliating than the situation of a husband who, after a long secret love affair, learns all of a sudden that his wife knew about it all the time, but kept silent out of politeness or – even worse – out of love for him?

In *Terms of Endearment*, Debra Winger, dying of cancer in a hospital bed, tells her son (who actively despises her for being abandoned by his father, her husband) that she is well aware of how much he really loves her – she knows that at some time in the future, after her death, he will acknowledge this to himself; at that moment, he will feel guilty for his past hatred of his mother, so she is now letting him know that she is **pardoning** him in advance, and thus delivering him of the future burden of guilt . . . this manipulation of the future guilt feeling is melodrama at its best; its very gesture of **pardon** makes the son guilty in advance. (Therein, in this attribution of guilt, in this imposition of a symbolic debt, through the very act of exoneration, lies the highest trick of Christianity.)

There is, however, a *third* formula to be added to this couple of 'He doesn't know it, although he does it' and 'He knows it, and therefore cannot do it': 'He knows very well what he is doing; none the less, he does it.' If the first formula covers the traditional hero and the second the early modern hero, the last, combining knowledge *and* act in an ambiguous way, accounts for the late

modern – contemporary – hero. That is to say: this third formula allows for two thoroughly opposed readings – rather like Hegelian speculative judgement, in which the lowest and the highest coincide: on the one hand, 'He knows very well what he is doing; none the less, he does it' is the clearest expression of the cynical attitude of moral depravity – 'Yes, I am a scum, cheating and lying, so what? That's life!'; on the other hand, the same stance of 'He knows very well what he is doing; none the less, he does it' can also express the most radical opposite of cynicism – the tragic awareness that although what I am about to do will have catastrophic consequences for my well-being and for the well-being of my nearest and dearest, none the less I **simply have** to do it, because of the inexorable ethical injunction. (Recall the paradigmatic attitude of the *noir* hero: he is fully aware that if he follows the call of the *femme fatale*, only doom awaits him, that what he is letting himself in for is a double trap, that the woman will surely betray him; none the less, he cannot resist, and does it all the same. . . .)

This split is not **only** the split between the domain of the pathological' – of well-being, pleasure, profit . . . and the ethical injunction: it can also be the split between the moral norms I usually follow and the unconditional injunction I feel obliged to obey – like the dilemma of Abraham who 'knows very well what killing one's own son means', and none the less resolves to do it; or the Christian who is ready to commit a terrible sin (to sacrifice his eternal soul) for the higher goal of God's **glory**. In short, the properly modern post- or meta-tragic situation occurs when a **higher necessity** compels me to betray the very ethical substance of my being.

The birth of beauty out of the abject

Of course, in our time, there is an abundance of catastrophic events whose horror probably surpasses that of the past – is it still possible, however, to call Auschwitz or the Stalinist camps a tragedy? Is not something more radical at work in the position of the victim of the Stalinist show trial, or of the Holocaust? Does not the term 'tragedy'¹, at least in its classical use, still imply the logic of Fate, which is rendered ridiculous apropos of the Holocaust? To say that the annihilation of the Jews obeyed a hidden necessity of Fate is already to gentrify it. Lacan endeavours to unravel this deadlock in his stunning reading of Paul Claudel's *Coiifontaine* trilogy.⁴

One of the clichés of psychoanalysis is that three generations are needed to produce a good psychotic; the starting point of Lacan's analysis of the *Coiifontaine* trilogy is that three generations are also needed to bring about a (beautiful) object of desire. The feature shared by the Oedipus family myth and the *Coiifontaine* family saga is that, in both cases, the succession of three generations obeys the matrix of (1) the flawed symbolic exchange; (2) the position of a reject; and (3) the emergence of the sublime object of desire. The 'original sin', the grandparental breach of the symbolic pact (Oedipus' parents cast him out; Sygne de *Coiifontaine* renounces her true love and marries the despised *Turelure*) gives birth to an undesired outcast (Oedipus himself; Louis de *Coiifontaine*) whose offspring is a girl of breathtaking beauty, the ultimate object of desire (*Antigone*; the blind *Pensée* de *Coiifontaine*). The proof that we are dealing here with a deep structural necessity is provided by a third

example which, precisely because it comes from the somewhat 'lower' culture of *la France profonde*, displays this matrix in its pure, distilled form: Marcel Pagnol's two novels *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources*, including their two cinema versions (first the two films by Pagnol himself, which precede his own novelization; then the big 1987 production by Claude Berri).

Here, then, is the outline of the story. In Provence in the early 1920s, the hunchback Jean de Florette, an educated city man (tax collector) who has learned about farming from books, suddenly inherits a little land from his mother Florette. So, together with his devoted wife, an ex-opera singer, and Manon, his delicate little daughter, Jean plans to settle on the farm and breed rabbits, not the usual local produce. Jean is a utopian figure, combining deep religious feeling and a yearning to live authentically in the country with the desire to exploit the land in a scientific way. The idea of living an authentic country life as opposed to the corrupted city life is clearly denounced here as a city myth: the countrymen themselves, on the contrary, are, self-absorbed and reticent – the basic ethical rule of the community disrupted by Jean's arrival is *on ne s'occupe pas des affaires des autres*. . . .

Misfortunes come thick and fast: Jean's neighbours, the prosperous old bachelor César and his simple-minded nephew Ugolin, the last of the mighty Soubeyran family, once the local potentates, have other plans for this piece of land – they want to grow carnations on it and sell them in the big city nearby. So the two hatch a careful plot to destroy Jean – César, who concocts it, is not simply evil and greedy; he justifies his acts on the basis of his values, centred around the continuity of land and family, so

that in his eyes, his plot is **fully** justified **by** the need to defend the land against the foreign intruder. Before Jean's arrival, **César** and **Ugolin** block up the spring on his land with cement. So when there is no rain, and the **plants** shrivel and the rabbits start to die, Jean and his family haul water from a faraway spring from morning till **night** to save their crop, unaware that there is an abundant spring under their very noses. This is the traumatic scene: the poor family taking the long walk and carrying water like mules, to the utmost point of exhaustion, while the entire village community is watching them, well aware that there is a spring on Jean's own land – but nobody **budges** to tell **him** so, since *on ne s'occupe pas des affaires des autres*. . . . Jean's will and persistence are unrelenting, and he finally dies in an explosion (during a desperate attempt to dig a well to reach water); his wife is forced to sell the farm to **César** and **Ugolin**, and moves with **Manon** to a lonely cave in a **nearby** mountain; **César** and **Ugolin**, of course, soon 'discover' the spring and start to grow their carnations.

The second part takes **place** a decade later: **Manon** is now a beautiful shepherd **girl**, a kind of local fairy **living** mysteriously in the mountain and avoiding the company of the villagers. Two men have a love interest in her: the new young village school-teacher and the **ugly** unfortunate **Ugolin**, who falls passionately in love with her after he secretly observes her singing and dancing naked in the wilderness, and even puts birds and rabbits in her traps to **help** her. However, **Manon**, who even as a little girl was distrustful of **Ugolin's** apparent friendship with her family, makes two fateful discoveries: she not only learns that the spring on her father's land was blocked up **by César** and **Ugolin**, and

that the whole village knew about it; while exploring underground mountain caves, she also accidentally discovers the source of water for the whole village. So now it's her turn to plot and execute her revenge: she cuts off the village water supply.

Things now start to move much faster. Ugolin half-admits his and César's crime against the dead Jean in public, and pathetically offers to marry Manon and take care of her to redeem himself for his past wrongdoings; after she publicly rebuffs him, Ugolin hangs himself, leaving all his fortune and land to Manon. Desperate for water, the villagers summon a state specialist in water sources, who gives them a lot of complicated theories but no water; so the local priest suggests a procession around the main village well. In his sermon, he clearly hints that the stoppage of water is a punishment for a collective crime. Finally, the schoolteacher – whose love for Manon is reciprocated by her, and who also suspects that Manon knows the secret of the sudden lack of water and is herself its cause – convinces her to pardon the villagers and restore the water. The two enter the cave together and unblock the spring so that the next day, during the procession and prayers, water starts to flow again. The teacher and Manon marry, and she gives birth to a lovely child with no hunchback, while the aged César learns from an old acquaintance, a blind woman spending her last days in the village, the secret of Jean's deformity.

Jean's mother Florette, a local beauty was César's great love. After a night of love together, César left for Algeria to do his military service; Florette was too proud to acknowledge her love for him. Soon afterwards, however, she wrote to him in Algeria, explaining that she was pregnant with his child and that she

loved him – but unfortunately, the letter never reached Cesar. Florette, thinking that Cesar did not want her, desperately tried to get rid of the fetus inside her, throwing herself down the stairs, and so on, but to no avail. So she went to the nearby village, quickly seduced the local blacksmith, married him and gave birth to Jean, who was born a hunchback owing to her attempts to get rid of him. Cesar thus learns that he plotted against and caused the death of his own only son, for whom he was longing so deeply in order to continue the family line. His time has come, and he decides to die: he writes a long letter to **Manon**, explaining to her that he is her grandfather, leaving her the entire **Soubeyran** fortune and asking her for forgiveness. Then he lies down and calmly dies.

The entire scope of the tragedy is thus encompassed by a letter (Florette's letter to Cesar) which arrives at its destination too late, after the long detour of two further generations: the tragedy is set in motion when the letter fails to reach Cesar in **Algeria**, and it reaches its conclusion when, finally, the letter does reach him, forcing him to confront the horrible fact that he has unwittingly destroyed his only son.

As in the Oedipus myth and in Claudel's **Coûfontaine** trilogy, the beautiful object (**Manon**) emerges as the offspring of an abject, of the unwanted child (Jean's hump, like Oedipus' limp, is literally the sign which registers this parental rejection of the offspring; Jean was born a hunchback because his unfortunate mother tried to terminate her pregnancy by throwing herself down stairs and steep paths). One is tempted to read this succession of three generations through the lenses of the inverted matrix of the three stages of logical time:⁵

- in the first generation, catastrophic events are set in motion by the fateful act of false *conclusion* (the alienating contract);
- what then follows is the 'time of understanding' (the time needed to grasp that, with the contract, I lost everything, that I was reduced to an abject – in short, what occurs here is the separation from the big Other, that is, I am deprived of my footing in the symbolic order);
- finally, there is the 'moment de voir' – to see what? The beautiful object, of course?

The passage from the second moment to the third is equivalent to the passage from the repulsive *phobic* object to the elevated fetish – that is to say, we are dealing with the reversal of the subjective attitude with regard to the same object – not the usual reversal of 'treasure into shit', but the opposite reversal of 'shit into treasure', of the worthless abject into the precious gem. What lurks in the background is the mystery of the emergence of the beautiful (feminine) object: first, there is the 'original sin', the alienating act of exchange ('a letter – Florette's letter to Cesar – did not reach its addressee', the love encounter failed, the couple was not reunited). This original catastrophe (César's blindness to the depth of Florette's love for him) is given its 'objective correlative' in the heinous deformity of their offspring; what then follows is the magic reversal of deformity into breathtaking beauty (Jean's daughter *Manon*).⁷ In Pagnol, the tragedy is Oedipus reversed: in contrast to Oedipus, the son who unwittingly kills his own father, Cesar unwittingly destroys his son. Cesar is not simply evil; he accomplishes his harmful acts by sticking to the traditional ethics of unconditional attachment to one's locale, of

protecting it against foreign intruders at any price. And the community itself, in passively observing the prolonged suffering of Jean's family, is also simply following its rudimentary ethical motto: *on ne s'occupe pas des affaires des autres*, and its counterpart, *quand on parle, on parle trop*.

Each of the three central male figures is therefore tragic in his own way. Cesar comes to realize that the enemy whom he destroyed was his own illegitimate son – a pure case of the closed loop of the tragic experience, in which the arrow destined to hit one's enemy returns to its dispatcher. At this moment, the circle of Fate is accomplished, and all that remains is for the subject to die, as old Cesar does with dignity. Perhaps the most tragic figure in the story is Ugolin, who undoubtedly loves Manon more deeply than the rather superficial and flirtatious teacher Bertrand, and is driven to suicide by his guilt and unhappy love. Finally, there is a tragic aspect to Jean himself – when the clouds bringing the precious rain to the dry land pass over his farm, he turns to heaven and cries in a (slightly ridiculous) outburst of impotent rage: 'I'm a hunchback. It's difficult to be a hunchback. Is there nobody up there?' Jean stands for the paternal figure who follows his project to the end, relying on weather statistics, irrespective of the suffering his exploit causes to his family.⁸ What constitutes his tragedy is the utter *meaninglessness* of his effort: he mobilizes his entire family to carry water from a distant well for long hours, day after day, unaware that there is a rich source of water right on his land.

From comedy to tragedy

The standard relationship between the community and the tragic individual is thus reversed: in contrast to the classical form of tragedy, in which the individual offends the community, in Pagnol it is the community which offends the individual. In classical tragedy, the guilt is on the side of the transgressive hero-individual who is then pardoned and reintegrated into the community; while here, the basic guilt is that of the community itself: it lies not in what they did, but in the fact that they did *not* do anything – in the discrepancy between their knowledge and their action: they all knew about the spring, yet none of them was ready simply to tell the unfortunate Jean the truth about it.

If the paradigmatic case of classical tragedy is that of a hero who commits an act the consequences of which are beyond the scope of his knowledge – who unwittingly commits a crime by violating the sacred order of his community – in Pagnol, the hero is the community itself (the collective of villagers) – not with regard to what they did but with regard to *what they knew and did not do*: all they had to do, instead of just silently witnessing the family's labour, was to impart their knowledge to Jean. Consequently, the tragic insight of Manon occurs when she gets to know not what others (the community) did, but what they *knew*. For this reason, César is right when he retorts to the villagers who, towards the end of the story, start all of a sudden to reproach him for stopping up the spring that even if it is true that he and Ugolin did it, *they* all share in the complicity, since *they* all knew about this act. . . . This guilt of the community is embodied in the fantasmatic image of the dead Jean, who appears as a

spectre haunting the villagers, reproaching them for not telling him the truth about the spring. **Manon**, the mute child who cannot be deceived, sees and discerns everything, although she can only silently observe the superhuman effort and fall of her father: her clumsy childish drawings of the whole family carrying water are the unbearable reminder to the community.

The opposition between **Manon** and the village community is, of course, in Lacanian terms, the opposition between **J** and **A**, between the substance of *jouissance* and the big Other. **Manon** is 'of the sources', she stands for the Real of the Life Source (not only sexuality, but Life as such), which is why she is able to cut off the flow of life energy (water) and thus cause the waning of the community – when the community **expel** her, they unknowingly drain their own Life Substance. Once it is cut off from its substance, the community appears in its truth, as the impotent **prattle** of the symbolic machinery: the satirical high point of **Pagnol's** novel is undoubtedly the villagers' meeting with the representative of the state water authority, who masks his ignorance with an abundant pseudo-scientific oration about the possible causes of the drying up of the village fountain. One cannot fail to recall here the empty comic tittle-tattle of Freud's three doctor colleagues in the second part of his dream about Irma's injection, who enumerate the possible excuses which exonerate Freud of any guilt in his treatment of Irma. And, significantly, it is the local priest who intervenes as mediator, pointing the way to reconciliation by shifting the focus from scientific knowledge to subjective truth by reminding the villagers of their shared guilt. No wonder, then, that the final reconciliation is sealed by the marriage between **Manon** and the young

teacher, with **Manon's** pregnancy attesting to the re-established harmony between the Real of the Life Substance and the symbolic 'big Other'. Is **Manon** not similar to Junta in **Leni Riefenstahl's** early masterpiece *The Blue Light* – the beautiful outcast, disenfranchised **by** the closed village community, who has access to the mystery of Life?

This intervention **by** the priest also displays the elementary mechanism of the emergence of ideological meaning: at the very point where causal explanation (of the state water **supply** specialist as to the causes of the blockage of the spring) fails, this void is filled **by** meaning – that is to say, the priest changes the register and suggests that the members of the community consider the stoppage of water not **simply** as resulting from natural processes (changing pressures **deep** in the ground, drought, the **underground** water changing its course and finding a new river bed) but as signalling some ethical failure of the community (he himself draws the parallel with Thebes, where the cause of the **plague** was incest in the royal family). The 'miracle' then occurs in the midst of the religious procession of people praying for water: all of a sudden, the water starts to flow again (since **Manon** has unblocked the source). Are we dealing here with a simple deception? Where is the true religious faith? The priest is fully aware of what is at stake; his message to **Manon** is: 'I know that the miracle will not really be a miracle, that water will start to flow again because you will unblock the source – however, true miracles are not external, but internal. The true miracle is that someone like you – who, because of the wrongs done to your family, has every right to hate our community – gathers the strength to change her mind and accomplish a kind gesture. The

true miracle is this inner conversion, **by** means of which the individual breaks out of the circle of revenge and accomplishes the act of **pardon**.' The true miracle resides in the retroactive undoing [*Ungeschehenmachen*] of crime and guilt.

What we encounter here is the ideological *je sais bien, mais quand même* at its purest: although there is no **physical** miracle, there is none the less a miracle on another, 'deeper', 'inner' level. One can see here clearly the **problematic** intermediate position of **Pagnol**. On the one hand, he seems to rely on the premodern notion of the correspondence between external, material events and the 'inner' truth, the correspondence which found its ultimate expression in the myth of the Fisher King (the 'waste land' as the expression of the King's ethical failure); on the other hand, he reflexively takes into account the **illusory** character of this correspondence.

This intermediate position casts a shadow over what purports to be the closed mythical universe of tragic fate, in which all the dispersed threads find a common resolution in the ending. Such an epic tragedy seems wholly out of place today, in an epoch when, on the screen, events have to explode all the time to maintain our span of attention, the only admissible dialogue consists of more and more clever or funny one-liners, and the only acceptable overall **plot** is more and more a conspiracy narrative. In **Pagnol**, however, things move at a majestic pace, following their inexorable path over three generations, as in a Greek tragedy; there is no suspense, all motives are laid out in advance, and it is **perfectly** clear what is going to happen – but for that very reason, the horror which occurs when it actually happens is even more sinister.

However, is it not that, instead of relating an actual mythical experience, Pagnol provides a nostalgic retro version of such an experience? A close look at the three consecutive forms in which Pagnol's story was presented to the public (first his two films, then his later novelization of his own films, and finally Claude Berri's two films) reveals the disturbing fact that the beginning is the least mythical: it is only in Berri's 'postmodern' nostalgic version that we get the full contours of the closed universe of mythical fate. While it retains the traces of the 'authentic' French provincial community life in which people's acts follow old, quasi-pagan religious patterns, Pagnol's version also brings out the theatricality and comicalness of the action; Berri's two films, although they are shot more 'realistically', emphasize destiny and melodramatic excess (significantly, the main musical leitmotiv of the films is based on Verdi's *La forza del destino*).⁹ So, paradoxically, the closed ritualized premodern community implies theatrical comicalness and irony, while the modern 'realistic' rendering involves Fate and melodramatic excess.¹⁰

Here again, do we not encounter the paradox of Hamlet the 'mythical' form of the narrative content is not the starting point, but the end result of a complex process of displacements and condensations? In the three consecutive versions of Pagnol's masterpiece, we thus observe the gradual ossification of the social comedy of mores into myth – in the reversal of the 'natural' order, the movement is *from* comedy to tragedy. The lesson is that it is not enough to say that today's myths are faked, unauthentic retro artefacts: the notion of a faked imitation of the myth should be radicalized into the notion that myth as such is afake.

The myth of postmodernity

This brings us back to the possibility of a mythical structure in modernity, when even philosophy itself becomes reflexive in two consecutive stages. First, with the Kantian critical turn, it loses its 'innocence' and incorporates the questioning of *its own* conditions of possibility. Then, with the 'postmodern' turn, philosophizing becomes 'experimental', no longer providing unconditional answers, but playing with different 'models', combining different approaches which take their own failure into account in advance – all we can properly formulate is the question, the enigma, while answers are simply failed attempts to fill in the gap of this enigma.

Perhaps the best illustration of the way this reflexivity affects our everyday experience of subjectivity is the universalized status of addiction: today, one can be 'addicted' to anything – not only to alcohol or drugs, but also to food, smoking, sex, work. . . . This universalization of addiction signifies the radical uncertainty of any subjective position today: there are no firm predetermined patterns, everything has to be (re)negotiated again and again. And this goes even as far as suicide. Albert Camus, in his otherwise hopelessly outdated *The Myth Of Sisyphus*, is right to emphasize that suicide is the only real philosophical problem – *when*, however, does it become so? Only in modern reflexive society, when life itself no longer 'goes by itself', as a 'non-marked' feature (to use the term developed by Roman Jakobson), but is 'marked', has to be especially motivated (which is why euthanasia is becoming acceptable). Prior to modernity, suicide was simply a sign of some pathological malfunction,

despair, misery. With reflexivization, however, suicide becomes an existential act, the outcome of a pure decision, irreducible to objective suffering or psychic pathology. This is the other side of Émile Durkheim's reduction of suicide to a social fact that can be quantified and predicted: the two moves, the objectivization/quantification of suicide and its transformation into a pure existential act, are strictly correlative."

How is myth affected by this process? It is perhaps more than a mere temporal coincidence that, at precisely the time when Sergei Eisenstein was developing (and practising) his notion of 'intellectual montage', of juxtaposing heterogeneous fragments in order to generate not a narrative continuum but a new meaning, T.S. Eliot did something quite similar in *The Waste Land*, juxtaposing fragments from different domains of common everyday life with fragments from old myths and works of art. The *Waste Land's* achievement was successfully to posit as the 'objective correlative' of the metaphysical feeling/atmosphere of universal decline, of the disintegration of the world, the twilight of civilization, fragments of banal everyday middle-class experience. These common fragments (pseudo-intellectual chitchat, pub conversation, the impression of a river, etc.) are suddenly 'transubstantiated' into the expression of a metaphysical malaise at a state which resembles Heidegger's *das Man*.¹² Here Eliot is the opposite of Wagner, who told his story of the Twilight of the Gods through larger-than-life mythical figures: Eliot discovered that the same basic story can be told much more effectively through fragments from the most common bourgeois everyday life.

Perhaps this marks the shift from late Romanticism to

modernism: late Romantics still thought that one must tell the big story of global decline in terms of larger-than-life heroic narrative, while modernism asserted the metaphysical potential of the most common and vulgar bits of our daily experience – and **perhaps**, **postmodernism** inverts modernism: one returns to big mythical themes, but they are deprived of their cosmic resonance and treated like common fragments to be manipulated; in short, in modernism we have fragments of common daily life expressing global metaphysical vision, while in **postmodernism** we have larger-than-life figures treated as **fragments** of common life.

I have played for some time with the idea of writing a *Cliff Notes* volume (a brief plot summary, description of characters, author's biography, etc.) on a nonexistent 'classic' text – this playing with an absent centre is still modernism, like Cindy Sherman's famous stills from non-existent black-and-white films. Postmodernism proper would have been the *opposite* procedure: that of imagining the whole narrative behind the painting (or photo), then writing a **play** or shooting a film about it. Something along these lines **did** happen recently in New York: Lynn Rosen's **play** *Nighthawks*, which opened on Off-Broadway in February 2000, offers **precisely** what its title promises: a series of scenes which bring to life four Edward Hopper paintings (*Summertime*, *Conference at Night*, *Sunlight in a Cafeteria* and, of course, *Nighthawks* itself), trying to imagine what conversation went on in the depicted scenes, and what brought these people together: anomie, isolation, failed encounters, desperate dreams. . . . In its breathtaking simplicity, even vulgarity this is **postmodernism** at its purest. This is not the same as the Spanish film from a couple

of years ago which tried to re-create the circumstances of the production of Velásquez's *Las Meninas*: here, it is not the circumstances of Hoppers process of painting but the fictional reality of the scene depicted in the painting that is elaborated and 'brought to life'. The point is not to render the genesis of a masterpiece, but naively to accept its content as depicting some social reality, and then to offer a wider slice of this reality.

This brings us to what is perhaps the archetypal postmodern procedure: that of filling in the gaps in classic texts. If modernism uses the myth as the interpretative frame of reference for its contemporary narrative, postmodernism directly rewrites the myth itself by filling in its gaps. In his short story 'You Must Remember This', Robert Coover describes in great detail, and in X-rated terms, what went on during the fateful three-and-a-half second fade-in in *Casablanca*, which follows the passionate embrace between Bergman and Bogart.¹³ And is today's reader-writer not exposed to the same temptation in Kleist's most famous short story, '*The Marquise of O—*', whose very first paragraph is shocking:

In M—, an important town in northern Italy, the widowed Marquise of O—, a lady of unblemished reputation and the mother of several well-brought-up children, inserted the following announcement in the newspapers: that she had, without knowledge of the cause, come to find herself in a certain situation; that she would like the father of the child she was expecting to disclose his identity to her; and that she was resolved, out of consideration for her family to marry him.¹⁴

The obscene shock of these lines relies on the heroine's overidentification with the moral code: she takes her obedience to sexual propriety to its ridiculous extreme. The heroine has no remembrance whatsoever of the sexual intercourse: there are no neurotic symptoms that would indicate its repression (since, as we know from Lacan, repression and the return of the repressed are one and the same thing); more than simply repressed, the fact of the intercourse is foreclosed. In *Men in Black*, the secret agents fighting the aliens have a small pencil-like flash machine which they use when non-authorized people encounter aliens: they flash this machine at them, and their memory of what happened to them in the past few minutes is completely erased (in order to spare them traumatic aftershocks). Is not something of the same order at work in the mechanism of *Verwerfung*? Is *Verwerfung* not a similar psychic machine? And is it not as if the Marquise of O— was submitted to a similar obliterating flash? This radical obliteration of the sexual intercourse is indicated by the famous dash in the middle of the sentence describing her ordeal: during the storming by Russian forces of a citadel commanded by her father, she has fallen into the hands of some ruffianly enemy troops who attempt to rape her; she is then rescued from them by the young Russian officer Count F— who, after saving her,

offered her his arm and led her into the other wing of the palace which the flames had not yet reached and where, having already been stricken speechless by her ordeal, she now collapsed in a dead faint. Then – the officer instructed the Marquise's frightened servants, who presently arrived, to

send for a doctor; he assured them that she would soon recover, replaced his hat and returned to the fighting.¹⁵

The dash between 'Then' and 'the officer', of course, plays exactly the same role as the three-and-a-half second shot of the airport tower at night, which follows Ilsa and Rick passionately embracing, and then dissolves back to a shot from outside the window of Rick's room. What happened (as is indicated already in this description by the curious detail of the Count 'replac[ing] his hat') is that the Count yielded to the sudden temptation offered by the Marquise's fainting fit. What follows the search through newspaper announcements is that the Count appears and offers to marry the Marquise, although she does not recognize in him her rapist, only her saviour. Later in the story, when his role in her pregnancy becomes clear, she still insists on marrying him, against the will of her parents, ready to recognize her saviour in the figure of her rapist – just as Hegel, at the end of his 'Preface' to *The Philosophy of Right*, following Luther, advises us to recognize the Rose (of hope and salvation) in the bothersome Cross of the present. The message of the story is the 'truth' of patriarchal society, expressed in the Hegelian speculative judgement that posits the identity of the rapist with the saviour whose function is to protect the woman from the rape – or, again in Hegelese, asserts how, in appearing to fighting an external force, the Subject struggles with itself, its own misrecognized Substance.

Where Kleist is already 'postmodern' is in his procedure of the ultra-orthodox subversion of the law through the very overidentification with it. The exemplary case, of course, is the long

novella *Michael Kohlhaas*, based on real sixteenth-century events: after suffering a minor injustice (two of his horses are maltreated by a local nobleman, the corrupt Baron von Tronka), Kohlhaas, a respected Saxon horse-dealer, starts an obstinate pursuit of justice; when, due to corruption, he fails in the courts, he takes the law into his own hands, organizes an armed gang and attacks and burns a series of castles and towns in which he suspects Tronka has taken refuge – all the time, he insists that he wants nothing more than rectification of his minor wrong.

In a paradigmatic dialectical reversal, Kohlhaas's very unconditional sticking to the rules, his *law-preserving violence*, turns into *law-making violence* (to use Walter Benjamin's classic opposition⁶): here the standard sequence is reversed – it is not the law-founding violence which, once its rule is established, becomes law-preserving; on the contrary, it is the very law-preserving violence which, brought to its extreme, turns into the violent founding of a new law. Once he becomes convinced that the very existing legal structure is corrupt, unable to stick to its own rules, he sends the symbolic register in an almost paranoid direction, **proclaiming** his intention to create a new 'world government' as the representative of Archangel Michael, and calling all good Christians to support his cause. (Although this story was written in 1810, a couple of years after Hegel's *Phenomenology*, it actually seems as if Kohlhaas, much more than Schiller's heroes, is the **paradigmatic** case of the **Hegelian** 'law of the heart and the frenzy of self-conceit'.)

At the end of the story, a strange reconciliation is achieved: Kohlhaas is sentenced to death, yet he accepts it calmly, because he has achieved his apparently trifling goal: the two horses are

returned to him in full health and glory, and Baron von Tronka is also sentenced to two years in prison. . . . This story of an excessive pursuit of justice by a 'stickler for the rules', with no understanding of the unwritten rules which **qualify** the application of the law, ends in crime: in a kind of legal equivalent to the so-called butterfly effect, a trifling trespass sets in motion the course of events which inflicts disproportionate damage on the whole country. No wonder Ernst Bloch characterized Kohlhaas as 'the Immanuel Kant of jurisprudence'.¹⁷

The James Bond films provide a symmetrical reversal of Kleist's two texts. On the one hand, most of them close with the same strangely utopian scene of the sexual act which is at the same time intimate and a shared collective experience: while Bond, finally alone and united with the woman, makes love to her, the couple's activity is observed (listened to or registered in some other – say, digital – way) by the big Other, embodied here by Bond's professional community (M, Miss Money Penny, Q, etc.); in the latest Bond film, APTED's *The World Is Not Enough* (1999), this act is nicely rendered as the warm blot on the satellite image – Q's replacement (John Cleese) discreetly turns off the computer screen, preventing others from satisfying their curiosity. Bond, who otherwise serves as the big Other (the ideal presupposed witness) for the Big Criminal, is here himself in need of the big Other: it is only these witnesses who 'make his sexual activity exist'. (Such a utopia of the sexual act acknowledged by the big Other of the community is evoked even by Adorno in *Minima Moralia*: Adorno reads the proverbial scene of the rich man who displays his young mistress in public, although he does not have sex with her, as a fantasy of fully emancipated

sex.¹⁸⁾ On the other hand, this very **ending** opens up a gap that calls for a postmodern rewriting. That is to say: the enigma of James Bond films is what happens in between, between this final bliss and the beginning of the *next* film, in which Bond is again called on by **M** to accomplish a mission? Perhaps *this* would be the postmodernist Bond film, a kind of boring existential drama of a relationship in decay: Bond **gradually** getting bored with his girl, small **figh**ts erupting; the girl wants marriage, while Bond is against it, and so on, so that Bond is finally relieved when the call from **M** enables him to escape a relationship that was becoming more and more suffocating.

Yet another way to conceptualize the opposition between modernism and postmodernism would be via the tension between myth and the 'narrative of a real story'. The paradigmatic modernist gesture is to stage a common everyday event in such a way that some mythical narrative resonates in it (the other obvious example, apart from *The Waste Land*, is, of course, Joyce's *Ulysses*); in popular literature, the same case can be made for the best Sherlock Holmes stories – they all contain clear mythical resonances.¹⁹ The postmodernist gesture would be the exact opposite: to stage the mythical narrative itself as an ordinary occurrence. So – either one recognizes, beneath what purports to be a straight realist narrative, the contours of a mythical frame (in recent cinema, the exemplary case is Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter*, with its references to the Pied Piper myth of the seducer of children), or one reads myth itself as a 'real story'.

This postmodern procedure, however, is very **risky** – Peter Schaffer's play *Equus* (later filmed with Richard Burton) provides what is perhaps the supreme example of the falsity I am

trying to denounce. The narrator of the drama, an elderly cynical psychiatrist who is interested in Ancient Greek myths, takes in treatment a young man who, in a desperate *passage à l'acte* by means of which he tried to resolve the deadlock of his libidinal situation, blinded with a sickle four highly prized racehorses he was taking care of as part of his job; the great moment of insight and truth occurs when the psychiatrist becomes aware of how, while he indulges in aseptic intellectual admiration of old Greek myths, there is before his very eyes a person whose present living experience enacts the compulsive sacrificial rituals that are the stuff of great myths – fascinated by old myths, he was blind to the actuality of a person whose everyday life *is* the sacred mythical experience. Why is this allegedly authentic insight false? Is it because it involves a kind of retroactive perspective illusion? Because there never is the full experience of the myth in the present – myth, a mythical framework, always, by definition, emerges as a memory, as the retroactive reconstitution of something which, when it 'actually took place', was simply a common vulgar play of passions?

The actual reasons for the falsity of *Eyuuus* are to be found elsewhere. *Equus* is a variation on the old topic of how, in our 'dry', alienated, 'disenchanted' contemporary lives, we have lost the full magic of the mythical experience of life. One of the fundamental features of artistic modernism proper, however, is to discern in the very process of modernization, in its violence, the return of barbaric, pre-civilized mythic patterns – in his reaction to the 1921 London performance of *The Rite of Spring*, T.S. Eliot praised Stravinsky's music for the way it metamorphosed 'the rhythm of the steppes into the scream of the motor horn, the

rattle of machinery, the grind of wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway, and other barbaric cries of modern life'.²⁰ In short, the underlying notion here is not that of the clash or gap between ancient rituals and myths and disenchanted modern behaviour, but the continuity between primitive barbarism and modernity. The idea is that industrial modernization, the chaotic crowd movements in big modern cities, and so on, all these features that symbolize the disintegration of the 'civilized' aristocratic or early bourgeois universe of refined customs, the dissolution of traditional links, harbinger a violent mythopoeic potential of their own – as is well known, the celebration of the return of barbaric mythopoeic violence in the process of modernization was one of the main themes of conservative modernism in the arts. The rise of the chaotic modern city crowds was perceived as undermining the hegemony of early bourgeois liberal-rationalist individualism in favour of a renewed barbaric religious aestheticization of social life – new sacred mass rituals are asserting themselves, enacting new forms of barbaric sacrifice.

The standard Marxist attitude to this process is double: on the one hand, it is easy for a Marxist to interpret this 'barbarization' as inherent to the capitalist violent dissolution of all traditional 'civilized' organic links – the idea that, because of the disintegrative, socially destructive impact of capitalism, the necessary form of expression of the capitalist development is ideological 'regression' to barbaric ritualized forms of social life; on the other hand, theorists like Adorno emphasize that this regression to the barbaric myth is a fake – what we are dealing with is no longer the authentic organic mythical life-form, but a manipulated myth, an

artificial fake masking its very opposite, the global reflexivization and rationalization of modern life.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the reflexivization and rationalization characteristic of modernization bring about their own new mode of opacity, which favours a quasi-mythical ideological experience. So the point of this re-mythologization is not simply that the external mythical framework is 'a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the intense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history', as Eliot himself put it apropos of Joyce's *Ulysses*, which structures a single day's experience of Leopold Bloom through reference to Homer's *Odyssey*.²¹ The point is, rather, a more radical one: the very chaotic violence of modern industrial life, dissolving traditional 'civilized' structures, is directly experienced as the return of the primordial mythopoeic barbaric violence 'repressed' by the armour of civilized customs. And perhaps this is what, in the final analysis, 'postmodernism' is: not so much something that follows modernism as, quite simply, its inherent *myth*.

Heidegger located the Greek breakthrough, the founding gesture of the 'West', in the overcoming of the pre-philosophical mythical 'Asiatic' universe: the greatest opposite of the West is 'the mythical in general and the Asiatic in particular'.²² However, this overcoming is not simply a leaving-behind of the mythical, but a constant struggle with(in) it: philosophy needs recourse to myth – not only for external reasons, in order to explain its conceptual teaching to the uneducated crowds, but inherently, to 'suture' its own conceptual edifice where it fails to reach its innermost core, from Plato's myth of the cave to

Freud's myth of the primordial father and Lacan's myth of *lamella*. Thus myth is the Real of logos: the foreign intruder, impossible to get rid of, incapable of remaining. That is the lesson of Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic Of Enlightenment*. Enlightenment always-already 'contaminates' mythical naive immediacy; Enlightenment itself is mythical, that is, its own founding gesture *repeats* the mythical operation. And what is postmodernity if not the ultimate defeat of the Enlightenment in its very triumph: when the dialectic of Enlightenment reaches its apogee, the dynamic, rootless postindustrial society directly generates its own myth.

'Thrift, thrift, Horatio!'

What, then, is the nature of the break of modernity? What gap or deadlock does myth endeavour to conceal? One is almost tempted to return to the old moralistic tradition: capitalism originates in the sin of thrift, of the miserly personality – the long-discredited Freudian notion of the 'anal character' and its link to capitalist accumulation gets an unexpected boost here. In *Hamlet* (Act I Scene 2), the unsavoury character of excessive thrift is precisely encapsulated:

Horatio. My lord, I came to see your father's funeral.

Hamlet. I pray thee, do not mock me, fellow-student;

I think it was to see my mother's wedding.

Horatio. Indeed, my lord, it follow'd hard upon.

Hamlet. Thrift, thrift, Horatio! the funeral bak'd meats

Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.

Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven
Or ever I had seen that day, Horatio!

The key point here is that 'thrift' designates not just a vague frugality, but a specific refusal to pay one's dues to the proper ritual of mourning: thrift (in this case, the double use of food) violates the *ritualvalue*, the one which, according to Lacan, Marx neglected in his account of value:

This term [thrift] is a *fitting* reminder that, in the accommodations worked out by modern society between use values and exchange values, there is *perhaps* something that has been overlooked in the *Marxian* analysis of economy, the dominant one for the thought of our time – something whose force and extent we feel at every moment: ritual values.²³

What, then, is the status of thrift as a *vice*?²⁴ In an Aristotelian frame of mind, it would be simple to locate thrift at the opposite extreme from *prodigality*, and then, of course, to construct some middle term – prudence, the art of moderate expenditure, avoiding both extremes – as the true virtue. The *paradox* of the Miser, however, is that *he makes an excess out of moderation itself*. That is to say: the standard description of desire focuses on its transgressive character: ethics (in the *premodern* sense of the 'art of living') is ultimately the ethics of moderation, of resisting the urge to go beyond certain limits, of a resistance against desire which is, by definition, transgressive – sexual passion which consumes me totally; gluttony; destructive passion which does not stop even at murder. . . . In contrast to this transgressive notion of desire, the

Miser invests moderation itself with desire (and thus with a **qual-**ity of excess): don't spend, economize; retain instead of letting go – all the proverbial 'anal' qualities. And it is only *this* desire, the very anti-desire, that is desire *par excellence*.

The use of the Hegelian notion of 'oppositional determination [*gegensätzliche Bestimmung*]'²⁵ is fully justified here: Marx claimed that in the series production–distribution–exchange–consumption, the term 'production' is doubly inscribed; it is simultaneously one of the terms in the series and the structuring principle of the entire series: in production as one of the terms of the series, production (as the structuring principle) 'encounters itself in its oppositional determination', as Marx put it, using the precise Hegelian term. And the same goes for desire: there are different species of desire (that is to say, of the excessive attachment that undermines the pleasure principle); among these species, desire 'as such' encounters itself in its 'oppositional determination in the guise of the Miser and his thrift, the very opposite of the transgressive action of desire. Lacan made this clear apropos of Molière:

The object of fantasy, image and **pathos**, is that other element that takes the place of what the subject is symbolically deprived of. Thus the imaginary object is in a position to condense in itself the virtues or the dimension of being and to become that veritable delusion of being [*leurre de l'être*] that Simone Weil treats when she focuses on the very densest and most opaque relationship of a man to the object of his desire: the relationship of Molière's Miser to his strongbox. This is the culmination of the fetish character of the object in human

desire. . . . The opaque character of the object a in the imaginary fantasy determines it in its most pronounced forms as the pole of perverse desire.²⁷

So, if we want to fathom the mystery of desire, we should not focus on the lover or the murderer in the thrall of their passion, ready to stake anything and everything for it, but on the Miser's attitude towards his chest, the secret place where he keeps and gathers his possessions. The mystery, of course, is that, in the Figure of the Miser, excess coincides with lack, power with impotence, avaricious hoarding with the elevation of the object into the prohibited/untouchable Thing one can only observe, never fully enjoy. Is not the ultimate Miser's aria Bartolo's 'A un dottor della mia sorte' from Act I of Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*? Its obsessive madness perfectly expresses the fact that he is totally indifferent to the prospect of having sex with the young Rosina – he wants to marry her in order to possess and guard her, just as a miser possesses his **strongbox**.²⁸ In more philosophical terms, the paradox of the Miser is that he unites two incompatible ethical traditions: the Aristotelian ethics of moderation and the Kantian ethics of an unconditional demand that derails the pleasure principle' – the Miser elevates the maxim of moderation itself into a Kantian unconditional demand. Thus the very sticking to the rule of moderation, the very avoidance of excess, generates an excess – a surplus-enjoyment – of its own.

The advent of capitalism, however, has subtly altered this logic: the capitalist is no longer the lone Miser who clings to his hidden treasure, taking a secret peek at it when he is alone,

behind securely locked doors, but the subject who accepts the basic paradox that the only way to preserve and multiply one's treasure is to spend it. Here Juliet's formula of love from the balcony scene ('the more I give, the more I have') undergoes a perverse twist – is this formula not also the very formula of the capitalist venture? The more the capitalist invests (and borrows in order to invest), the more he has, so that at the end of the day, we get a purely virtual capitalist à la Donald Trump, whose cash 'net worth' is practically zero, or even negative, yet who is considered 'wealthy' because of the prospect of future profits. So – back to the Hegelian 'oppositional determination' – capitalism, in a way, turns around the notion of thrift as the oppositional determination (the form of appearance) of yielding to desire (that is, consuming the object): the genus here is avarice, while excessive limitless consumption is avarice itself in its form of appearance (oppositional determination).

This basic paradox enables us to generate even phenomena like the most elementary marketing strategy, which is to appeal to the consumer's thrift: is not the ultimate message of advertising slots 'Buy this, spend more, and *you will economize*, you will get extra free!?' Take the proverbial male-chauvinist image of the wife who comes home from a shopping spree and informs her husband: 'I've just saved us two hundred dollars! Although I wanted to buy **only** one jacket, I bought three, and got a two-hundred-dollar discount!' The embodiment of this surplus is the toothpaste tube whose last third is differently coloured, with 'YOU GET **30% FREE!**' in large letters – in such a situation I am always tempted to say: 'OK then, give me only this free **30** per cent of the toothpaste!' In capitalism, the *definition* of

the 'proper price' is a *discount* price. The worn-out designation 'consumer society' thus holds only if one conceives of consumption as the mode of appearance of its very opposite, thrift.²⁹

Here, we should return to *Hamlet* and to ritual value: ritual is ultimately the ritual of sacrifice which opens up the space for generous consumption – after we have sacrificed to the gods the innermost parts of the slaughtered animal (heart, intestines), we are free to enjoy a *hearty* meal of the remaining meat. Instead of enabling free consumption without sacrifice, the modern 'total economy' which wants to dispense with this 'superfluous' ritualized sacrifice generates the paradoxes of thrift – there is *no* generous consumption; consumption is allowed only in so far as it functions as the form of appearance of its opposite. And was not Nazism precisely a desperate attempt to restore ritual value to its proper place through the Holocaust, that gigantic sacrifice to the 'obscure gods', as Lacan put it in *Seminar XI*?³⁰ Quite appropriately, the sacrificed object was the Jew, the very embodiment of the capitalist paradoxes of thrift. Fascism is to be situated in the series of attempts to counter this capitalist logic: apart from the Fascist corporatist attempt to 're-establish the balance' by cutting off the excess embodied in the 'Jew', we could mention the different versions of the attempt to restore the premodern sovereign gesture of pure expenditure – recall the figure of the *junkie*, the only true 'subject of consumption', the only one who consumes himself utterly, to his very death, in his unbound *jouissance*.³¹

Agape

How, then, are we to break out of the deadlock of thrifty consumption, if these two exits are false? Perhaps it is the Christian notion of **agape** that shows us the way out: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not **perish** but have eternal life' (John 3: 16). How, exactly, are we to conceive of this basic tenet of the Christian **faith**?³² Problems emerge the moment we comprehend this 'giving of his one and only Son' – the death of Christ – as a sacrificial gesture in the exchange between God and man. If we claim that, **by** sacrificing that which is most precious to him, his own son, God redeems humanity ransoming its sins, then there are ultimately only two ways to explain this act: either God himself demands this retribution – that is to say, Christ sacrifices himself as the representative of humanity to satisfy the retributive need of God his father – or God is not omnipotent – that is to say, he is subordinated to a higher Destiny, like a Greek tragic hero: his act of creation, like the fateful deed of a Greek hero, brings about dire unwanted consequences, and the only way for him to re-establish the balance of Justice is to sacrifice what is most precious to him, his own Son – in this sense, God himself is the ultimate Abraham. The fundamental **problem** of **Christology** is how to avoid these two readings of Christ's sacrifice which impose themselves as obvious:

Any idea that God 'needs' reparation either from us or from our representative should be banished, as should the idea that there is some kind of moral order which is above

God and to which God must conform by requiring reparation.³³

The problem, of course, is *how exactly* to avoid these two options, when the very wording of the Bible seems to support their common premisses: Christ's act is repeatedly designated as 'ransom' by the words of Christ himself, by other biblical texts, and by the most eminent commentators on the Bible. Jesus himself says that he came 'to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10: 45); Timothy 2: 5–6 speaks of Christ as the 'mediator between God and humanity. . . who gave his life as a ransom for all'; St Paul himself, when he states that Christians are slaves who have been 'bought at a price' (I Corinthians 6: 20), implies that the death of Christ should be conceived as purchasing our freedom.

So we have a Christ who, through his suffering and death, pays the price for setting us free, redeeming us from the burden of sin; if, then, we have been liberated from enslavement to sin and the fear of death through the death and resurrection of Christ, *who demanded this price? To whom* was the ransom paid? Some early Christian writers, clearly perceiving this problem, proposed a logical, albeit heretical, solution: since Christ's sacrifice delivered us from the power of the Devil (Satan), then Christ's death was the price God had to pay to the Devil, our 'owner' when we live in sin, so that the Devil would set us free. Again, that is the deadlock: if Christ is offered as a sacrifice to God himself, the question arises: why did God exact this sacrifice? Was he still the cruel jealous God who demanded a heavy price for his reconciliation with humanity, which had betrayed

him? If the sacrifice of Christ was offered to someone else (the Devil), then we get the strange spectacle of God and the Devil as partners in an exchange.

Of course, Christ's sacrificial death is easy to 'understand', there is a tremendous 'psychological force' in this act. When we are haunted by the notion that things are fundamentally wrong, and that we are ultimately responsible for this – that there is some deep flaw inherent to the very existence of humanity, that we are burdened with a tremendous guilt which we can never properly assuage – the idea of God, the absolutely innocent Being, sacrificing himself for our sins out of infinite love for us, and thus relieving us of our guilt, serves as proof that we are not alone, that we *matter* to God, that he *cares* for us, that we are protected by the Creator's infinite Love, while at the same time infinitely indebted to him. So Christ's sacrifice serves as the eternal reminder and incitement to lead an ethical life – whatever we do, we should always remember that God himself gave his life for us. . . . Such an account, however, is obviously inadequate, since one has to explain this act in *inherent* theological terms, not in terms of **psychological** mechanisms. The enigma remains, and even the most sophisticated theologians (like Anselm of Canterbury) tended to regress to the trap of legalism. According to Anselm, when there is sin and guilt, there has to be a satisfaction: something has to be done by which the offence caused by human sin will be purged. However, humanity itself is not strong enough to provide this necessary satisfaction – only God can do it. The only solution, therefore, is the Incarnation, the emergence of a God–man, of a person who is simultaneously fully divine and fully human: as God, he has the *ability* to provide the

required satisfaction; as a man, he is under an *obligation* to provide it.³⁴

The **problem** with this solution is that the legalistic notion of the inexorable character of the need to pay for sin (the offence must be compensated for) is not argued, but **simply** accepted – the question here is a very naive one: why does God not forgive us *directly*? Why must he obey the need to pay for sin? Is not the basic tenet of Christianity precisely the opposite one: the suspension of this legalistic logic of retribution, the idea that through the miracle of conversion a New Beginning is **possible**, through which past debts (sins) are simply erased? Following an apparently similar line, but with a radical change of emphasis, Karl **Barth** provides a tentative answer in his essay on 'The Judge Judged in Our Place': God as a Judge first **passed** a judgement on **humanity**, and then became a human being and **paid** the price himself, took the punishment upon himself, 'in order that in this way there might be brought about **by** him our reconciliation with him, and our conversion to **him**'.³⁵ So – to put it in somewhat inappropriate terms – God became man and sacrificed himself in order to set the ultimate example that would evoke our sympathy for him, and thus convert us to him. This idea was first clearly articulated **by** Abelard: 'The Son of God took our nature, and in it took upon himself to teach us **by** both word and example even to the point of death, thus binding us to himself through **love**'.³⁶

Here, the reason Christ had to suffer and die is not the legalistic notion of retribution, but the **edifying** religious-moral effect of his death on us, sinful humans: if God were to **pardon** us directly, this would not transform us, making us new, better men – **only** the compassion and feeling of **gratitude** and debt

elicited by the scene of Christ's sacrifice have the necessary power to transform us. . . . It is easy to see that something is amiss in this reasoning: is this not a strange God who sacrifices his own Son, what matters most to him, just to impress humans? Things become even more uncanny if we focus on the idea that God sacrificed his Son in order to bind us to himself through Love: what was at stake, then, was not only God's love for us, but also his (narcissistic) desire to *be loved* by us humans – in this reading, is not God himself strangely akin to the mad governess from Patricia Highsmith's 'Heroine', who sets the family house on fire in order to be able to prove her devotion to the family by bravely saving the children from the raging flames? Along these lines, God first causes the Fall (that is, provokes a situation in which we need him) and then redeems us (pulls us out of the mess for which he himself is responsible).

Does this mean, then, that Christianity is a flawed religion? Or is a different reading of the Crucifixion feasible? The first step out of this predicament is to recall Christ's statements, which disturb – or, rather, *simply suspend* – the circular logic of revenge or punishment destined to re-establish the balance of Justice: instead of '**An** eye for an eye!', we get 'If someone slaps your right cheek, turn to him your left cheek also!' The point here is not stupid masochism, humble acceptance of one's humiliation, but the endeavour to *interrupt the circular logic of the re-established balance of justice*. Along the same lines, Christ's sacrifice, with its paradoxical nature (it is the very person *against whom* we humans have sinned, whose trust we have betrayed, who atones and pays the price for our sins), *suspends* the logic of sin and punishment, of legal or ethical retribution, of 'settling

accounts', **by** bringing it to the point of self-relating. The only way to achieve this suspension, to break the chain of crime and **punishment/retribution**, is to assume an utter readiness for **self-erasure**. And love, at its most elementary, is nothing but such a paradoxical gesture of breaking the chain of retribution. So the second step is to focus on the terrifying force of someone accepting in advance, and pursuing, his own annihilation – Christ was not sacrificed **by** and for another, he sacrificed himself.

The third step is to focus on the notion of Christ as mediator between God and humanity: in order for humanity to be restored to God, the mediator must sacrifice himself. In other words, as long as Christ is there, there can be no Holy Spirit, which is the figure of the reunification of God and humanity. Christ as mediator between God and humanity is – to put it in today's deconstructionist terms – the condition of possibility *and* the condition of impossibility between the two: as mediator, he is at the same time the obstacle which prevents the full mediation of the opposed poles. Or – to put it in the Hegelian terms of the Christian syllogism – there are two '**premisses**' (Christ is **God's** Son, fully Divine, and Christ is man's son, **fully** human), and to unite the opposed **poles**, to reach the 'conclusion' (humanity is fully united with God in the Holy Spirit), the mediator must erase himself from the picture.

Christ's death is not part of the eternal cycle of Divine incarnation and death, in which God repeatedly appears and then withdraws into himself, in his Beyond. As **Hegel** put it, what dies on the Cross is not the human incarnation of the transcendent God, but the *God of Beyond himself*. Through Christ's sacrifice, God himself is no longer beyond, but passes into the Holy Spirit

(of the religious community). In other words, if Christ were to be the mediator between two separate entities (God and humanity), his death would mean that there was no longer a mediation, that the two entities are apart again. So, obviously, God must be the mediator in a stronger sense: it is not that, in the Holy Spirit, there is no longer the need for Christ, because the two poles are directly united; for this mediation to be possible, *the nature of both poles must be radically changed* – that is to say, they must both undergo a transubstantiation in one and the same movement. On the one hand, Christ is the vanishing mediator/medium through whose death God the Father himself 'passes into' the Holy Spirit; on the other hand, he is the vanishing mediator/medium through whose death the human community itself 'passes into' the new spiritual stage.

These two operations are not separate; they are two aspects of one and the same movement: the very movement through which God loses the character of a transcendent Beyond and passes into the Holy Spirit (the spirit of the community of believers) *equals* the movement through which the 'fallen' human community is elevated into the Holy Spirit. In other words, it is not that, in the Holy Spirit, men and God communicate directly, without Christ's mediation; rather, *they* directly coincide – God is *nothing but* the Holy Spirit of the community of believers. Christ has to die not in order to enable direct communication between God and humanity, but because *there is no longer any transcendent God with whom to communicate*.

As Boris Groys said recently,³⁷ Christ is the first and only fully 'ready-made God' in the history of religion: he is fully human, and thus indistinguishable from any other ordinary

man – there is nothing in his **physical** appearance that makes him a special case. So, just as Duchamp's *pissoir* or bicycle are objects of art not because of their inherent **qualities**, but because of the place they are made to occupy, Christ is God not because of his inherent 'Divine' qualities but because, precisely as fully human, he is God's son. For this reason, the **properly** Christian attitude to Christ's death is not one of melancholic attachment to his deceased person, but one of infinite joy: the ultimate horizon of pagan Wisdom is melancholy – ultimately, everything returns to dust, so one must learn to disengage oneself, to renounce desire – while if there was ever a religion that is not melancholic, it is Christianity, despite the deceptive appearance of the melancholic attachment to Christ as the lost object.

So Christ's sacrifice is, in a radical sense, **meaningless**: not an act of exchange, but a superfluous, excessive, unwarranted gesture aimed at demonstrating his love for us, for fallen humanity – just as when, in our daily lives, we want to show someone that we really love them, and we can do it only **by** accomplishing a superfluous gesture of expenditure. Christ does not '**pay**' for our sins – as St Paul made clear, it is this very logic of payment, of exchange, that, in a way, is the sin, and the wager of Christ's act is to show us that the chain of exchange can be interrupted. Christ redeems humanity not **by** paying the price for our sins, but **by** showing us that we can break **out** of the vicious cycle of sin and payment. Instead of paying for our sins, Christ literally erases them, retroactively 'undoes' them through love.

It is against this background that one should measure the radical difference which, despite superficial resemblances, separates Christianity from **Buddhism**.³⁸ Although both Christianity and

Buddhism assert the individual's ability to establish direct contact with the Absolute (the Void, the Holy Spirit), bypassing the hierarchical structure of cosmos and society, Buddhism remains indebted to the pagan notion of the Great Chain of Being: even the most heroic person among us is like Gulliver, whom the Lilliputians tied down with hundreds of ropes – that is to say, we cannot escape the consequences of our past acts; they trail behind us like shadows, and sooner or later they catch up with us: we have to pay the price. That is the kernel of the properly pagan tragic vision of life: our very existence is ultimately the proof of our sin, something we should feel guilty about, something that disturbs the cosmic balance; and we pay the price for it in our ultimate annihilation, when 'dust returns to dust'. What is of crucial importance here is that this pagan notion involves the short circuit, the overlap between the 'ontological' and 'ethical' dimensions, best expressed in the Greek word for causality [*aitia*]: 'to cause something' also means 'to be guilty/responsible for it'. Against this pagan horizon, the Christian 'Good News (Gospel)' is that it is possible to suspend the burden of the past, to cut the ropes which tie us to our past deeds, to wipe the slate and begin again from zero. There is no supranatural magic involved here: this liberation simply means the separation between the 'ontological' and the 'ethical' dimensions: the Great Chain of Being can be broken on the ethical level; sins can not only be pardoned, but also retroactively erased with no traces left: a New Beginning is possible.

The properly dialectical paradox of paganism is that it legitimizes social hierarchy ('everyone/everything in his/her/its own place') by reference to a notion of the universe in which all

differences are ultimately rendered worthless, in which every determinate being ultimately disintegrates into the primordial Abyss out of which it emerged. In a symmetrical contrast, Christianity predicates equality and direct access to universality precisely through asserting the most radical Difference/Rupture. That is the gap that separates Christianity from Buddhism: according to Buddhism, we can achieve liberation from our past deeds, but this liberation is possible only through radical renunciation of (what we perceive as) reality, through liberating ourselves from the very impetus/thriving ('desire') that defines life, through extinguishing its spark and immersing ourselves in the primordial Void of Nirvana, in the formless One—All. There is no liberation in life, since in this life (and there is no other) we are always enslaved to the craving that defines it: what we are now (a king, a beggar, a fly, a lion . . .) is determined by our acts in our previous lives, and after our death, the consequences of our present life will determine the character of our next reincarnation. In contrast to Buddhism, Christianity puts its wager on the possibility of the radical Rupture, of breaking the Great Chain of Being, already in *this* life, while we are still fully alive. And the new community founded on this Rupture is the living body of Christ.

The enigma of/in the Other

How does Judaism stand with regard to this opposition between paganism and Christianity? There is an overwhelming argument for the intimate link between Judaism and psychoanalysis: in both cases, the focus is on the *traumatic encounter with the abyss of the*

desiring Other – the Jewish people's encounter with their God, whose impenetrable Call throws off the rails the routine of everyday human existence; the child's encounter with the enigma of the Other's *jouissance*. This feature seems to distinguish the Jewish-psychoanalytic 'paradigm' not only from any version of paganism and Gnosticism (with their emphasis on inner spiritual self-purification, on virtue as the realization of one's innermost potential) but no less so also from Christianity – does not Christianity 'overcome' the Otherness of the Jewish God through the principle of Love, the reconciliation/unification of God and Man in the becoming-man of God?

As for the basic opposition between paganism and the Jewish break, it is definitely well founded: both paganism and Gnosticism (the reinscription of the Jewish-Christian stance back into paganism) emphasize the 'inner journey' of spiritual self-purification, the return to one's true Inner Self, the self's 'rediscovery', in clear contrast to the Jewish-Christian notion of an *external* traumatic encounter (the Divine Call to the Jewish people; God's call to Abraham; inscrutable Grace – all totally incompatible with our 'inherent' qualities, even with our 'natural' innate ethics). Kierkegaard was right here: it is Socrates versus Christ, the inner journey of remembrance versus rebirth through the shock of the external encounter. That is also the ultimate gap that forever separates Freud from Jung: while Freud's original insight concerns the traumatic external *encounter* of the Thing that embodies *jouissance*, Jung reinscribes the topic of the unconscious into the standard Gnostic problematic of the inner spiritual journey of self-discovery.

With Christianity, however, things get complicated. In his

'general theory of seduction', Jean **Laplanche** provided an unrivalled formulation of the encounter with the unfathomable Otherness as the fundamental fact of the **psychoanalytic experience**.³⁹ It is **Laplanche** himself, however, who insists here on the absolute necessity of the move from the enigma *of* to the enigma *in* – a clear variation on **Hegel's** famous dictum apropos of the Sphinx: 'The enigmas of the Ancient Egyptians were also enigmas for the Egyptians themselves':

when one speaks, to take up Freud's terms, of the enigma of femininity (what is woman?), I propose with Freud to move to the function of the enigma *in* femininity (what does a woman want?). In the same way (but Freud does not make this move), what he terms the enigma of the taboo takes us back to the function of the enigma in the taboo. And still more so, the enigma of mourning takes us to the function of the enigma in mourning: what does the dead person want? What does he want of me? What did he want to say to me?

The enigma leads back, then, to the otherness of the other; and the otherness of the other is his response to his unconscious, that is to say, to his otherness to **himself**.⁴⁰

Is it not crucial to accomplish this move also apropos of the notion of *Dieu obscur*, of the elusive, impenetrable God: this God must also be impenetrable to himself; he must have a dark side, an Otherness in himself, something that is in himself more than himself? Perhaps this accounts for the shift from Judaism to Christianity: Judaism remains on the level of the enigma *Of* God,

while Christianity moves to the enigma *in* God Himself. Far from being opposed to the notion of logos as the Revelation *in/through* the Word, Revelation and the enigma in God are strictly correlative, two aspects of one and the same gesture. That is to say: it is *precisely* because God is also an enigma *in and for himself*, because he has an unfathomable Otherness in himself, that Christ had to emerge to reveal God not only to humanity but *to God himself* – it is only through Christ that God fully actualizes himself as God.

Along the same lines, one should also oppose the fashionable thesis on how our intolerance towards the external (ethnic, sexual, religious) Other is the expression of an allegedly 'deeper'¹ intolerance towards the repressed or disavowed Otherness in ourselves: we hate or attack strangers because we cannot come to terms with the stranger within ourselves. . . . Against this topos (which, in a Jungian way, 'internalizes' the traumatic relationship to the Other into the subject's inability to accomplish his 'inner journey' of fully coming to terms with what he is), one should emphasize that the truly radical Otherness is not the Otherness in ourselves, the 'stranger in our heart', but the Otherness of the Other itself to itself. It is only within this move that properly Christian love can emerge: as Lacan emphasized again and again, love is always love for the Other in so far as he is lacking – we love the Other *because* of his limitations. The radical conclusion from this is that, if God is to be loved, he must be *imperfect*, inconsistent in himself; there has to be something 'in him more than himself'.

What, then, about Laplanche's criticism of Lacan? Laplanche is fully justified in emphasizing how the traumatic intrusion of

the Other's enigmatic message enables us to break the epistemological gridlock between determinism and hermeneutics. On the one hand, theoretical orientations as opposed as hermeneutics and Cultural Studies anti-essentialist discursive constructionism share the notion of the Unconscious as retroactively constituted through the very gesture of its interpretation: there is no substantial 'unconscious', there are just retroactive rewritings of the 'narratives that we are'. On the other hand, there is the determinist notion of some pre-symbolic Real (either the raw fact of the seduction scene, or the biological Real of instincts) which is causally responsible for the subject's development. Psychoanalysis points us towards a third way: the causality of the traumatic encounter, of the subject exposed to the enigmatic sexualized message from the Other, the message which he tries in vain to internalize, to unravel its meaning, so that there forever remains an excessive hard kernel, the inner Thing that resists translation. In short, while there is something, some hard kernel, which resists symbolization, this kernel is not the immediate Real of instinctual or some other kind of causality, but the Real of an indigestible traumatic encounter, of an enigma that resists symbolization. And not only is this Real not opposed to freedom – it is its very condition. The shocking impact of being affected/'seduced' by the enigmatic message of the Other derails the subject's *automaton*, opens up a gap which the subject is free to fill in with his (ultimately failed) endeavours to symbolize it. Freedom is ultimately *nothing but* the space opened up by the traumatic encounter, the space to be filled in by its contingent/inadequate symbolizations/translations. As such, this encounter of the enigmatic message, of a signifier without signi-

fied, is the 'vanishing mediator' between determinism and hermeneutics: it is the ex-timate kernel of signification – by breaking the determinist causal chain, it opens up the space For signification(s):

With the concept of *enigma*, a break in determinism appears: to the extent that the originator of the enigmatic message is unaware of most of what he means, and to the extent that the child possesses only inadequate and imperfect ways to configure or theorize about what is communicated to him, there can be no linear causality between the parental unconscious and discourse on the one hand and what the child does with these on the other. All the Lacanian formulae on the unconscious as 'discourse of the Other,' or the child as 'symptom of the parents,' disregard the break, the profound reshaping, which occurs between the two, and which may be likened to a metabolism that breaks down food into its constituent parts and reassembles them into a completely different entity.⁴²

This critique holds for the 'structuralist' Lacan, the Lacan who liked to emphasize that

it is the specific law of [the symbolic] chain which governs those psychoanalytic effects that are decisive for the subject: such as Foreclosure, repression, denial itself – specifying with appropriate emphasis that these effects follow so faithfully the displacement of the signifier that imaginary factors, despite their inertia, figure only as shadows and reflections in the process.⁴³

Within this inexorable logic of the symbolic automatism in which the big Other 'runs the show', and the subject is merely 'spoken', there is definitely no room for any break in determinism. However, the moment Lacan shifts the emphasis on the 'barred' (inconsistent, lacking) big Other, on the question emerging from the Other ('Che vuoi?'), it is precisely this enigma which emerges, an Other with Otherness in itself. Suffice it to recall the 'translation' of the desire of the mother into the **Name-of-the-Father**.⁴⁴ Lacan's name for the enigmatic message is the desire of the mother – the unfathomable desire the child discerns in the maternal caressing. The mark of misleading 'introductions to Lacan' is to conceive of the ensuing symbolic **paternal** function as the intruder who disturbs the imaginary symbiotic bliss of the mother–child dyad, introducing into it the order of (symbolic) **prohibitions**, that is, the symbolic order as such. Against this misperception, one should insist that 'father' for Lacan is not the name of a traumatic intrusion, but the *solution* to the deadlock of such an intrusion, the answer to the enigma. The enigma, of course, is the enigma of the (m)other's desire (what does she really want, above and beyond *me*, since I am obviously not enough for her?); and 'father' is the *answer* to this enigma, the *symbolization* of this deadlock. In this precise sense, 'father' is for Lacan a translation **and/or** a symptom: a compromise solution that alleviates the unbearable anxiety of directly confronting the Void of the Other's desire.⁴⁵

2 Hitler as Ironist?

*in which, as well as finding out what was in **Adolf Hitler's** mind when he was planning and committing his heinous crimes, the reader will also discover why we, today, show our respect for the victims of the Holocaust by laughter*

Was the Holocaust diabolical Evil?

If one asks the naive question 'What was on Hitler's mind when he acted so cruelly against the Jews?', one can sort the answers into four levels which perfectly fit the four levels of allegorical reading already elaborated in medieval hermeneutics:⁴⁶

- First, there is the notion of pure, primitive hatred: Hitler hated the Jews in his guts, viscerally, and his 'theoretical' foundations were mere secondary rationalizations of this 'irrational' attitude, which dominated him beyond his conscious control.
- Then there is the notion of Hitler as a 'mountebank', a conscious manipulator who feigned his hatred for the Jews, and other political convictions, simply in order to attain power, his only true goal.
- Then there is the notion that Hitler and his inner circle of collaborators were 'sincerely' convinced that the Jews were evil, and that they were annihilating them for the good of the Aryan race and of humanity as such. Even the fact that some of the executioners were ashamed of their acts, and the need to conceal them from the public, can be reconciled with this 'sincerity': they believed that the majority of Germans were

not yet fully aware of the necessity of the harsh measures (extermination of the Jews) which would secure their future – this was the line adopted by Himmler in his infamous speech to the special SS troops in 1943. The myth of betrayal, Hitler's ultimate, founding lie, also fits into this frame: the notion that the German army was far from defeated in autumn 1918 – it was the 'November Criminals', the corrupted (mostly Jewish) politicians, who signed the surrender of November 1918. The truth, of course, was that in autumn 1918 the German armies were collapsing, Germany's borders were about to be overrun; the generals who later claimed to be on the verge of victory before being stabbed in the back were actually eager for the politicians to save them from the public humiliation of military defeat by making some deal that would permit the generals to march home at the head of their troops rather than fleeing ignominiously. The generals forced the politicians to do the deal to save face for them, then stabbed the politicians in the back by claiming that they had been betrayed. It was this lie that created Hitler: at that moment, Hitler had a total physical and mental collapse, unable to accept the national catastrophe; he found a solution in a hallucinatory summons – a visionary voice told him that this defeat resulted from the politicians' stab in the back, and that his mission was to remedy this betrayal.

- Finally, there is the notion of Hitler as a demonic 'artist of evil', who pursued the annihilation of the Jews not *in spite of* its evil character (this brings us back to the second level), but *because of* its evil character. The fundamental argument against the 'sincerity' of the Nazi belief is their treatment of the Jews before their physical annihilation: in a torturous process of

physical and mental humiliation, they first deprived them of their human dignity, reducing them to a subhuman level, and only *then* killed them. In this way, they implicitly acknowledged the humanity of the Jews: while they claimed that the Jews were in fact like rats or vermin, they first had to reduce them brutally to that status. This cynicism is supremely expressed in a Nazi documentary about the Jews, which shows as the proof of their subhuman status shots of the way they lived in dirt and decay in the Warsaw ghetto – that is to say, in the very horror that the Nazis themselves had created. A further proof is provided by the multitude of practices which added the ironic insult to injury: the bands playing while the Jews marched to the gas chambers or to work, the notorious 'Arbeit macht frei!' inscription above the entrance to Auschwitz, and so on – unmistakable signs that the 'final solution' was carried out as a gigantic joke which submitted the victims to a supplementary act of gratuitous, cruel and ironic humiliation. The awareness of some executioners that they were doing something horrible and shameful, which should be kept out of the public eye, also fits this level: the very awareness that what they were doing was an act of transgression of the minimal standards of decency not only established between the perpetrators a secret bond of solidarity but provided the supplementary obscene *jouissance* – isn't it satisfying to do such horrible things under cover of sacrificing oneself for one's country?

The strange thing about these four answers is that although they are mutually exclusive, each of them is, in a way, utterly

convincing. To resolve this deadlock, one should first qualify the second option: what if Hitler was a fake manipulator who none the less *got caught up in his own game* – who started to believe his own faked *myth*? Even a superficial reading of *Mein Kampf* leaves us perplexed when we try to answer a simple question: does Hitler believe himself or not? The only consistent answer is: *both yes and no*. On the one hand, it is clear that Hitler consciously 'manipulates': sometimes – say, when he emphasizes how, in order to dominate the crowds and arouse their passions, one should present them with a simplified image of the one great Enemy on whom all the blame is put – he even directly shows his cards. On the other hand, it is no less clear that he gets passionately immersed in his own deception.

Once we admit this paradox, we can combine it with the fourth option: Hitler as his own 'revisionist', that is, an ironist almost in the Rortyan sense, for whom the 'final solution' was a cruel aesthetic joke accomplished just for the sake of it, not for any external goal like power, and thus fitting the Kantian notion of 'diabolical Evil'. The line that divides these two options is less clear than it may appear: the solution to this paradox is that while Hitler considered himself the ultimate ironist, he was unaware of how thoroughly he was caught up in his own game. The danger of playing such games of 'what was going on in Hitler's mind', however, is that they come dangerously close to what Lacan called the 'temptation of the sacrifice' – nowhere is it more urgent to resist this temptation than apropos of the Holocaust.

The sacrificial gesture does not simply aim at some profitable exchange with the Other to whom we sacrifice: its more basic

aim is, rather, to ascertain that there is some Other out there who is able to **reply** (or not) to our sacrificial entreaties. Even if the Other does not grant my wish, I can at least be sure that there is an Other who next time, maybe, will respond differently: the world out there, inclusive of all the catastrophes that may befall me, is not a blind meaningless automaton, but a partner in a possible dialogue, so that even a catastrophic outcome is to be read as a meaningful response, not as a realm of blind chance. It is against this background that one should read the desperate need of the Holocaust historians to isolate a determinate cause, or to read some meaning into the Holocaust: when **they** seek some 'perverse' pathology in Hitler's sexuality what they are actually afraid of is that **they** will find *nothing* – that Hitler, on the private, intimate level, was a person just like any other – such a result makes his monstrous crimes even more horrifying and uncanny. And, along the same lines, when researchers desperately seek a secret *meaning* of the Holocaust, anything (including heretically asserting that God himself is diabolical) is better than acknowledging that an ethical catastrophe of such proportions could have occurred without a purpose, just as a blind effect.

Claude Lanzmann's prohibition against questioning the causes of the Holocaust is often misunderstood – there is no contradiction, for example, between his prohibition of 'Why?' and his statement that the Holocaust was not an indecipherable enigma. The point of Lanzmann's prohibition is not theological; it is not the same as, say, the religious prohibition against probing into the mystery of the origins of life and conception – this latter prohibition is caught in the paradox of **prohibiting** the impossible, of 'You shouldn't, because you can't!'. When Catholics, for

example, claim that one should not pursue **biogenetic** explorations, because humanity cannot be reduced to the interaction between genes and the environment, the underlying, unavowed fear is that if one were to pursue these explorations to the end, one would none the less achieve the impossible, that is, reduce the specific spiritual dimension to a biological mechanism. Lanzmann, on the contrary, does not prohibit exploration of the Holocaust because the Holocaust is a mystery whose secret is best left in the dark: the point is, rather, that there is no secret mystery of the Holocaust to be brought to light, no enigma to be resolved. What is to be added after we have explored all the historical, etc., circumstances of the Holocaust is simply the abyss of the act itself: of the free *decision*, in all its monstrosity.

The assertion of this abyss in no way involves compliance with the predominant feature of today's academic Holocaust industry, the elevation of the Holocaust into metaphysical diabolical Evil, irrational, apolitical, incomprehensible, approachable only through respectful silence. The Holocaust is presented as the ultimate traumatic point where objectifying historical knowledge breaks down, where it has to acknowledge its worthlessness before a single witness; and, simultaneously, the point at which the witnesses themselves have to concede that words fail them, that what they can share is ultimately only their silence as such. So the Holocaust is referred to as a mystery, the heart of darkness of our civilization; its enigma negates all (explanatory) answers in advance, defying knowledge and description, noncommunicable, lying outside historicization – it cannot be explained, visualized, represented, transmitted, since it marks the Void, the black hole, the end, the implosion, of the

(narrative) universe. Accordingly, any attempt to locate it in its context, to politicize it, is equivalent to the anti-Semitic negation of its uniqueness. . . . Here is one of the standard versions of this exemption of the Holocaust:

A great Hassidic Master, the Rabbi of Kotsk, used to say, 'There are truths which can be communicated by the word; there are deeper truths that can be transmitted only by silence; and, on another level, are those which cannot be expressed, not even by silence.'

And yet, they must be communicated.

Here is the dilemma that confronts anyone who plunges into the concentration camp universe: How can one recount when – by the scale and weight of its horror – the event defies language?⁴⁷

Are these not the terms that designate the Lacanian encounter of the Real? However, this very depoliticization of the Holocaust, its elevation into the properly *sublime* Evil, the untouchable Exception beyond the reach of 'normal' political discourse, can also be a *political* act of utter cynical manipulation, a political *intervention* aiming at legitimizing a certain kind of hierarchical political relation. First, it is part of the postmodern strategy of depoliticization and/or victimization. Second, it disqualifies forms of Third World violence for which Western states are (co)responsible as minor in comparison with the Absolute Evil of the Holocaust. Third, it serves to cast a shadow over every radical political project – to reinforce the *Denkverbot* against a radical political imagination: 'Are you aware that what you propose

leads ultimately to the Holocaust?' In short: **notwithstanding** the unquestionable sincerity of some of its proponents, *the 'objective' ideologico-political content of the depoliticization of the Holocaust, of its elevation into the abyssal absolute Evil, is the political pact of aggressive Zionists and Western Rightist anti-Semites at the expense of today's radical political possibilities.* In it, Israeli expansionism towards Palestinians paradoxically joins hands with the Western anti-Semite's avoidance of the concrete analysis of the political dynamics of anti-Semitism – of how this same dynamics is today pursued by other means (or, rather, with other goals, displaced on to other targets).

Laugh yourself to death!

The truth of this elevation of the Holocaust into the unspeakable Evil is the unexpected reversal into comedy: the recent rise of Holocaust comedies is strictly correlative to the elevation of the holocaust into the unspeakable Evil – after all, the stuff of comedy is things which elude our grasp; laughter is one way of coping with the incomprehensible. If no direct realistic staging can be adequate to the horror of the Holocaust, then the only way out of the predicament is to turn to comedy which, at least, accepts its failure to express the horror of the Holocaust in advance and, moreover, projects this gap between the represented and its failed representation into its very narrative content, in the guise of the gap between the ultimate horror of what is going on (the extermination of Jews) and the false (comic) spectacle organized by the Jews themselves which enables them to survive. The success of Roberto Benigni's film *Life Is Beautiful* marks the beginning of a series: in the 1999/2000

season it was followed by *Jacob the Liar* with Robin Williams (the remake of the old GDR classic about the owner of a small shop in the ghetto who pretends to have a hidden radio-receiver and regularly tells his terrified fellow citizens uplifting news about the impending German defeat which he allegedly learned from the radio) and the American release of the Romanian film *The Train of Hope* (the story of the residents of a small Jewish community who, when the Nazis occupy the country and plan to transport them to the extermination camp, organize a fake train with Nazi guards, board it and, of course, instead of going to the camp, take the ride to freedom). What is of interest is that all three films are centred on a *lie* that allows the threatened Jews to survive their ordeal.

The key to this trend is provided by the obvious failure of its opposite, the Holocaust *tragedy*. There is a scene which condenses all that is false in Spielberg, although many a critic praised it as the strongest scene in *Schindler's List*, containing the 'Oscar-winning' performance by Ralph Fiennes: the scene, of course, in which the commander of the concentration camp confronts a beautiful Jewish girl, his prisoner. We listen to his long quasi-theatrical monologue, while the terrified girl simply stares silently in front of her, totally immobilized by mortal fear: while she attracts him sexually, he finds her unacceptable as his love object because of her Jewish origins. In this battle between human erotic attraction and racist hatred, racism wins the day, and he casts the girl away.

The tension of this scene consists in the radical incommensurability between the two subjective perspectives: what for him is a light-hearted flirtation with the idea of a brief sexual affair is for

her a question of life and death. We see the girl as an utterly terrified human being, while the man is not even directly addressing her but, rather, treating her as an object, a pretext for his loud monologue. . . . So what is so thoroughly false here? The fact that the scene presents a (psychologically) impossible position of enunciation of its subject: it expresses his split attitude towards the terrified Jewish girl as *his direct psychological self-experience*. The only way to express this split correctly would have been to stage the scene in a Brechtian way, with the actor playing the Nazi villain directly addressing the public: 'I, the commander of the concentration camp, find this girl sexually very attractive; I can do whatever I want with my prisoners, so I can rape her with impunity. However, I am also imbued with the racist ideology which tells me that Jews are filthy and unworthy of my attention. So I do not know how to decide . . .'

The falsity of *Schindler's List* is therefore the same as the falsity of those who seek the clue to the horrors of Nazism in the 'psychological profiles' of Hitler and other Nazi figures. Here, Hannah Arendt was right in her otherwise problematic thesis on the 'banality of Evil': if we take Adolf Eichmann as a psychological entity, a person, we discover nothing monstrous about him – he was just an average bureaucrat; his 'psychological profile' gives us no clue to the horrors he executed. No wonder, then, that no one, not even the most severe guardians of the flame of the Absolute Evil, was offended by *Life Is Beautiful*, the story of an Italian Jewish father who, in Auschwitz, adopts a desperate strategy of shielding his young son from the trauma by presenting what is going on to him as a staged competition in which you must stick to the rules (eat as little as possible, etc.) –

the one who wins the most points will, at the end, see an American tank arriving.

In contrast to Spielberg, Benigni's film thus renounces 'psychological depth' in advance, opting for ridicule. The problematic nature of this solution, however, emerges the moment we simply confront it with other, earlier, types of the Holocaust comedy: Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (from before World War II), Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be* (1942), and *Seven Beauties* [*Pasqualino Settebellezze*], Lina Wertmüller's attempt at Holocaust comedy (1975).⁴⁹ The first thing to note is what one laughs at here: limits are obviously respected in all these films. In principle, one could well imagine the so-called 'Muslims' (the living dead of the camps, those prisoners who lost their will to live and just slowly dragged themselves around, passively reacting to their surroundings) as the object of laughter generated by their automatic mindless movements; it is also absolutely clear, however, that such laughter would have been ethically totally unacceptable. Furthermore, the question to be asked here is a very simple one: neither of these films is a hundred per cent comedy; at a certain point, laughter or satire is suspended, and we are confronted with the 'serious' message or level – so the question is: at which point?

In Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, it is obviously the pathetic final speech of the poor Jewish barber who finds himself occupying the place of Hynkel (Hitler); in *Life Is Beautiful*, it is – among others – the very last scene of the film, after the arrival of the tank, when we see the child after the war, happily embracing his mother in a green meadow, while his off-screen voice is thanking his father, who sacrificed himself for his son's survival . . . in these cases, we have a pathetic moment of redemption. This, however,

is precisely what is missing in *Seven Beauties*: if Wertmüller had made *Life Is Beautiful*, the film would probably end with the soldier in the American tank mistaking the child for a lone Nazi sniper and shooting him dead. *Seven Beauties* deals with how, in the concentration camp, Pasqualino, a caricaturized dynamic Italian obsessed with pathetic family honour (Giancarlo Giannini, protecting the honour of his seven none too beautiful sisters), comes to the conclusion that if he is to survive, he must seduce the plump and ruthless woman Commandant, and we witness his attempts to offer his body, with erection a prerequisite for the success of his endeavour. . . . After the successful seduction, he is elevated to the office of *kapo*, and in order to save the men under his command, he must kill six of them, including his own best friend Francesco.

As in other cases, the comedy here is caught in a dialectical tension – not, however, a tension with redemptive pathos. As we have already seen, in all other Holocaust comedies, at a certain point, the comedy is 'sublated' and we are given a 'serious' pathetic message: the final speech of the poor Jewish barber mistaken for Hynkel–Hitler in *The Great Dictator*; the speech of the Polish actor playing Shylock in *To Be or Not to Be*; the final scene of *Life Is Beautiful*, when the son, united with his mother, recalls his father's supreme sacrifice. In *Seven Beauties*, however, comedy is caught in tension with the undignified horror of the cruel survival logic of concentration camp life: laughter is exaggerated beyond good taste', it is confronted with and slips into the scenes of burning corpses, of people committing suicide by jumping into a pool of human excrement, of the hero confronted by a cruel choice and choosing to shoot his best friend. We are no

longer dealing here with the pathetic figure of a good little man maintaining his heroic dignity in horrible conditions, but with a victim-turned-oppressor who definitely loses his moral innocence – thus the final sentimental redemptive message is completely missing.

When, in a Holocaust comedy, there is no longer laughter, when the comic representation of the resourceful persistence of life reaches its end, we are thus confronted with the following alternative: either **pathetic**, tragic (or, rather, melodramatic) dignity – the hero suddenly turns into a truly heroic figure; or nausea – the hero maintains his survivalist stance to the end, so that the very exaggeration of comedy turns into disgust. In Lacanian terms this alternative is, of course, the one between the Master-Signifier and the *objet petit a* as the 'indivisible remainder' of the symbolic process. There is, unfortunately, a third option: what about the position of the 'Muslim', the **living dead**? Would it be **possible** to make a comedy in which, when the laughter reaches its limit, we would get the Muslim?

The Muslim

The 'Muslim' is the key figure of the Nazi extermination camp universe;⁵⁰ although one also finds its vague equivalent in the Stalinist Gulags,⁵¹ they none the less seem to obey a different inner logic. The functioning of the Nazi camps involved a kind of 'aesthetics of Evil': the humiliation and torture of the inmates, which was an end in itself, serving no rational purpose, running directly against the interests of the efficient maximum exploitation of those inmates. The Stalinist Gulag, in contrast, still

moved within the horizon of the ruthless exploitation of the prisoners, considered as an expendable work force – an example of its most terrifying moments was the well-known accident on the steamship *Kim*, transporting 3,000 convicts to the Kolyma camps. During the trip, the convicts had mutinied, and the ship's authorities opted for a simple solution to crush the mutiny: at 40 degrees Celsius below zero, they hosed down all the holds. When the *Kim* entered the port of Nagaievo on 5 December 1947, its 'cargo' was a gigantic block of ice with 3,000 corpses frozen in it.

In this universe, ethical miracles of mass defiance and demonstrative public solidarity were still possible, like the legendary event at Vorkuta Mine 29 in 1953. A few months after Stalin's death, strikes broke out in labour camps all across Siberia; the strikers' demands were modest and 'reasonable': the release of the very old and the too young, a ban on random shooting by watch-tower guards, and so on. One by one, the camps succumbed to threats or false promises from Moscow, and only Mine 29 at Vorkuta held out, surrounded by two divisions of NKVD troops, with tanks. When the troops finally entered the main gate, they saw the prisoners standing behind it in a solid phalanx, their arms linked, singing. After a brief hesitation, the heavy machine-guns opened up – the miners remained massed and erect, defiantly continuing to sing, the dead held up by the living. After about a minute, reality prevailed, and the corpses began to litter the ground.⁵² However, this brief minute in which the strikers' defiance seemed to suspend the very laws of nature, transubstantiating their exhausted bodies into the appearance of an immortal singing collective Body, was the occurrence of the

Sublime at its purest, the prolonged moment in which, in a way, time stood still. It is difficult to imagine something like this taking place in a Nazi extermination camp.

One can divide the population of the Nazi extermination camps into three broad categories. The majority broke down and regressed to an almost-animal 'egotism', focusing their efforts on sheer survival, even managing to do things which in the 'normal' world are considered unethical (stealing food or shoes from a neighbour) in order to survive. The memoirs of concentration camp survivors, however, invariably mention the One, an individual who did not break down – who, in the midst of the unbearable conditions which reduced all others to the egotistic struggle for sheer survival, miraculously maintained and radiated an 'irrational' generosity and dignity: in Lacanian terms, we are dealing here with the function of *Ya de l'Un*: even here, *there* was the One who served as the support of the minimal solidarity that defines the social link proper as opposed to collaboration within the frame of the pure strategy of survival.

Two features are crucial here: first, this individual was always perceived as one (there was never a multitude of them, as if, following some obscure necessity, this excess of the inexplicable miracle of solidarity has to be embodied in a One); secondly, it was not so much what this One actually did for the others that mattered but, rather, his very *presence* among them (what enabled the others to survive was the awareness that even if they were reduced to survival-machines for most of the time, there was the One who maintained human dignity). Rather like canned laughter, here we have something like *canned dignity*, where the Other (the One) maintains my dignity for me, in my place – or, more

precisely, where I maintain my dignity *through* the Other: I may be reduced to the cruel struggle for survival, but the very awareness that there is One who maintains his dignity enables me to maintain a minimal link to humanity. Often, when this One broke down or was unmasked as a fake, the other prisoners lost their will to survive and turned into 'Muslims', indifferent living dead – paradoxically, their very readiness to struggle for sheer survival was sustained by its exception, by the fact that there was the One who was *not* reduced to this level, so that when this exception disappeared, the struggle for survival itself lost its force. What this means, of course, is that this One was not defined exclusively by his 'real' qualities (at this level, there may well have been more individuals like him, or it may even have been that he was not really unbroken, but a fake, just playing that role): his exceptional role was rather, that of *transference* – that is to say, he occupied a place constructed (presupposed) by the others.

The Muslims are the 'zero-level' of humanity: the Heideggerian co-ordinates of the project [*Entwurf*] through which the *Dasein* answers and assumes, in an engaged way, his being-thrown-in-the-world [*Geworfenheit*], are suspended here. The Muslims are a kind of 'living dead' who even cease to react to basic animal stimuli, who do not defend themselves when attacked, who gradually even cease to feel thirst and hunger, eating and drinking more out of blind habit than on account of some elementary animal need. For this reason, they are the point of the Real without symbolic Truth – there is no way to 'symbolize' their predicament, to organize it into a meaningful life-narrative. However, it is easy to perceive the danger of these

descriptions: they inadvertently reproduce, and thus attest to, the very 'dehumanization' imposed on them **by** the Nazis. This is why one should insist more than ever on their humanity, without forgetting that they are in a way dehumanized, deprived of the essential features of humanity: the line that separates 'normal' human dignity and engagement from the Muslim's 'inhuman' indifference is *inherent to 'humanity'*, which means that there is a kind of inhuman traumatic kernel or gap in the very midst of 'humanity' itself – to put it in Lacanian terms, the Muslims are 'human' in an ex-timate way. Precisely as 'inhuman', as deprived of almost all specific positive human features, they stand for humanity 'as such': they are the particular 'inhuman' element that immediately gives body to the human genus, in which this genus acquires direct existence – the Muslim is a man *tout court*, without any further qualifications.

One is tempted to say that the Muslim, precisely in so far as he is in a way 'less than animal', deprived even of animal vitality, is the necessary intermediate step between animal and man, the 'zero-level' of humanity in the precise sense of what Hegel called 'the night of the world', the withdrawal from engaged immersion in one's environment, the pure self-relating negativity which, as it were, 'wipes the slate' and thus opens up the space for specifically human symbolic engagement.⁵³ To put it in yet another way: the Muslim is not simply outside language (as is the case with the animal), he is the absence of language *as such*, silence as a positive fact, as the rock of impossibility, the Void, the background for speech to emerge against. In this precise sense, one can say that in order to 'become human', to bridge the gap between animal immersion in the environment to human activity, we *all*, at

some point, have had to be Muslims, to pass through the zero-level designated by this term. Lacan repeatedly mentions Edgar Allan Poe's story about Mr Valdemar who, after being put to death and then brought back to life, murmurs in a dreadful voice: 'I am dead!' Was not the same limit-experience undergone by those few Muslims who survived their ordeal, returned to 'normal' social life, and were then able to pronounce the unbearable words 'I was a Muslim'?

What this means is that – as Agamben rightly emphasizes – the 'normal' rules of ethics are suspended here: we cannot simply deplore their fate, regretting that they are deprived of basic human dignity, since *to be 'decent', to retain 'dignity', in front of a Muslim is in itself an act of utter indecency*. One cannot simply ignore the Muslim: any ethical stance that does not confront the horrifying paradox of the Muslim is by definition unethical, an obscene travesty of ethics – and once we actually confront the Muslim, notions like 'dignity' are somehow deprived of their substance. In other words, 'Muslim' is not simply the 'lowest' in the hierarchy of ethical types ('They not only have no dignity, they have even lost their animal vitality and egotism'), but the zero-level which renders the whole hierarchy meaningless. Not to take this paradox into account is to participate in the very cynicism that the Nazis themselves practised when they first brutally reduced the Jews to the subhuman level and then presented this image as the proof of their subhumanity – they extrapolated to the extreme the standard procedure of humiliation, in which I, say, take away the trouser belt of a dignified person, thus forcing him to hold his trousers up with his hands, and then mock him as undignified.

There are two opposed positions towards death in contemporary philosophy: Heidegger's and Badiou's. For Heidegger, authentic death (as opposed to the anonymous 'one dies') is the assumption of the possibility of the ultimate impossibility of *Dasein's* being as 'mine'; for Badiou, death (finitude and mortality) is what we share with animals, and the truly human dimension is the one of 'immortality', of answering the Call of the 'eternal' Event. Despite their opposition, both Heidegger and Badiou share the same matrix: the opposition between authentic engaged existence and anonymous egotistic craving, participation in a life where things merely 'function'. The unique position of the Muslims belies both poles of this opposition: while they are certainly not engaged in an authentic existential project, to designate them as leading the unauthentic life of *das Man* is, of course, utter cynicism – they are somewhere else, the third term, the zero-level that undermines the very opposition between authentic existence and *das Man*. This inhuman 'indivisible remainder' of humanity, this existence beneath freedom and dignity, even beneath the very opposition of Good and Evil, is what characterizes the modern post-tragic position, more horrible than any classical tragedy. To put it, none the less, in the terms of Ancient Greek tragedies, what accounts for the exceptional status of the Muslims is that they are the ones who entered the prohibited domain of *ate*, of unspeakable horror: they met the Thing itself face to face.

The proof of this entry is another feature noted by all witnesses: the Muslim's gaze, a kind of desubjectivized, transfixed gaze in which total impassive indifference (the extinguishing of the 'spark of life', of engaged existence) coincides with an

uncanny intense fixity, as if the gaze were frozen into immobility by seeing too much, seeing what one should not see. No wonder the Gorgon's head is often mentioned apropos of this gaze: apart from her hair made of serpents, her key features are the open mouth (as in shocked, frozen, immobilized surprise) and the transfixed gaze, the wide-open eyes staring at the unnamed source of horror whose position coincides with that of ourselves, the spectators. On a more fundamental level, what we are dealing with here is the positivization of an impossibility which gives rise to the fetish-object. For example, how does the object-gaze become a fetish? Through the Hegelian reversal of the impossibility of seeing the object into an object which gives body to this very impossibility: since the subject cannot directly see that, the lethally fascinating Thing, he accomplishes a kind of reflection-into-self by means of which the object that fascinates him becomes *the gaze* itself. (In this sense [although not in an entirely symmetrical way], gaze and voice are 'reflective' objects, which give body to an impossibility – in Lacanian 'mathemes': a under minus small phi.)

Perhaps the best-known cinematic example here is the detective Arbogast falling down the stairs while being slaughtered in Hitchcock's *Psycho*: this transfixed gaze of the immobilized head, shot against the dynamically moving background (in contrast to what goes on in 'reality', where the background stands still, while the head is moving), and staring with a bliss beyond the usual horror at the Thing that is killing him. This gaze has precedents: in *Vertigo*, it is the transfixed head of Scottie during the dream sequence, and so on, up to the early underestimated masterpiece *Murder*, with the murderer's transfixed gaze while he is flying on

the trapeze.⁵⁴ Where is the object-gaze here? It is not this gaze that we see, but what it is looking at – that is, the gaze of the camera itself, ultimately *our own* (spectator's) gaze. And, again, this zero-level at which it is no longer possible to distinguish clearly between the gaze and the object it perceives, the level at which the horrified gaze itself becomes the ultimate object of horror, is what characterizes the Muslim.

Beneath tragedy and comedy

This unique figure of the Muslim enables us to grasp why both comedy and tragedy ultimately fail to represent the concentration camp universe. Both comedy and tragedy rely on the gap between the impossible Thing and an object, part of our reality, elevated to the dignity of the Thing, functioning as its stand-in – in other words, both comedy and tragedy rely on the structure of *sublimation*. Tragic dignity shows us how an ordinary fragile individual can summon the incredible strength and pay the highest price for his fidelity to the Thing; comedy proceeds in the opposite direction, revealing the banality of the object that pretends to be the Thing – the public hero is unmasked as a ridiculous, vain or clumsy opportunist. . . . It is not enough, however, to claim that comedy mobilizes the gap between the Thing and the ridiculous object occupying its place; the crucial feature is, rather, that both comedy and tragedy involve kinds of immortality, albeit opposed. In the tragic predicament, the hero forfeits his earthly life for the Thing, so that his very defeat is his triumph, conferring sublime dignity on him, while comedy is the triumph of indestructible life – not sublime life, but

opportunistic, common, vulgar earthly life itself. One is tempted to claim that the ultimate comic scene is that of a false death, of the death denounced as a fake: say, the proverbial scene of the solemn funeral with all the relatives assembled, weeping and praising the deceased, when, all of a sudden, the allegedly dead person awakens (he did not really die, after all) and asks what the hell is going on, what's all the fuss about.

There is a scene from John Ford's *The Quiet Man* in which an old man is dying, and priests at his deathbed are already saying the last prayers for him. All of a sudden, the dignified calm of the situation is disturbed by the sound of a violent brawl: outside the house, the fistfight between the film's two heroes for which the whole village has been waiting is finally taking place; the dying man opens his eyes, pricks up his ears attentively, forgets that he is involved in his own dying, gets up, runs out of the house in his white nightgown and joins the enthusiastic spectators of the fight. . . . (The ultimate comic scene of the triumph of life would have been, of course, that of a person attending his own funeral, like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn observing the Mass dedicated to their memory from the back of the church.) This is how one should read Lacan's equation of the comic dimension with the phallic signifier:

One must simply remember that what satisfies us in comedy, what makes us laugh, . . . is not so much the triumph of life as its flight, the fact that life slides away, steals away, flees, escapes all those barriers that oppose it, and precisely those that are most essential, those that are constituted by the agency of the signifier.

The phallus is nothing other than a signifier, the signifier of this flight. . . . Life goes by, triumphs all the same, whatever happens. When the comic hero trips up and falls in the soup, the little fellow still survives.⁵⁵

Imagine an Antigone who, after delivering her solemn response to Creon, asks to withdraw – why? Not because she wants a dignified exit, but for a more vulgar purpose: once outside Creon's quarters, she squats and urinates. . . . And is not this comic aspect of survivalism precisely what films like *Life Is Beautiful* and *Seven Beauties* rely on? What makes both films ultimately attractive is the resourceful survivalism of their respective heroes: whatever the difficulty, they find a way. The moment when *Life Is Beautiful* is no longer meant to be funny can also be identified along these lines: it is the precise moment when dignity re-emerges on a deeper level – to put it in pathetic terms: when we, the spectators, become aware of how the very 'undignified' tricks and deceptions by means of which the hero saves his son bear witness to a basic underlying dignity, much more serious than that of declamatory heroism.

None the less, there is an ambivalent aspect to Lacan's equation of the comic dimension with the phallic signifier: if the comic dimension stands for the triumph of life at its most evasive and opportunistically resourceful, defined precisely as the successful tricky evasion of the barriers constituted by the signifier – in short, the triumph of life over the constraints of symbolic regulations and prohibitions – why, then, does Lacan claim that this dimension is expressed by the phallus as *signifier*? It is not sufficient to claim here that the phallus, as the organ of fertility, is

precisely the signifier (symbol) of this dimension of life which always finds a way to survive and regenerate itself, the signifier of this reproduction and maintaining of life through constant flight and resourceful evasion of fixed symbolic barriers – the enigma still persists: how is it that life, in its persistence which overcomes symbolic barriers, finds its equivalent in the phallus as the 'pure' signifier, the signifier which – as Lacan puts it in 'The Signification of the Phallus' – stands for the very operation of logos, of transposing 'raw' presymbolic reality into symbolized reality?

The only way out of this predicament is to make it clear that the 'life' which survives all predicaments in comedy is precisely *not* simple biological life, but a fantasmatic spectral/ethereal life unencumbered by the inertia of the Real, *the life whose domain is already sustained by the order of the signifier*. In short, this phallic universe of eternal survival is the universe of perversion – why? Reduced to its elementary skeleton, perversion can be seen as a defence against the Real of death and sexuality, against the threat of mortality as well as the contingent imposition of sexual difference: what the perverse scenario enacts is a 'disavowal of castration' – a universe in which, as in cartoons, a human being can survive any catastrophe; in which adult sexuality is reduced to a childish game; in which one is not forced to die, or to choose one of the two sexes. Recall the standard scene from a Tom and Jerry cartoon: Jerry is run over by a heavy truck, dynamite explodes in his mouth, he is cut to ribbons, yet the story goes on; in the next scene he is back again with no trace of the previous catastrophe. . . . As such, the pervert's universe is the universe of pure symbolic order, of the signifier's game running its course,

unencumbered by the Real of human finitude. The pervert's immortality is *comic* immortality; the stuff of comedy is precisely this repetitive, resourceful popping-up of life – whatever the catastrophe, no matter how dark the predicament, we can be sure in advance that the little fellow will Find a way out.

In the concentration camp universe at its most horrifying, however, it is no longer possible to sustain this gap between reality in its material inertia and the ethereal domain of infinite Life – this very gap is suspended, that is to say, reality itself tends to coincide with the monstrous Thing. On the one hand, the Muslim is so destitute that his stance can no longer be considered 'tragic': in him there is none of the dignity that is crucial for the tragic position – that is, he no longer maintains the minimum of dignity against the background of which his miserable actual position would have appeared as tragic; he is simply reduced to the shell of a person, emptied of the spark of spirit. If we try to present him as tragic, the effect will be precisely *comic*, as when one tries to read tragic dignity into meaningless idiotic persistence. On the other hand, although the Muslim is in a way 'comic', although he acts in a way that is usually the stuff of comedy and laughter (his automatic, mindless, repetitive gestures, his impassive pursuit of food), the utter misery of his condition thwarts any attempt to present and/or perceive him as a 'comic character' – again, if we try to present him as comic, the effect will be precisely *tragic*, as when the sad sight of someone cruelly mocking a helpless victim (say, putting obstacles in the path of a blind person, to see if he will stumble), instead of producing laughter in us, the observers, generates sympathy for the victim's tragic predicament. Did not something along these lines

happen with the rituals of humiliation in the camps, from the inscription above the entrance to the gates of Auschwitz 'Arbeit macht frei!' to the band that accompanied prisoners to work or to the gas chambers?

The paradox is that it is only through such cruel humour that tragic sentiment can be generated. The Muslim is thus the zero-point at which the very opposition between tragedy and comedy, sublime and ridiculous, dignity and derision, is suspended; the point at which one pole passes directly into its opposite: if we try to present the Muslim's predicament as tragic, the result is comic, a mocking parody of tragic dignity; if we treat him as a comic character, tragedy emerges. Here we enter the domain that is somehow outside – or, rather, beneath – the very elementary opposition between the dignified hierarchical structure of authority and its carnivalesque transgression – between the original and its parody, its mocking repetition, on which Bakhtin's work is focused.

Today, one often emphasizes how, despite the tragic-heroic tonality that often resonates in Lacan, especially in his writings from the 1950s, such a heroic-tragic ethics is not Lacan's last word: Jacques-Alain Miller demonstrated how, in the last decade of his teaching, Lacan accomplished the passage from *tragique* to *moque-comique*: from heroic identification with the Master-Signifier to identification with the semblance of the excremental remainder, from pathos to irony.⁵⁶ Does the twin example of the Muslim and the Stalinist victim not point, however, to a domain *beneath* this opposition as the ultimate level of the ethical experience – the level of ethics beyond aesthetics, beyond the beautiful? It is usual to say of Wagner that in the

superb music of *Parsifal*, he 'abuses' musical beauty in order to sell us a bunch of reactionary (misogynist, racist . . .) ideas – what, however, if one were to venture a step further and claim that *beauty 'as such,' in its very notion, is already something strangely abusive*: namely, the abuse of the suffering it uses (stages) in order to evoke the so-called 'aesthetic response' in us? Is not such an abuse the very core of the satisfactory effect of tragedy? And is it not true that this aesthetic abuse is no longer feasible, reaches its limit, in the case of the Holocaust: if we endeavour to represent it in an aesthetic way, abuse becomes manifest, and thus renders the aesthetic effect inoperative? Perhaps this is one way of understanding Adorno's much-quoted 'no poetry after Auschwitz'?

The difference between Nazism and Stalinism, between the extermination camp and the Gulag, is condensed in the opposition between the two figures who both occupy the space 'beyond tragedy': the Muslim and the victim of the show trial who sacrifices his 'second life' itself for the Thing. The Nazi treatment produces the Muslim; the Stalinist treatment produces the accused who confesses. What unites the two is that they both find themselves in the Void, deprived of both lives, earthly and sublime: they are beyond egotism, no longer enjoying life, indifferent towards earthly satisfactions, including more 'elevated' ones like being well-respected by one's peers; *and* beyond caring for their moral dignity, for the way they will be remembered by the big Other, inscribed into the texture of Tradition – in this sense, they are both a kind of living dead, shells whose life-spark is extinguished. There is, however, a key difference between the two: while the Muslim is simply reduced to the

apathetic vegetative existence of a living death through physical terror, the victim of the show trial has to participate in his own public degradation, actively forsaking his dignity.

3 When the Party Commits Suicide

in which the reader will first be initiated into the secrets of the Stalinist purges; at the end, however, he will be surprised to learn how even the darkest Stalinism harbours a redemptive dimension

'The Power of the Powerless'

Belief is a notion that displays the deadlock characteristic of the Real: on the one hand, nobody can fully assume belief in the first person singular. An example of this is Faust's evasive series of a dozen counter-questions when, after the consummation of their love, Margarethe asks him the famous question 'What is your view of religion?': Does one really *have* to have faith? Who may say: I believe in God? and so on (see Goethe's *Faust I*, lines 3415 ff.). On the other hand, however, no one really escapes belief – a feature that deserves to be emphasized especially today, in our allegedly godless times. That is to say: in our officially atheistic, hedonistic, post-traditional secular culture, where nobody is ready to confess his belief in public, the underlying structure of belief is all the more pervasive – we all secretly believe. Lacan's position here is clear and unambiguous: 'God is unconscious,' that is, it is natural for the human being to succumb to the temptation of belief.

This very predominance of belief, the fact that the need to believe is consubstantial with human subjectivity, is what makes the standard argument evoked by believers in order to disarm their opponents problematic: only those who believe can understand what it means to believe, so atheists are, a priori, unable to argue against us. What is false in this reasoning is its premiss: atheism is not the zero-level which anyone can understand, since it means only the absence of (belief in) God – perhaps nothing is more difficult than to sustain this position, to be a true materialist. In so far as the structure of belief is that of the fetishist split and disavowal ('I know that there is no big Other, but none the less . . . [I secretly believe in Him]'), only the psychoanalyst who endorses the nonexistence of the big Other is a true atheist. Even Stalinists were believers, in so far as they always invoked the Last Judgement of History which will determine the 'objective meaning' of our acts. Even such a radical transgressor as Sade was not a consistent atheist; the secret logic of his transgression is an act of defiance addressed to God, that is, the reversal of the standard logic of the fetishist split ('I know that there is no big Other, but none the less. . .'): 'Although I know that God exists, I am ready to defy him, to violate his prohibitions, to act *as if* He does *not* exist!' Apart from psychoanalysis (Freudian, in contrast to the Jungian deviation), it was, perhaps, only Heidegger who, in *Being and Time*, deployed the consistent atheist notion of human existence, thrown into a contingent finite horizon, with death as its ultimate possibility. It is crucial to take these paradoxes of belief into account when one deals with the status of the 'official' ideology in Socialist regimes.

Václav Havel's *The Power of the Powerless* (1978) provides the

best account of how 'actually existing Socialism' functioned in the daily lives of its subjects: what mattered was not inner belief in the propositions of the ruling ideology, but following the external rituals and practices in which this ideology acquired material existence.⁵⁷ Although Louis Althusser is often dismissed as a proto-Stalinist among Marxists, it would be productive to read Havel with Althusser, and to interpret Havel's famous example of the greengrocer from the beginning of *The Power of the Powerless* as the supreme example of how Ideological State Apparatuses function.

The greengrocer, a modest, ordinary man, is profoundly indifferent towards the official ideology; he simply follows the rituals mechanically – on state holidays, he decorates his shop window with official slogans like 'Long Live Socialism!'; he participates impassively in mass gatherings. . . . Although he complains privately about the corruption and incompetence of 'those in power', he has recourse at the same time to a series of folk-sayings ('Power is always corrupt . . .') which enable him to legitimize his stance in his own eyes, and thus to retain the false appearance of dignity. When someone tries to engage him in dissident activity, he may even protest indignantly: 'Who are *you* to involve me in things which will certainly ruin the professional chances of my children? Is it really my duty to put the world to rights?'

If there is a 'psychological' mechanism at work in late Socialist ideology, it is therefore not that of belief but, rather, that of *shared guilt*: in the Czech 'normalization' that followed the Soviet invasion of 1968, the regime took care that, in one way or another, the majority of people were somehow morally discredited, compelled

to violate their own moral standards. When an individual was blackmailed into signing a petition against a dissident (say, condemning Havel himself), he knew that he was lying and contributing to a campaign against an honest man, and it was precisely this ethical betrayal that made him the ideal subject of late Socialism. We thus had a regime that actively condoned and relied on the moral bankruptcy of its subjects. This actual shared guilt provides the disavowed foundation of the spectre of the 'objective guilt' evoked by the Communist regime. For this reason, Havel's notion of an authentic 'living in truth' involves no metaphysics of truth or authenticity: it simply designates the act of suspending one's participation in the game, breaking out of the vicious cycle of 'objective guilt'.

With the terrorism that characterizes every authentic ethical stance, Havel mercilessly cuts off and denounces all false exits, all false modes of distance towards the ruling ideology, including cynicism and seeking refuge in the apolitical niche of the 'small pleasures of everyday life' – such acts of indifference, of making fun of official rituals in private circles, are the very mode of reproduction of the official ideology. A 'sincere' believer in the official Socialist ideology was potentially much more dangerous than the cynic: he was already one step from dissidence. There was the fundamental paradox of ex-Yugoslav self-management Socialism: the official ideology exhorted people all the time to participate actively in the process of self-management, to master the conditions of their life outside the 'alienated' Party and state structures; the official media deplored people's indifference, escape into privacy, and so on – however, it was precisely such an event, a truly self-managed articulation and organization of

people's interests, which the regime feared most. A whole series of markers delivered, between the lines, the injunction that such official exhortation was not to be taken too literally, that a cynical attitude towards the official ideology was what the regime really wanted – the greatest catastrophe for the regime would have been for its own ideology to be taken seriously, and realized by its subjects.

Havel is especially penetrating in his denunciation of the inherent hypocrisy of Western Marxism, as well as of the 'socialist opposition' in the Communist countries themselves. What cannot fail to strike us is the almost total absence of theoretical confrontation with Stalinism in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, in clear contrast to its permanent obsession with Fascist anti-Semitism. The very exceptions to this rule are telling: Franz Neumann's *Behemoth*, a study of National Socialism which, in the typical style fashionable in the late 1930s and 1940s, suggests that the three great world systems – the emerging New Deal capitalism, Fascism, and Stalinism – tend towards the same bureaucratic, globally organized, 'administered' society; Herbert Marcuse's *Soviet Marxism*, his least passionate and arguably worst book, a strangely neutral analysis of the Soviet ideology with no clear commitment; and, finally, attempts by some Habermasians who, reflecting upon the emerging dissident phenomena, endeavoured to elaborate the notion of civil society as the site of resistance to the Communist regime – interesting politically, but far from offering a satisfactory global theory of the specificity of Stalinist 'totalitarianism'.

The standard excuse (the classic Frankfurt School authors did not want to oppose Communism too openly, since by doing

so, they would **play** into the hands of their domestic Cold War warriors) is obviously insufficient – the point is not that this fear of being put in the service of official anti-Communism proves how they were secretly pro-Communist but, rather, the opposite: if they had **really** been cornered and asked about where they stood in the Cold War, they would have chosen Western liberal democracy (as Max Horkheimer explicitly did in some of his late writings). 'Stalinism' (actually existing Socialism) was thus, for the Frankfurt School, a traumatic topic apropos of which they had to remain silent – this silence was the **only** way for them to maintain their inconsistent position of underlying solidarity with Western liberal democracy, without losing their official mask of 'radical' Leftist critique. Openly acknowledging this solidarity would deprive them of their 'radical' aura, changing them into another breed of Cold War anti-Communist Leftist liberals; while showing too much sympathy for 'actually existing Socialism' would force them to betray their unacknowledged basic commitment.

This ultimate solidarity with the Western system when it was really threatened displays a clear symmetry with the stance of the 'democratic Socialist opposition' in the German Democratic Republic. While its members criticized the Communist Party rule, they endorsed the basic premiss of the GDR regime: the thesis that the Federal Republic of Germany was a neo-Nazi state, the direct inheritor of the Nazi regime, and that therefore the existence of the GDR as the anti-Fascist bulwark had to be protected at any cost. For that reason, the moment the situation got really serious and the Socialist system was actually threatened, they publicly supported the system (Brecht apropos of the East

Berlin workers' demonstrations in 1953; Christa Wolf apropos of the Prague Spring in 1968). They sustained their belief in the inherent reformability of the system – but for this truly democratic reform to take place, time and patience were needed – that is to say, too rapid a disintegration of Socialism would have returned Germany to the capitalist–Fascist regime, and thus strangled the Utopia of the Other Germany for which, despite all its horrors and failures, the GDR continued to stand. Hence the deep distrust of these intellectuals for 'people' as opposed to Power: in 1989, they openly opposed free elections, well aware that if free elections were held, the majority would choose the despised capitalist consumerism. Heiner Müller was right on target when, in 1989, he claimed that free elections had also brought Hitler to power. . . . (Some Western Social Democrats played the same game, feeling much closer to the 'reform-minded' Communists than to dissidents – the latter somehow embarrassed them, appearing as an obstacle to the process of detente.)

Along the same lines, it was also clear to Havel that the Soviet invasion, in a way, *saved* the myth of the Prague Spring of 1968 – the utopian notion that if the Czechs were only left alone, they would in fact give birth to 'Socialism with a human face', to an authentic alternative to both Real Socialism and Real Capitalism. That is to say: what would have happened if the Warsaw Pact forces had not intervened in August 1968? Either the Czech Communist leadership would have had to impose restraint, and Czechoslovakia would have remained a (more liberal, true) Communist regime, or it would have turned into a 'normal' Western capitalist society (maybe with a stronger Scandinavian social democratic flavour).

Thus Havel enables us to discern the falsity of what one is tempted to call the *interpassive Socialism* of the Western academic Left: what these Leftists displace on to the Other is not their activity but their passive authentic experience. They allow themselves to pursue their well-paid academic careers in the West, while using the idealized Other (Cuba, Nicaragua, Tito's Yugoslavia) as the stuff of their ideological dreams: they dream through the Other, and explode against it if it disturbs their complacent dream (by abandoning Socialism and opting for liberal capitalism). What is of special interest here is the basic misunderstanding, the lack of communication, between the Western Left and the dissidents in late Socialism – it is as if it was forever impossible for them to find a common language. Although they felt that they should somehow be on the same side, an elusive gap seemed forever to separate them: for Western Leftists, Eastern dissidents were all too naive in their belief in democracy – in their rejection of Socialism, they unknowingly threw the baby out with the bathwater; in the eyes of the dissidents, the Western Left played patronizing games with them, disavowing the true harshness of the totalitarian regime – the accusation that the dissidents were somehow guilty for not seizing the unique opportunity of disintegrating Socialism and inventing an authentic alternative to capitalism was hypocrisy at its purest. What, however, if this lack of communication was in fact an example of successful communication in the Lacanian sense of the term? What if each of the two positions received from its Other its own repressed message in its inverted and true form?

The Communist sacrifice

Havel's analysis, however, perspicacious as it is, pertains to 'stagnant' late real Socialism, in which it was again possible for the dissidents to assume the heroic position of the tragic victim. Anything of this kind was simply unthinkable during the zenith of 'authentic' Stalinism; the best way to specify the post-tragic position of the Stalinist victim would have been to confront it with the tragic position at its most sublime, that of Antigone, who sacrifices everything (all 'pathological' things: marriage, earthly happiness . . .) for the Cause-Thing that matters to her more than life itself, the proper burial of her deceased brother. When she is condemned to death, Antigone enumerates all the things she will not be able to experience because of her premature death (marriage, children . . .) – this is the 'spurious infinity' one sacrifices through the Exception (the Thing for which one does it and which, precisely, is not sacrificed). The structure here is that of the Kantian Sublime: the overwhelming infinity of sacrificed empirical objects brings home in a negative way the enormous, incomprehensible dimension of the Thing for which one sacrifices them. So Antigone is sublime in her sad enumeration of what she is sacrificing – this list, in its enormity, indicates the transcendent contours of the Thing to which she retains her unconditional fidelity. She dies, but in her very biological death she survives in the collective memory as the exemplary case of the dignified life, of a fidelity that goes beyond (biological) life and death.

So what could be more tragic than this? To be compelled, on behalf of Fidelity to the Thing (not on account of simple

pathological egotism), to sacrifice this very Second ('Eternal') Life, the dignity that elevates us beyond mere biological life. This is what the accused revolutionary is asked at the show trial: show your ultimate fidelity to the Revolution by publicly confessing, by admitting that you are worthless scum, the dregs of humanity. Maybe, if you do this, you will even be allowed to survive and to lead a (relatively) comfortable life: a broken man, no longer able to enjoy earthly pleasures because they are rendered worthless by the fundamental Betrayal of your existence.

Perhaps the ultimate case of this post-tragic position is found in Khmer Rouge rule in Cambodia, where there were no public trials, no ritualized public self-accusations comparable to Stalinist show trials: people simply disappeared in the night – they were dragged away, and nobody dared to speak or ask about it.⁵⁸ The key to this feature is that, until late 1976, *the very existence of the Communist Party and its leadership structure was treated as the highest secret*, the Party functioned somewhat like Wagner's Lohengrin – all-powerful as long as it remained the anonymous Angka (Organization), as long as its name (Communist Party) was not publicly pronounced and acknowledged. Only in 1977 did the regime acknowledge that the Party existed, and Pol Pot was presented as its leader ('Brother No. 1'). So, until 1977, we had the paradox of the power edifice in which the public structure and its obscene hidden double *overlap*: instead of the usual public–symbolic power structure sustained by the obscene invisible network of apparatuses, we have the public power structure which *directly treats itself as an anonymous, secret, hidden body*. As such, the Khmer Rouge regime was a kind of political equivalent to the famous publicity description of the utterly

evil Linda Fiorentino *femme fatale* character from John Dahl's neo-*noir* film *The Last Seduction*: 'Most people have a dark side . . . she had nothing else.' In the same way, while most political regimes have a dark side of obscene secret rituals and apparatuses, the Khmer Rouge regime had nothing else. . . . This is probably 'totalitarianism' at its unsurpassed purest – how did it happen?

The key act of the Stalinist Communist Party is the official consecration of its History (no wonder the Stalinist book was the infamous *History of the CPSU* [Bolsheviks]) – only at this point does the Party symbolically start to exist. The Communist Party of Cambodia, however, had to remain 'illegal' as long as the key problem of its history was not solved: when did its founding congress take place? In 1951, the Communist Party of Cambodia was established as part of the Vietnam-dominated Indochinese Communist Party; in 1960, the 'autonomous' Cambodian Communist Party was formed. How does one make a choice here? Until the mid-1970s, the Khmer Rouge, although it was already fiercely autonomous and nationalist, still needed the support of Vietnam; so their official historian, Keo Meas, made an almost Freudian compromise-solution, **proclaiming** as the official birth date of the Party 30 September 1951 – the year of the founding of the Cambodian wing of the Indochinese Communist Party and the day of the 1960 congress of the autonomous Cambodian Communist Party. (History, of course, is treated here as a pure domain of meaning without regard for facts: the chosen date reflected the current political balance, not historical accuracy.) In 1976, however, Khmer Rouge Cambodia was strong enough to break away from Vietnamese tutelage – what better way to mark this than to change the date of the party foundation – to rewrite

history and acknowledge as the true date the date of the constitution of the autonomous Cambodian Communist Party, 30 September 1960?

It is now, however, that the true Stalinist deadlock emerges: how, then, could they explain the embarrassing fact that, hitherto, the Party had publicly cited *another* date as its founding moment? Publicly to acknowledge that the previous date had been a pragmatic, politically opportune manoeuvre was, of course, unthinkable – so, logically, the only solution was to *discover a plot*. No wonder, then, that Keo Meas was arrested and tortured to confess (in an act of supreme irony, his confession was dated 30 September 1976) that he *proposed* the compromise date in order to disguise the existence of an underground, *parallel* Cambodian Communist Party controlled by Vietnam and destined to subvert from within the true, authentic Party of Cambodia. . . . Is this not a perfect example of properly paranoiac redoubling – the Party has to remain underground, a secret organization, and can appear publicly only when it *rejects/externalizes* this underground existence in its uncanny double, in *another parallel* secret Party? Now we can also understand the logic of the highest Communist sacrifice: by confessing to his treason, Keo Meas enabled the Party to propose a consistent history of its origins, *taking* upon himself the guilt for the past opportunistic compromises. These compromises were necessary at that time: so the true hero is the one who makes the necessary compromise, knowing that in a subsequent development this compromise will be denounced as treason and he *personally* will be liquidated – *this* is the highest service one can render to the Party.

In this paranoid universe, the notion of *symptom* (in the sense of an ambiguous sign indicating a hidden content) is universalized: in Stalinist discourse, a 'symptom' was not only the sign of some (ideological) affliction or deviation from the correct Party line, but also the sign of correct orientation; in this sense, it was possible to speak of 'healthy symptoms', as in this criticism of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony by the arch-Stalinist composer Isaac Dunayevsky: 'The brilliant mastery of the Fifth Symphony . . . does not preclude the fact that it does not by any means display all the healthy symptoms for the development of Soviet Symphonic Music. Why, then, use the term 'symptom'? Because, precisely, one can never be sure if a positive feature really is what it pretends to be: what if someone merely *pretends* to follow the Party line faithfully in order to conceal his true counter-revolutionary attitude?

A similar paradox is discernible in the Christian superego dialectic of the Law and its transgression (sin): this dialectic does not spring only from the fact that the Law itself encourages its own transgression, that it generates the desire for its own violation; our obedience to the Law itself is not 'natural', spontaneous, but *always-already mediated by the (repression of the) desire to transgress the Law*. When we obey the Law, we do so as part of a desperate strategy to fight against our desire to transgress it, so the more rigorously we *obey* the Law, the more we bear witness to the fact that, *deep* within ourselves, we feel the pressure of the desire to indulge in sin. The superego feeling of *guilt* is therefore right: the more we obey the Law, the more we *are* guilty, because this obedience *is* in effect a defence against our sinful desire, and in Christianity, the *desire* (intention) to sin is *equal* to the *act* itself –

if you merely covet your neighbour's wife, you are already committing adultery. This Christian superego attitude is perhaps best expressed by T.S. Eliot's line from *Murder in the Cathedral*: 'the highest form of treason: to do the right thing for the wrong reason' – even when you do the right thing, you do it in order to counteract, and thus conceal, the basic vileness of your true nature.⁶⁰

Perhaps a reference to Nicolas Malebranche allows us to throw some further light on this procedure. In the standard version of modernity, ethical experience is restricted to the domain of 'subjective values' as opposed to 'objective facts'. While he endorsed this modern line of separation between 'subjective' and 'objective', between 'values' and 'facts', Malebranche transposed it *within* the ethical domain itself, as the split between 'subjective Virtue and 'objective Grace – I can be 'subjectively' virtuous, but this in no way guarantees my 'objective' salvation in the eyes of God; the distribution of Grace which decides my salvation depends on totally 'objective' laws, strictly comparable to the laws of material Nature. Do we not encounter another version of this same objectivization in the Stalinist show trial: I can be subjectively honest, but if I am not touched by the Grace (of insight into the necessity of Communism), all my ethical integrity will make me no more than an honest petty-bourgeois humanitarian opposed to the Communist Cause, and despite my subjective honesty, I will remain forever 'objectively guilty'? These paradoxes cannot be dismissed as the simple machinations of 'totalitarian' power – they harbour a genuine tragic dimension overlooked by standard liberal diatribes against 'totalitarianism'.

Stalin–Abraham against Bukharin–Isaac

How, then, is this horrifying position *subjectivized*? As Lacan indicated, the lack of tragedy proper in the modern condition renders this condition even more horrifying: the fact is that despite all the horrors of Gulag and Holocaust, from capitalism onwards there are no longer tragedies proper – the victims in concentration camps or the victims of the Stalinist show trials were not in a properly tragic predicament; their situation was not without its comic – or, at least, ridiculous – aspects, and for that reason it was all the more horrifying: there is a horror so deep that it can no longer be 'sublimated' into tragic dignity, and for that reason is approachable only through an eerie imitation/doubling of the parody itself. We have perhaps *the* exemplary case of this obscene comicalness of the horror beyond tragedy in Stalinist discourse. The Kafkaesque quality of the eerie laughter that erupted among the public during Bukharin's last speech before the Central Committee on 23 February 1937 hinges on the radical discord between the speaker's utter seriousness (he is talking about his possible suicide, and why he will not commit it, since it could hurt the Party, but will, rather, go on with his hunger strike until death) and the reaction of the Central Committee members:

Bukharin: I won't shoot myself because then people will say that I killed myself so as to harm the party. But if I die, as it were, from an illness, then what will you lose by it? (Laughter.)

Voices: Blackmailer!

Voroshilov: You scoundrel! Keep your trap shut! How vile!
How dare you speak like that!

Bukharin: But you must understand – it's very hard for me
to go on living.

Stalin: And it's easy for us?!

Voroshilov: Did you hear that: 'I won't shoot myself, but I
will die'?!

Bukharin: It's easy for **you** to talk about me. What will you
lose, after all? Look, if I am a saboteur, a son of a bitch,
then **why** spare me? I make no claims to anything. I am
just describing what's on my mind, what I am going
through. If this in any way entails any **political** damage,
however minute, then, no question about it, I'll do
whatever **you** say. (Laughter.) **Why** are you laughing?
There is absolutely nothing **funny** about any of
this. . . .'⁶¹

Do we not have here, enacted in real life, the uncanny logic of
Josef K.'s first interrogation in *The Trial*?:

'Well, then,' said the Examining Magistrate, turning over
the leaves and addressing K. with an air of authority, 'you are
a **house-painter**?' 'No,' said K., 'I'm the junior manager of a
large Bank.' This answer evoked such a **hearty** outburst of
laughter from the Right party that K. had to laugh too.
People doubled up with their hands on their knees and
shook as if in spasms of **coughing**.⁶²

The discord that **provokes** laughter is radical here: from the

Stalinist point of view, suicide was deprived of any subjective authenticity; it was simply instrumentalized, reduced to one of the 'most cunning' forms of the counter-revolutionary plot. Molotov put it clearly on 4 December 1936: 'Tomsky's suicide was a plot, a **premeditated** act. Tomsky had arranged, not with one person but with several people, to commit suicide and therefore to strike a blow once again at the Central Committee.'⁶³ And Stalin repeated it later at the same Central Committee plenum: 'Here you see one of the ultimate and most cunning and easiest means by which one can spit at and deceive the party one last time before dying, before leaving the world. That, Comrade Bukharin, is the underlying reason for these last suicides.'⁶⁴ This utter denial of subjectivity is made explicit in Stalin's **Kafkaesque** reply to Bukharin:

Stalin: We believed in you, we decorated you with the Order of Lenin, we moved you up the ladder and we were mistaken. Isn't it true, Comrade Bukharin?

Bukharin: It's true, it's true, I have said the same myself.

Stalin: [apparently paraphrasing and mocking Bukharin]
You can go ahead and shoot me, if you like. That's your business. But I don't want my honor to be besmirched. And what testimony does he give today? That's what happens, Comrade Bukharin.

Bukharin: But I cannot admit, either today or tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, anything which I am not guilty of. (Noise in the room.)

Stalin: I'm not saying anything personal about you [informal *ty*].⁶⁵

In such a universe, of course, there is no place for even the most formal and empty right of subjectivity, on which Bukharin continues to insist:

Bukharin: . . . I confessed that from 1930 to 1932 I committed many political sins. I have come to understand this. But with the same forcefulness with which I confess my real guilt, with that same forcefulness I deny the guilt which is thrust upon me, and I shall deny it forever. And not because it has only personal significance, but because I believe that no one should under any circumstances take upon himself anything superfluous, especially when the party doesn't need it, when the country doesn't need it, when I don't need it. (Noise in the room, laughter) . . . The whole tragedy of my situation lies in this, that this Piatakov and others like him so poisoned the atmosphere, such an atmosphere arose that no one believes human feelings – not emotions, not the impulses of the heart, not tears. (Laughter.) Many manifestations of human feeling, which had earlier represented a form of proof – and there was nothing shameful in this – have today lost their validity and force.

Kaganovich: You practiced too much duplicity!

Bukharin: Comrades, let me say the following concerning what happened –

Khlopliankin: It's time to throw you in prison!

Bukharin: What?

Khlopliankin: You should have been thrown in prison a long time ago!

Bukharin: Well, go on, throw me in prison. So you think the fact that you are yelling: 'Throw him in prison!' will make me talk differently? No, it won't.⁶⁶

The Central Committee was concerned neither with the objective truth-value nor with the subjective sincerity of Bukharin's proclamations of innocence; it was interested only in what kind of 'signal' his reluctance to confess was sending to the Party and the public: a 'signal' that, ultimately, the entire 'Trotskyist–Zinovievist trial' was a ritualistic farce. By refusing to confess, Bukharin and Rykov

'give their signals to their like-minded friends, namely: Work in greater secrecy. If you are caught, don't confess. That's their policy. Not only have they cast doubt on the investigation in pursuing their defense. In defending themselves, they have also necessarily cast doubt on the Trotskyist–Zinovievist trial.'⁶⁷

Nevertheless, Bukharin heroically stuck to his subjectivity to the end – in his letter to Stalin dated 10 December 1937, while making it clear that he will obey the ritual *in public* ('In order to avoid any misunderstandings, I will say to you from the outset that, as far as the *world at large* (society) is concerned . . . I have no intention of recanting anything I've written down (confessed)'⁶⁸), he still desperately addressed Stalin as a person, professing his innocence:

Oh, Lord, if only there were some device which would have

made it possible for you to see my soul flayed and ripped open! If only you could see how I am attached to you, body and soul. . . . Well, so much for 'psychology' – forgive me. No angel will appear now to snatch Abraham's sword from his hand. My fatal destiny shall be fulfilled.

. . . My conscience is clear before you now, Koba. I ask you one final time for your forgiveness (only in your heart, not otherwise). For that reason I embrace you in my mind. Farewell and remember kindly your wretched N. Bukharin.⁶⁹

What causes Bukharin such trauma is not the ritual of his public humiliation and punishment, but the possibility that Stalin might really believe the charges against him:

There is something *great and bold* about the *political idea* of a general purge. . . . I know all too well that *great* plans, *great* ideas, and *great* interests take **precedence** over everything, and I know that it would be petty for me to place the question of my own person *on apar* with the *universal-historical* resting, first and foremost, on your shoulders. But it is here that I feel my *deepest* agony and find myself facing my chief, agonizing paradox.

. . . *If* I were absolutely sure that your thoughts ran precisely along this **path**, then I would feel so much more at peace with myself. Well, so what! If it must be, then so be it! But believe me, my heart boils over when I think that you might *believe* that I am **guilty** of these crimes and that in your heart of hearts you *yourself* think that *I* am really

guilty of all these horrors. *In that case*, what would it

One should be very attentive to the meaning of these lines. Within the standard logic of guilt and responsibility, Stalin could have been pardoned if he were really to believe in Bukharin's guilt, while his accusing of Bukharin in the case of being aware of his innocence would have been an unpardonable ethical sin. Bukharin inverts this relationship: if Stalin accuses Bukharin of monstrous crimes while he is fully aware that these accusations are false, he is behaving like a proper Bolshevik, placing the needs of the Party above the needs of the individual, which is totally acceptable to Bukharin. What is absolutely unbearable to him, on the contrary, is the possibility that Stalin *really believes* in his guilt.

Stalinist jouissance

Thus Bukharin still clings to the logic of *confession* deployed by Foucault – as if the Stalinist demand for a confession was actually aimed at the accused's deep self-examination, which would unearth the most intimate secret in his heart of hearts. More precisely, Bukharin's fatal mistake was to think that he could, in a way, have his cake and eat it: to the very end, while professing utter devotion to the Party and to Stalin personally, he was not ready to renounce the minimum of subjective autonomy. He was ready to plead *guilty in public* if the Party needed his confession, but he wanted it to be made clear in the inner circle, among his comrades, that he was not really guilty, but merely *agreed* to play the necessary role in the public ritual. This, precisely, the

Party could not grant him: the ritual loses its performative power the moment it is explicitly designated as a mere ritual. No wonder that, when Bukharin and other accused insisted on their innocence, the Central Committee perceived this as an inadmissible tormenting of the Party by the accused: it is not the accused who are tormented by the Party, it is the Party leadership that is tormented by those who refuse to confess their crimes – and some members of the Central Committee even praised Stalin's 'angelic patience' which allowed the accused to go on tormenting the Party for years, instead of fully acknowledging that they were scum, vipers to be exterminated:

Mezhlauk: I ought to tell you that we are not tormenting you. On the contrary, you are tormenting us in the basest, most impermissible way.

Voices: That's right! That's right! . . .

Mezhlauk: You have been tormenting the party over many, many years, and it is only thanks to the angelic patience of Comrade Stalin that we have not torn you politically to pieces for your vile, terroristic work. . . . Pitiful cowards, base cowards. There is no place for you either on the Central Committee or in the party. The only place for you is in the hands of the investigative organs, where you will no doubt talk differently, because here at the plenum you've lacked the most basic courage which one of your own disciples, Zaitsev by name – perverted by you – had when he said, speaking about both himself and you: 'I am a viper and I ask Soviet power to exterminate me like a viper.'"

Thus Bukharin's guilt is in a way purely formal: it is not the guilt of committing the crimes of which he is accused, but the guilt of persisting in the position of subjective autonomy from which one's guilt can be discussed on the level of facts – in the position which openly proclaims the gap between reality and the ritual of confession. For the Central Committee, the ultimate form of treason is *this very sticking to the minimum of personal autonomy*. Bukharin's message to the Central Committee was: 'I am ready to give you everything *but that* (the empty form of my personal autonomy)! – and, of course, it was precisely this that the Central Committee wanted from him more than anything else.

What is interesting here is how subjective authenticity and the examination of objective facts are not opposed but put together, as two sides of the same treacherous behaviour, both opposed to Party ritual. And the ultimate proof that such disregard for the facts had a certain paradoxical ethical dignity is that we also find it in the opposite, 'positive' case – say, of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, who, although they were *guilty* of spying, as recent declassified documents demonstrate, heroically insisted on their innocence right up to the death chamber, fully aware that a confession would have spared their lives. In a way, they were 'lying sincerely': although they were factually guilty, they were not *guilty* in a 'deeper' sense – *precisely in the sense in which the accused in the Stalinist trials were guilty, even if they were factually innocent*.

So, to put things in a proper perspective: ultimately, the Central Committee members' criticism of Bukharin was that he was not *ruthless* enough, that he retained traces of human weakness, of 'soft-heartedness':

Voroshilov: Bukharin is a sincere and honest man, but I fear for Bukharin no less than for Tomsy and Rykov. Why do I fear for Bukharin? Because he is a soft-hearted person. Whether this is good or bad I do not know, but in our present situation this soft-heartedness is not needed. It is a poor assistant and adviser in matters of policy because it, this soft-heartedness, may undermine not only the soft-hearted person himself but also the party's cause. Bukharin is a very soft-hearted person.⁷²

In Kantian terms, this 'soft-heartedness' (in which it is easy to recognize a distant echo of Lenin's reaction against listening to Beethoven's *Appassionata*: one must not listen to such music too much, because it makes you soft, and all of a sudden you want to cuddle your enemies instead of mercilessly destroying them . . .) is, of course, the remainder of the 'pathological' sentimentality that blurs the subject's pure ethical stance. And here, at this key point, it is crucial to resist the 'humanist' temptation of opposing to this Stalinist ruthless self-instrumentalization any kind of 'Bukharinian' natural goodness, any tender understanding of and compassion for common human frailty, as if the problem with the Stalinist Communists was their ruthless, self-obliterating dedication to the Communist cause, which turned them into monstrous ethical automata and made them forget common human feelings and sympathies. On the contrary, the problem with the Stalinist Communists was that they were not pure' enough, and got caught up in the perverse economy of duty: 'I know this is heavy and can be painful, but what can I do? This is my duty...'

The standard motto of ethical rigour is 'There is no excuse for not accomplishing one's duty!'; although Kant's '*Du kannst, denn du sollst!*' [You can, because you must!]' seems to offer a new version of this motto, he implicitly complements it with its much more uncanny inversion: 'There is no excuse for *accomplishing* one's duty!'⁷³ The reference to duty as the excuse for doing our duty should be rejected as hypocritical; suffice it to recall the proverbial example of a severe sadistic teacher who subjects his pupils to merciless discipline and torture. Of course, his excuse to himself (and to others) is: 'I myself find it hard to exert such pressure on the poor kids, but what can I do – it's my duty!' The more pertinent example is precisely that of a Stalinist Communist who loves humankind, but none the less performs horrible purges and executions; his heart is breaking while he's doing it, but he can't help it, it's his Duty towards the Progress of Humanity. . . . What we encounter here is the properly *perverse* attitude of adopting the position of the pure instrument of the big Other's Will: it's not my responsibility, it's not I who am actually doing it, I am merely an instrument of a higher Historical Necessity. The obscene *jouissance* of this situation is generated by the fact that I conceive of myself as exculpated for what I am doing: isn't it nice to be able to inflict pain on others in the full awareness that I'm not responsible for it, that I am merely an agent of the Other's Will? . . . This is what Kantian ethics prohibits. This position of the sadistic pervert provides the answer to the question: How can the subject be guilty when he merely realizes an 'objective', externally imposed necessity? By subjectively assuming this 'objective necessity' – by deriving *enjoyment* from what is imposed on him.⁷⁴ So, at its most radical, Kantian ethics is *not* 'sadistic', but

precisely what prohibits assuming the position of a Sadeian executioner.

What, then, does this tell us about the respective status of coldness in Kant and in Sade? The conclusion to be drawn is not that Sade sticks to cruel coldness, while Kant somehow has to allow for human compassion, but quite the opposite: it is only the Kantian subject that is in fact thoroughly cold (apathetic), while the sadist is not 'cold' *enough*, his 'apathy' is a fake, a lure concealing his all-too-passionate engagement on behalf of the Other's *jouissance*. And, of course, the same goes for the passage from Lenin to Stalin: the revolutionary political counterpoint to Lacan's *Kant avec Sade* is undoubtedly *Lenin avec Stalin* – it is only with Stalin that the Leninist revolutionary subject turns into the perverse object-instrument of the big Other's *jouissance*.

Lenin versus Stalin

Let us make this point clear apropos of Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness*, the attempt to deploy the philosophical stance of Leninist revolutionary practice. Can Lukács really be dismissed as the advocate of such a pseudo-Hegelian assertion of the proletariat as the absolute Subject–Object of History? Let us focus on the concrete political background of *History and Class Consciousness*, in which Lukács still speaks as a fully engaged revolutionary. To put it in somewhat rough and simplified terms: the choice, for the revolutionary forces in the Russia of 1917, in the difficult situation in which the bourgeoisie was unable to bring the democratic revolution to an end, was as follows:

- On the one hand, the Menshevik stance was that of obedience to the logic of the 'objective stages of development': first democratic revolution, then proletarian revolution. In the whirlpool of 1917, instead of capitalizing on the gradual disintegration of state apparatuses and building upon the widespread popular discontent and resistance against the Provisional Government, all radical parties should resist the temptation to push the movement too far and, rather, join forces with democratic bourgeois elements in order first to achieve the democratic revolution, waiting patiently for the 'mature' revolutionary situation. From this point of view, a socialist takeover in 1917, when the situation was not yet 'ripe', would trigger a regression to primitive terror. . . . (Although this fear of the catastrophic terrorist consequences of a 'premature' uprising may seem to augur the shadow of Stalinism, the ideology of Stalinism in fact marks a *return* to this 'objectivist' logic of the necessary stages of development.)⁷⁵
- On the other hand, the Leninist stance was to take a leap, throwing oneself into the paradox of the situation, seizing the opportunity and *intervening*, even if the situation was 'premature', with a wager that *this very 'premature' intervention would radically change the 'objective' relationship offerees itself, within which the initial situation appeared 'premature'* – that it would undermine the very standard to which reference told us that the situation was 'premature'.

Here, one must be careful not to miss the point: it is not that Lenin, in contrast to the Mensheviks and sceptics among the

Bolsheviks themselves, thought that the complex situation of 1917 – the growing dissatisfaction of the broad masses with the irresolute politics of the Provisional Government – offered a unique chance of 'jumping over' one phase (the democratic bourgeois revolution), of 'condensing' the two necessary consecutive stages (democratic bourgeois revolution and proletarian revolution) into one. Such a notion still accepts the fundamental underlying objectivist 'reified' logic of the 'necessary stages of development'; it merely allows for the different rhythm of its course in different concrete circumstances (i.e. in some countries, the second stage can immediately follow the first). In contrast to this, Lenin's point is much stronger: ultimately, *there is no objective logic of the 'necessary stages of development'*, since 'complications' arising from the intricate texture of concrete situations and/or from the unanticipated results of 'subjective' interventions always disrupt the smooth course of things.

As Lenin shrewdly observed, the fact of colonialism and the overexploited masses in Asia, Africa and Latin America radically affects and 'displaces' the 'straight' class struggle in developed capitalist countries – to talk about 'class struggle' without taking colonialism into account is an empty abstraction which, translated into practical politics, can result only in condoning the 'civilizing' role of colonialism and thus, by subordinating the anticolonialist struggle of the Asian masses to the 'true' class struggle in developed Western states, *de facto* accepting that the bourgeoisie defines the terms of the class struggle. . . . (Again, one can discern here an unexpected closeness to Althusserian 'overdetermination': there is no ultimate rule so that, with reference to it, one can measure 'exceptions' –

in actual history there are, in a way, only exceptions.) One is tempted to resort here to Lacanian terms: what is at stake in this alternative is the (non-)existence of the 'big Other': the Mensheviks relied on the all-embracing foundation of the positive logic of historical development; while the Bolsheviks (Lenin, at least) were aware that 'the big Other doesn't exist' – a political intervention proper does not occur within the co-ordinates of some underlying global matrix, since what it achieves is precisely the 'reshuffling' of this very matrix.

This, then, is why Lukács had such admiration for Lenin: his Lenin was the one who, apropos of the split in Russian Social Democracy into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, when the two factions fought over a precise formulation of who can be a Party member as defined in the Party programme, wrote: 'Sometimes, the fate of the entire working-class movement for long years to come can be decided by a word or two in the party programme.'⁷⁶ Or the Lenin who, when he saw the chance for the revolutionary takeover in late 1917, said: 'History will never forgive us if we miss this opportunity!'⁷⁷ On a more general level, the history of capitalism is a long history of how the predominant ideologico-political framework was able to accommodate (and soften the subversive edge of) the movements and demands that seemed to threaten its very survival.

For a long time, for instance, sexual libertarians thought that monogamous sexual repression was necessary for the survival of capitalism – now we know that capitalists can not only tolerate but even actively incite and exploit forms of 'perverse' sexuality, not to mention promiscuous indulgence in sexual pleasures. The conclusion to be drawn is not, however, that capitalism has the

endless ability to integrate, and thus cut off, the subversive edge of all particular demands – the question of timing, of 'seizing the moment', is crucial here. A certain particular demand possesses, at a certain moment, a global detonating power; it functions as a metaphorical stand-in for the global revolution: if we insist on it unconditionally, the system will explode; if, however, we wait too long, the metaphorical short circuit between this particular demand and global overthrow is dissolved, and the System can, with sneering hypocritical satisfaction, make the gesture of 'You wanted this? Now you've got it!', without anything really radical happening.

The art of what Lukács called *Augenblick* (the *moment* when, briefly, there is an opening for an *act* to intervene in a situation) is the art of seizing the right moment, of aggravating the conflict *before* the System can accommodate to our demand. So here we have a Lukács who is much more 'Gramscian' and conjecturalist/contingentian than is usually assumed – the Lukacsian *Augenblick* is unexpectedly close to what, today, Alain Badiou endeavours to formulate as the Event: an intervention that cannot be accounted for in terms of its pre-existing 'objective conditions'.⁷⁸ The crux of Lukács's argumentation is to reject the reduction of the act to its 'historical circumstances': there are no neutral 'objective conditions' – that is to say (in Hegelese): all presuppositions are already minimally posited.

When discourse implodes

The key to the social dynamics of Stalinism lies in its *exception*: in the unique moment when, for a couple of months in the second

half of 1937, its ritualistic discourse broke down. That is to say: until 1937, purges and trials followed a pattern with clear rules, solidifying the *nomenklatura*, cementing its unity, providing an account of the causes of failures in the guise of ritualized scapegoating (there is famine, chaos in industry, etc., *because* of the Trotskyite saboteurs . . .). With the highest point of the terror in autumn 1937, however, the implicit discursive rules were broken by Stalin himself: in an all-against-all orgy of destruction, the *nomenklatura*, including its highest strata, started to devour and destroy *itself*—a process aptly designated the 'Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks' ('The Storm of 1937: The Party Commits Suicide', as one of the subtitles of *The Road to Terror* reads) — this period, 'that of the "blind terror," marks the temporary eclipse of the discursive strategy. It is as if the Stalinists, prisoners of their fears and iron discipline, had decided that they could not rule any longer by rhetorical means.'⁷⁹

For this reason, the texts on mass shootings in this period were no longer the usual normative/prescriptive ritualized incantations aimed at disciplining the broad public of rank-and-file Party members and the population at large. Even the empty symbols of the enemies ('Trotskyites') which, in each previous stage of the terror, were filled with new content, were now largely dropped — what remained was just the fluctuating targeting of new arbitrary groups: different 'suspicious' nationalities (Germans, Poles, Estonians . . .), stamp collectors with foreign contacts, Soviet citizens studying Esperanto, right up to Mongolian lamas — all this just to help the executioners to meet the quotas of liquidations that each district had to fulfil (these quotas were decided by the Politburo in Moscow as a kind of

mock production target in central planning after a discussion, say, the weekly quota for the Soviet Far East was elevated from 1,500 to 2,000, and the quota for Ukraine dropped from 3,500 to 3,000). Here, even the paranoiac reference to anti-Soviet conspiracy was instrumentalized with regard to meeting the quotas for liquidations – first there was the formal, a priori act of determining quotas, and the ensuing fluctuating categorizations of enemies (English spies, Trotskyites, saboteurs . . .) were ultimately reduced to a procedure that allowed the executioners to identify individuals to be arrested and shot:

This was not a targeting of enemies, but blind rage and panic. It reflected not control of events but a recognition that the regime lacked regularized control mechanisms. It was not policy but the failure of policy. It was a sign of failure to rule with anything but force.⁸⁰

So, at this unique point, we pass from language as *discourse*, as social link, to language as pure *instrument*. And what should be emphasized again and again, against the standard liberal demonizing vision of Stalin as a perverse Master systematically pursuing a diabolical plan of mass murder, is that this extremely brutal violent exercise of power as power over life and death coincided with – or, rather, was the expression of, the mode of existence of – its exact opposite, a total incapacity to govern the country through 'normal' authority and executive measures. During the Stalinist terror, the Politburo acted in panic, trying desperately to master and regulate events, to get the situation under control.

This implicit acknowledgement of impotence is also the hidden truth of the divinization of the Stalinist Leader into a supreme Genius who can give advice on almost any topic, from how to repair a tractor to how to cultivate flowers: what this Leader's intervention in everyday life means is that things do not function on the most everyday level – what kind of country is this, in which the supreme Leader himself has to dispense advice about how to repair tractors? It is here that we should recall Stalin's condemnation of (the accused individual's) suicide as a plot to deal the last blow to the Party (quoted above): perhaps we should read the suicide of the Party itself in late **1937** in the opposite way – not as a 'signal', but as an authentic act by the collective subject, beyond any instrumentality.

In his analysis of the paranoia of the German judge Schreber, Freud reminds us that what we usually consider madness (the paranoiac scenario of the conspiracy against the subject) is in fact already an attempt at recovery: after complete psychotic breakdown, the paranoiac construct is an attempt by the subject to re-establish a kind of order in his universe, a frame of reference enabling him to acquire a 'cognitive mapping'.⁸¹ Along the same lines one is tempted to claim that when, in late **1937**, the Stalinist paranoiac discourse reached its apogee and set in motion its own dissolution as a social link, the **1938** arrest and liquidation of Yezhov himself, Stalin's main executioner in **1937**, was in effect an attempt at recovery, at stabilizing the uncontrolled frenzy of self-destruction that broke out in **1937**: the purge of Yezhov was a kind of meta-purge, the purge to end all purges (he was accused precisely of killing thousands of innocent Bolsheviks on behalf of foreign powers – the irony of it

being that the accusation was literally true: he *did* organize the killing of thousands of innocent Bolsheviks . . .). The crucial point, however, is that although here we are reaching the limits of the Social, the level on which the socio-symbolic link itself is approaching its self-destructive dissolution, this very excess was none the less generated by a precise dynamic of the *social* struggle, by a series of shifting alignments and realignments between the very top of the regime (Stalin and his narrow circle), the upper nomenklatura, and rank-and-file Party members:

Thus in 1933 and 1935 Stalin and the Politburo united with all levels of the nomenklatura elite to screen, or purge, a helpless rank and file. The regional leaders then used those purges to consolidate their machines and expel 'inconvenient' people. This, in turn, brought about another alignment in 1936, in which Stalin and the Moscow nomenklatura sided with the rank and file, who complained of repression by the regional elites. In 1937 Stalin openly mobilized the 'party masses' against the nomenklatura as a whole; this provided an important strand in the Great Terror's destruction of the elite. But in 1938 the Politburo changed alignments and reinforced the authority of the regional nomenklatura as part of an attempt to restore order in the party during the terror.'''

So the situation exploded when Stalin made the risky move of directly appealing to the lower rank-and-file members themselves, encouraging them to articulate their complaint against

the arbitrary rule of the local Party bosses (a move similar to Mao's Great Cultural Revolution) – their fury at the regime, unable to express itself directly, exploded all the more viciously against the personalized substitute targets. Since at the same time the upper *nomenklatura* retained its executive power in the purges themselves as well, this set in motion a self-destructive vicious cycle in which virtually *everyone* was threatened (of 82 district Party secretaries, 79 were shot).

Another aspect of the spiralling vicious cycle was the very fluctuations of the directives from the top as to the thoroughness of the purges: the top demanded harsh measures, while simultaneously warning against excesses, so the executors were put in an untenable position – ultimately, whatever they did was wrong. If they did not arrest enough traitors and discover enough conspiracies, they were considered lenient and supporters of counter-revolution; so, under this pressure, in order to meet the quota, as it were, they had to fabricate evidence and invent plots – thereby exposing themselves to the criticism that they themselves were saboteurs, destroying thousands of honest Communists on behalf of foreign powers. . . . Stalin's strategy of addressing the party masses directly, co-opting their anti-bureaucratic attitudes, was therefore very risky:

This not only threatened to open elite politics to public scrutiny but also risked discrediting the entire Bolshevik regime, of which Stalin himself was a part. . . . Finally, in 1937, Stalin broke all the rules of the game – indeed, destroyed the game completely – and unleashed a terror of all against all.⁸³

The shifting situation that arose from this 'breaking of all rules' was not without its horrifyingly comic moments: when, in spring 1937, Dmitri Shostakovich was ordered to appear at NKVD headquarters, he was received by Zanchevsky, an investigator who, after a friendly introductory chat, started to inquire into Shostakovich's contacts with the already arrested Marshal Tukhachevsky: 'It cannot be that you were at his home and that you did not talk about politics. For instance, the plot to assassinate Comrade Stalin?' When Shostakovich continued to deny any conversation about politics, Zanchevsky told him: 'All right, today is Saturday, and you can go now. But I only give you until Monday. By that day you will without fail remember everything. You must recall every detail of the discussion regarding the plot against Stalin of which you were a witness.' Shostakovich spent a nightmarish weekend at home, then returned to NKVD headquarters on Monday morning, ready to be arrested. However, when he announced his name at the entrance and said that he had come to see Zanchevsky, he was informed, 'Zanchevsky isn't coming in today' – during this weekend, Zanchevsky himself had been arrested as a spy.⁸⁴

Excursus: Shostakovich and the resistance to Stalinism

So how did Shostakovich himself stand with regard to official Party discourse? After the publication of Volkov's problematic memoirs of Shostakovich, it became fashionable to praise Shostakovich as the ultimate heroic closet dissident, as living proof of how, even in the most horrible conditions at the height of Stalinism, it was possible to get the radically critical message

through. The problem with such a reading is that it presupposes an impossible split: when we learn, for instance, that the 'true meaning' of the finale of the Fifth Symphony is sarcastic – to mock the Stalinist injunction to be happy (so that its triumphant rhythmic pounding is in fact the pounding of so many nails into a coffin, as Rostropovich put it); or that the 'true meaning' of the First Movement of the Leningrad Symphony is to portray the terrorist march of the *Communist* (not the German Army's) conquest; or that of the Eleventh Symphony to portray the explosion not of the revolution of 1905, but of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 (which is why, allegedly, upon hearing it on the piano, Shostakovich's son Maxim said to his father: 'They will shoot you for this!'), and so on.

The idea is that this true message was *absolutely transparent* to all fellow dissidents, even to the thousands of ordinary people who reacted enthusiastically to this music (to anyone 'with ears to hear', as it is usually put⁸⁵); yet at the same time, in some mysterious way, *absolutely opaque* to those in power, to the cultural and political *nomenklatura*. Were the *nomenklatura* really so incredibly stupid that they did not get what hundreds of thousands of ordinary people got? What if the solution is much simpler, and we should merely conclude that *one and the same* listener was able to move on both levels, just as classic Hollywood, controlled by the Hayes Code, mobilized two levels: the explicit, ideologically innocent texture and the underlying (sexually) transgressive message.⁸⁶

Unfortunately, the notion of a 'closet dissident' is an oxymoron: the very essence of a dissident act is that it is *public*; like the proverbial child from Andersen's 'The Emperor's New

Clothes', it says openly, to the big Other, what others only privately whisper about. So it is Shostakovich's very inner distance towards the 'official' Socialist reading of his symphonies that makes him a prototypical Soviet composer – this distance is constitutive of ideology, while authors who fully (over)identified with the official ideology, like Alexander Medvedkin, the Soviet Filmmaker portrayed in Chris Marker's documentary *The Last Bolshevik*, run into trouble. Every Party functionary, right up to Stalin himself, was in a way a 'closet dissident', talking privately about themes prohibited in public.

Furthermore, such a celebration of Shostakovich as a closet heroic dissident is not only factually false, it even occludes the true greatness of his late music. Even to a listener with minimal sensitivity, it is clear that his (deservedly famous) string quartets are not heroic statements defying the totalitarian regime, but a desperate comment on Shostakovich's own cowardice and opportunism: Shostakovich's artistic integrity lies in the fact that he fully articulated in his music his inner turmoil, the mixture of despair, melancholic lethargy, explosions of impotent rage, even self-hatred, instead of presenting himself as a closet hero. The fact that his very famous Eighth String Quartet was composed at the time when Shostakovich finally succumbed to pressure and became a member of the Communist Party – a compromise which drove him to an almost suicidal despair – is crucial: this is the music of a broken man, if ever there was one.

The well-known cliché about a Russian oscillating between melancholic depression and outbursts of impotent rage thus loses the ahistorical character of an 'archetype' and becomes grounded in a concrete sociopolitical constellation of the moral

compromises imposed on the artist in the Stalinist era. Quartet No. 8, for example, with its movement from moody depression ('Slavonic melancholy sadness') to a maniac outburst of rage, and then back to depression, fits this Slavonic cliché perfectly. (It is in fact as if the standard inner movement of the classic sonata form – the harmonious beginning, the outburst and development of the conflict, the final resolution of the tension and the return to harmony – is repeated here in an uncannily mocking way: from melancholic lethargy to impotent outburst, then back to the initial lethargy.) However, the much-praised ascetic wealth of Shostakovich's quartets, their subdued bitterness, is the paradoxical result of (his reaction to) the traumatic intervention of Stalinist politics, which cut short his satirical-experimental playfulness.

The big traumatic cut in Shostakovich's life was the brutal rejection of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* in 1936, launched by Stalin himself, who furiously left the performance after the first two acts. As a result of this rejection, Shostakovich withdrew from the public stage for two years, then bought his way back into political mercy with his proto-Socialist-Realist Fifth symphony. Here we witness a true shift of paradigms: from the early Shostakovich, a brilliant musical satirist and experimenter, to the epic musical tragedian who reverted to traditional forms, progressing from minor-key lyric sadness to the thumping cacophony of the victorious 'Red Square Parade' finale. The early Shostakovich, however, does not simply vanish, but re-emerges transformed as the shadowy double of the late one. Even his great 'Stalinist' works (for instance, the Fifth Symphony) remain deeply ambiguous: yes, they are imposed,

written to order, to please the Master, in contrast to the 'intimate' works. Precisely as such, however, these works seem to satisfy a certain 'perverse' need of the composer that was absolutely authentic. Shostakovich himself claimed that the Finale of the Fifth Symphony expresses the ironically distorted/exaggerated acceptance of the (superego) order to 'be happy and enjoy life', as if reproducing musically the repetitive striking of a hammer driving into you the obscene injunction 'Be happy! Be happy!'. Yet this acceptance, in its very exaggerated distortion, produces a satisfaction of its own. So even if we accept Shostakovich's claim that the finale of his Fifth is meant ironically, it is not the irony he has in mind (a critical portrayal of the official optimism), but the much more ambiguous acknowledgement of the obscene power of the injunction to be happy that affects us from within, haunting us as a devilish spectre.

The radical ambiguity of Stalinism

In the notion of social antagonism, *intrasocial* differences (the topic of concrete social analysis) overlap with the difference between the Social as such and its Other. This overlapping becomes evident at the apogee of Stalinism, where the enemy is explicitly designated as non-human, as the excrement of humanity: the struggle of the Stalinist Party against the enemy becomes the struggle of humanity itself against its non-human excrement. (On a different level, the same goes for Nazi anti-Semitism; this is why Jews are also denied their basic humanity.)

Precisely as Marxists, we should have no fear in acknowledging that the purges under Stalinism were in a way more

'irrational' than Fascist violence: paradoxically, this very excess is an unmistakable sign that Stalinism, in contrast to Fascism, was the case of a perverted *authentic* revolution. In Fascism, even in Nazi Germany, it was possible to survive, to maintain the appearance of a 'normal' everyday life, if one did not involve oneself in any oppositional political activity (and, of course, if one were not of Jewish origin . . .); while in the Stalinism of the late 1930s, no one was safe, *everyone* could be unexpectedly denounced, arrested and shot as a traitor. In other words, the 'irrationality' of Nazism was 'condensed' in anti-Semitism, in its belief in the Jewish Plot; while Stalinist 'irrationality' pervaded the entire social body. For that reason, Nazi police investigators were still looking for proof and traces of actual activity against the regime, while Stalinist investigators were engaged in clear and unambiguous fabrications (invented plots and sabotage, etc.).

This very violence inflicted by the Communist Power on its own members, however, bears witness to the radical self-contradiction of the regime – to the fact that at the origins of the regime there was an 'authentic' revolutionary project: incessant purges were necessary not *only* to erase the traces of the regime's own origins, but also as a kind of 'return of the repressed', a reminder of the radical negativity at the heart of the regime. The Stalinist purges of senior Party echelons relied on this fundamental betrayal: the accused were actually *guilty* in so far as they, as members of the new *nomenklatura*, betrayed the Revolution. Thus the Stalinist terror is not simply the betrayal of the Revolution – the attempt to erase the traces of the authentic revolutionary past; rather, it bears witness to a kind of 'imp of perversity' which

compels the post-revolutionary new order to (re)inscribe its betrayal of the Revolution within itself, to 're-mark' it in the guise of arbitrary arrests and killings which threatened all members of the *nomenklatura* – as in psychoanalysis, the Stalinist confession of guilt conceals the true guilt. (As is well known, Stalin wisely recruited into the NKVD people of lower social origins who were thus able to act out their hatred of the *nomenklatura* by arresting and torturing senior apparatchiks.)

This inherent tension between the stability of the rule of the new *nomenklatura* and the perverted 'return of the repressed' in the guise of repeated purges of the ranks of the *nomenklatura* is at the very heart of the Stalinist phenomenon: purges are the very form in which the betrayed revolutionary heritage survives and haunts the regime. The dream of Gennadi Zyuganov, the Communist presidential candidate in 1996 (things would have been all right in the Soviet Union if only Stalin had lived at least five years longer, and accomplished his final project of having done with cosmopolitanism and bringing about a reconciliation between the Russian state and the Orthodox Church – in other words, if only Stalin had carried out his anti-Semitic purge . . .) aims precisely at the point of pacification at which the revolutionary regime would finally get rid of its inherent tension and stabilize itself – the paradox, of course, is that in order to attain this stability, Stalin's last purge, the planned 'mother of all purges' which was to have taken place in the summer of 1953 and was prevented by his death, would have had to succeed.

Here, perhaps, Trotsky's classic analysis of the Stalinist 'Thermidor' is not fully adequate: the actual Thermidor happened only after Stalin's death (or, rather, even after

Khrushchev's fall), with the Brezhnev years of 'stagnation', when the *nomenklatura* finally stabilized itself into a 'new class'. Stalinism proper is, rather, the enigmatic 'vanishing mediator' between the authentic Leninist revolutionary outburst and its Thermidor. On the other hand, Trotsky was right in predicting in the 1930s that the Soviet regime could end in only one of two ways: either the workers would revolt against it, or the *nomenklatura* would no longer be satisfied with political power, but would convert itself into capitalists who would directly own the means of production. And – as *The Road to Terror* claims in its last paragraph, with a direct reference to Trotsky⁸⁷ – this second outcome is what actually happened: the great majority of the new private owners of the means of production in ex-Socialist countries, especially in the Soviet Union, are members of the *ex-nomenklatura*, so one would say that the main event of the disintegration of 'actually existing Socialism' was the transformation of the *nomenklatura* into a class of private owners. The ultimate irony, however, is that the two opposite outcomes predicted by Trotsky seem to have combined in a strange way: what enabled the *nomenklatura* to become the direct owners of the means of production was the resistance to their political rule, whose key component – at least in some cases (Solidarity in Poland) – was the workers' revolt against the *nomenklatura*.

As Alain Badiou has pointed out,⁸⁸ despite its horrors and failures, 'actually existing Socialism' was the only political force that – for some decades, at least – seemed to pose an *effective* threat to the global rule of capitalism, really scaring its representatives, driving them into paranoiac reaction. Since, today, capitalism defines and structures the *totality* of human civilization,

every 'Communist' territory was and is – again, despite its horrors and failures – a kind of 'liberated territory', as Fredric Jameson put it apropos of Cuba.⁸⁹ What we are dealing with here is the old structural notion of the gap between the Space and the positive content that Fills it: although the Communist regimes, in their positive content, were mostly a dismal failure, generating terror and misery, they simultaneously opened up a certain space, the space of utopian expectations which, among other things, enabled us to measure the failure of actually existing Socialism itself. What anti-Communist dissidents tend, as a rule, to overlook is that the very space from which they themselves criticized and denounced the day-to-day terror and misery was opened and sustained by the Communist breakthrough, by its attempt to escape the logic of Capital. In short, when dissidents like Havel denounced the existing Communist regime on behalf of authentic human solidarity, they (unwittingly, for the most part) spoke from the place opened up by Communism itself – this is why they tend to be so disappointed when 'actually existing capitalism' does not meet the high expectations of their anti-Communist struggle. Perhaps Václav Klaus, Havel's pragmatic double, was right when he dismissed Havel as a 'Socialist'.

So the difficult task is to confront the radical ambiguity of Stalinist ideology which, even at its most 'totalitarian', still exudes an emancipatory potential. From my youth, I remember the memorable scene from a Soviet film about the civil war in 1919, in which the Bolsheviks organize the public trial of a mother with a diseased young son, who is unmasked as a spy for the counter-revolutionary White forces. At the very beginning of the trial, an old Bolshevik strokes his long white moustache and

says: 'The sentence must be severe, but just!' The revolutionary court (the collective of the Bolshevik fighters) establishes that the cause of her enemy activity was her difficult social circumstances; the sentence is therefore that she should be fully integrated into the Socialist collective, taught to write and read and to acquire a proper education, while her son is to be given proper medical care. While the surprised mother bursts out crying, unable to understand the court's benevolence, the old Bolshevik again strokes his moustache and nods his approval: 'Yes, this is a severe but just sentence!'

It is easy to claim, in a quick pseudo-Marxist way, that such scenes were simply the ideological legitimization of the most brutal terror. However, no matter how manipulative this scene is, no matter how contradicted it was by the arbitrary harshness of actual 'revolutionary justice', it none the less provided the spectators with new ethical standards by which reality was to be measured – the shocking outcome of this exercise of the revolutionary justice, the unexpected rechannelling of 'severity' into severity towards social circumstances and *generosity* towards people, cannot fail to produce a sublime effect. In short, what we have here is an exemplary case of what Lacan called the 'quilting point [*point de capiton*]', of an intervention that changes the coordinates of the very field of meaning: instead of pleading for generous tolerance against severe justice, the old Bolshevik *redefines the meaning of 'severe justice' itself in terms of excessive forgiveness and generosity*. Even if this appearance is deceptive, there is in a sense more truth in this appearance than in the harsh social reality that generated it.

However, there was something even more crucial at stake in

the failed 'real Socialist' venture: the idea – whose impact was at its strongest in the German Democratic Republic – of labour (material, industrial production) as the privileged site of community and solidarity: not only does engagement in the collective effort of production bring satisfaction in itself; private problems themselves (from divorce to illness) are put into their proper perspective by being discussed in one's working collective. This notion, the focus of what is arguably the ultimate GDR novel, Christa Wolf's *Divided Heaven*,⁹⁰ is to be confused neither with the premodern notion of work as a ritualized communal activity, nor with the nostalgic celebration of old industrial forms of production (say, the pseudo-Romanticism of the authenticity of Welsh miners' lives in the style of *How Green Was My Valley*) – even less with the proto-Fascist celebration of artisanal manual work: the production group is a collective of modern individuals who discuss their problems rationally, not a ritualized archaic community.

Perhaps that is the ultimate cause of *Ostalgie*, of the continuing nostalgic attachment to the defunct 'real Socialism' – of the idea that despite all its failures and horrors, something precious was lost with its collapse. In today's ideological perception, work itself (manual labour as opposed to 'symbolic' activity), not sex, becomes the site of obscene indecency to be concealed from the public eye. The tradition which goes back to Wagner's *Rheingold* and Lang's *Metropolis*, the tradition in which the working process takes place underground, in dark caves, culminates today in the 'invisibility' of the millions of anonymous workers sweating in Third World factories, from Chinese Gulags to Indonesian or Brazilian assembly lines – the West can afford to babble about the

'disappearing working class', even when its traces are readily discernible all around us: all one should do is to note the small inscription 'Made in . . . (China, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Guatemala)' on mass-produced goods, from jeans to Walkmans. But what is crucial in this tradition is the equation of labour with *crime*: the idea that labour, hard work, is originally an indecent criminal activity to be hidden from the public eye.

Today, the two superpowers, the USA and China, relate more and more as Capital and Labour. The USA is turning into a country of managerial planning, banking, servicing, and so on, while its 'disappearing working class' (except for migrant Chicanos and others who work predominantly in the service economy) is reappearing in China, where a large proportion of US products, from toys to electronic hardware, is manufactured in conditions that are ideal for capitalist exploitation: no strikes, limited freedom of movement for the work force, low wages. . . . Far from being simply antagonistic, the relationship between China and the USA is therefore, at the same time, deeply symbiotic. The irony of history is that China fully deserves the title 'working-class state': it is the state of the working class for American Capital.

The only points in Hollywood films where we see the production process in all its intensity are when the action hero penetrates the master-criminal's secret domain and locates there the site of intense labour (distilling and packaging drugs, constructing a rocket that will destroy New York . . .). When, in a James Bond film, the master-criminal, after capturing Bond, usually takes him on a tour of his illegal factory, is this not the closest Hollywood comes to the proud socialist-realist

presentation of production in a factory? And the function of Bond's intervention, of course, is to explode this site of production in a ball of fire, allowing us to return to the daily semblance of our existence in a world with the 'disappearing working class'.

What explodes in this final orgy of violence in a James Bond film is thus a certain unique utopian moment in Western history: the moment at which the participation in the collective process of material labour was perceived as the site which can generate an authentic sense of community and solidarity. The dream was not to get rid of physical labour, but to find fulfilment in it as a collective experience, turning around the old biblical definition of labour as a punishment for Adam's Fall.

In his short book on Alexander Solzhenitsyn, one of his last works, Georg Lukács offers an enthusiastic appraisal of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the short novel which, for the first time in Soviet literature, depicted daily life in the Gulag (and whose publication had to be approved by Nikita Khrushchev, General Secretary of the Communist Party, himself).⁹¹ Lukács focuses on the scene in which, towards the end of his long working day, Ivan Denisovich rushes to complete a section of wall that he has been building; when he hears the guards' call for all prisoners to regroup for the march back to the camp, he cannot resist the temptation of quickly inserting the final couple of bricks, although he thereby risks the guards' wrath. Lukács reads this impetus to finish the work as an index of how, even in the brutal conditions of the Gulag, the specifically Socialist notion of material production as the site of creative fulfilment survived: when, in the evening, Ivan Denisovich takes a mental

overview of the past day, he notes with satisfaction that he has built a wall and enjoyed doing it. Lukács is right in his paradoxical claim that *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, this seminal dissident text, perfectly fits the most stringent definition of socialist realism.

This reference to (material) production is pivotal today, in the context of the ongoing digitalization of our lives. We live in the midst of an arduous revolution in the 'forces of production', whose much-publicized tangible effects (new and newer gadgets invading our lives) overshadow its much more far-reaching repercussions. The true question apropos of cyberspace and Virtual Reality is not 'What happens to our experience of reality? (i.e. all the boring trendy variations on 'Is real reality turning into just another cyberspace window?') but, rather: 'How does the interposition of the World Wide Web affect the status of intersubjectivity?' The true 'horror' of cyberspace is not that we are interacting with virtual entities as if they were human – treating virtual nonpersons as real persons but, rather, the opposite: in our very interaction with 'real' persons, who are more and more accessible only through their stand-ins in cyberspace, we are treating 'real' persons as virtual entities that can be harassed and slaughtered with impunity, since we interact with them only in Virtual Reality.

In these conditions, one is tempted to resuscitate the old, opprobrious and half-forgotten Marxian dialectics of the productive forces and the relations of production: how does this transformation affect not only the relations of production in the narrow sense of the term, but our entire social being, our practice and (ideological) experience of social interaction? Marx liked to

oppose revolutionary changes in the production process to the political revolution; his recurrent theme is that the steam engine and other eighteenth-century technological innovations did much more to revolutionize the whole of social life than all that century's spectacular political events. Is not this theme more relevant than ever today, when unprecedented changes in production are accompanied by a kind of lethargy in the domain of politics: while we are in the midst of a radical transformation of society whose ultimate consequences we seem unable to identify clearly, many radical thinkers (from Alain Badiou to Jacques Rancière) argue that the epoch of political acts proper is – at least for the time being – over.

What this paradox indicates, perhaps, is the need to repeat in the opposite direction the step, common to both Habermas and his 'deconstructionist' opponents, from production to symbolic activity, and to bring the focus back to *(material) production as opposed to participation in symbolic exchange*? For two philosophers as different as Heidegger and Badiou, material production is not the site of the 'authentic' Truth-Event (as are politics, philosophy, art . . .); deconstructionists usually start with the statement that production is also part of the discursive regime, not outside the domain of symbolic culture – and then go on to ignore it, and to focus more or less exclusively on culture. And is not this 'repression' of production reflected within the sphere of production itself, in the guise of the division between the virtual/symbolic site of 'creative' planning-programming and its execution, its material realization, done more and more in Third World sweat shops, from Indonesia or Brazil to China? This division – on the one hand, pure 'frictionless' planning, done on research

campuses or in 'abstract' glass-covered corporate high-rises; on the other hand, the 'invisible' **dirty** execution, taken into account by the planners mostly in the guise of 'environmental costs', and so on – is more and more radical today; the two sides are often even geographically separated by thousands of miles.

It is obvious that we are in the midst of a process in which a new constellation of productive forces and relations of production is taking shape; however, the terms we use to designate this emerging New ('postindustrial society', 'information society', etc.) are not yet true *concepts*. Like the notion of 'totalitarianism', they are theoretical *stopgaps*: instead of enabling us to think the historical reality they designate, they relieve us of the **duty** to think – or even actively *prevent* us from thinking. The standard retort of postmodern trendsetters, from Alvin Toffler to Jean Baudrillard, is: we cannot think this New because we remain stuck in the old industrial paradigm'. Against this cliché, one is tempted to assert that the exact *opposite* is true: what if all these attempts to *leave behind*, to erase from the picture, material production by conceptualizing the current mutation as the shift from production to information ignore the difficulty of thinking how this mutation affects *the structure of collective production itself*? In other words, what if the true task is precisely to conceive of the emerging New in the terms of collective material production?

It is crucial to take note of how this suspension of the importance of the sphere of (material) production is shared by liberal-conservative ideologists of 'postindustrial society' and their apparent opponents, the few remaining true political 'radicals'. Political 'extremism' or 'excessive radicalism' should always

be read as phenomena of ideologico-political *displacement*: as indices of their opposite, of a limitation, of a refusal actually to 'go to the end'. What was the Jacobins' recourse to radical 'terror' if not a kind of hysterical acting out bearing witness to their inability to disturb the very fundamentals of economic order (private property, etc.)? And does not the same go even for the so-called 'excesses' of Political Correctness? Do they also not symbolize a retreat from disturbing the real (economic, etc.) causes of racism and sexism?

Perhaps, then, the time has come to render problematic the standard *topos*, shared by practically all the 'postmodern' Leftists, according to which political 'totalitarianism' somehow results from the predominance of material production and technology over intersubjective communication and/or symbolic practice, as if the root of political terror lay in the fact that the principle of instrumental reason, of the technological exploitation of nature, is also extended to society, so that people are treated as raw material to be transformed into a New Man. What if it is the exact *opposite* which holds? What if political 'terror' indicates precisely that the sphere of (material) production is *denied* in its autonomy and *subordinated* to political logic? Is it not that all political 'terror', from the Jacobins to the Maoist Cultural Revolution, presupposes the Foreclosure of production proper, its reduction to the terrain of a political battle?⁹³

So where are we to look for a proletarian' today, in the era of the alleged 'disappearance of the working class'? Perhaps the proper way to approach this question is to focus on how the Marxian notion of the proletarian inverts Hegel's classic dialectic of Lord and Bondsman. In the struggle between the (future)

Lord and Bondsman as recounted in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the Lord is ready to put everything at stake, even up to his very life, and therefore attains freedom; while the Bondsman is bonded not directly to his Lord, but primarily to the objective, material world around him, to his environmental roots, ultimately to his life as such – he is the one who is not ready to put everything at risk, and for this reason he has to concede sovereignty to his Lord.

The well-known Soviet spy Alexandre Kojève read this Hegelian dialectic of Lord and Bondsman as the prefiguration of Marx's class struggle; he was right, if one only bears in mind that Marx inverted the terms. In the proletarian class struggle, it is the proletarian who occupies the position of the Hegelian Lord: he is ready to risk everything, since he is the pure subject deprived of all roots, with 'nothing to lose but his chains', as the old saying goes. The capitalist, on the contrary, has quite a few things to lose (his capital, precisely), and is thus the true Bondsman, bonded to his possessions, by definition never ready to put everything at stake even if he is the most dynamic innovator celebrated by today's media. (It is important to remember that, in the opposition between proletarian and capitalist, it is the proletarian who is for Marx the subject, who stands for pure substanceless subjectivity, far from being the object subordinated to the capitalist qua subject.) This, then, provides the key to where we are to look for today's proletarians: where there are subjects reduced to a rootless existence, deprived of all substantial links.

4 Melancholy and the Act

in which the reader will be surprised to learn that anyone who is not a melancholic, or does not agree that we are thrown into a contingent finite universe, can today be suspected of 'totalitarianism'

The Lacanian 'big Other' does not designate merely the explicit symbolic rules regulating social interaction, but also the intricate cobweb of *unwritten* 'implicit' rules. One such rule in today's radical academia concerns the relationship between mourning and melancholy. In our permissive times, when transgression itself is appropriated – even encouraged – by the dominant institutions, the predominant doxa as a rule presents itself as a subversive transgression – if one wants to identify the hegemonic intellectual trend, one should simply search for the trend that claims to pose an unprecedented threat to the hegemonic power structure. With regard to mourning and melancholy, the predominant doxa is as follows: Freud opposed 'normal' mourning (the successful acceptance of loss) to 'pathological' melancholy (where the subject persists in his or her narcissistic identification with the lost object). Against Freud, one should assert the conceptual *and* ethical primacy of melancholy: in the process of loss, there is always a remainder which cannot be integrated through the work of mourning, and the ultimate fidelity is fidelity to this remainder. Mourning is a kind of betrayal, the 'second killing' of the (lost) object, while the melancholic subject remains *faithful* to the lost object, *refusing* to renounce his or her attachment to it.

This story can be given a multitude of twists, from the queer one (homosexuals are those who retain fidelity to the lost/repressed identification with the same-sex libidinal object) to the postcolonial-ethnic one (when ethnic groups enter capitalist modernization and are under threat that their specific legacy will be swallowed up by the new global culture, they should not renounce their tradition through mourning, but retain their melancholic attachment to their lost roots).

Owing to this 'politically correct' background, the 'mistake' of depreciating melancholy can have dire consequences – papers are rejected, applicants don't get jobs because of their 'incorrect' attitude towards melancholy. For this very reason, however, it is all the more necessary to denounce the 'objective cynicism that such a rehabilitation of melancholy enacts: the melancholic link to the lost ethnic Object allows us to claim that we remain faithful to our ethnic roots, while fully participating in the global capitalist game – one should ask how far the whole project of 'postcolonial studies' is sustained by this logic of objective cynicism. Melancholy is thus an exquisitely *postmodern* stance, the stance that allows us to survive in a global society by maintaining the appearance of fidelity to our lost 'roots'. For this reason, melancholy and laughter are not opposed, but *stricto sensu* two sides of the same coin: the much-praised ability to maintain an ironic distance to one's ethnic roots is the obverse of the melancholic attachment to those roots.

Lack is not the same as loss

So what is *theoretically* wrong with this reassertion of melancholy? One usually emphasizes the anti-Hegelian twist of this

rehabilitation of melancholy: the work of mourning has the structure of the 'sublation [*Aufhebung*]' through which we retain the notional essence of an object by losing it in its immediate reality; while in melancholy, the object resists its notional 'sublation'.⁹⁴ The mistake of the melancholic, however, is not simply to assert that something resists symbolic 'sublation' but, rather, to locate this resistance in a positively existing, albeit lost, object. In Kant's terms, the melancholic is guilty of committing a kind of 'paralogism of the pure capacity to desire', which lies in the confusion between *loss* and *lack*: in so far as the object-cause of desire is originally, in a constitutive way, lacking, melancholy interprets this lack as a loss, as if the object lacking were once possessed and then lost.⁹⁵ In short, what melancholy obfuscates is the fact that the object is lacking from the very beginning, that its emergence coincides with its lack, that this object is *nothing but* the positivization of a void/lack, a purely anamorphic entity which does not exist 'in itself'. The paradox, of course, is that this deceitful translation of lack into loss enables us to assert our possession of the object: what we never possessed can also never be lost, so the melancholic, in his unconditional fixation on the lost object, in a way possesses it in its very loss.

What, however, is the true *presence* of a person? In an evocative passage towards the end of *The End of the Affair*, Graham Greene emphasizes the falsity of the standard scene in which the husband, returning home after the death of his wife, wanders nervously around the apartment, experiencing the traumatic absence of his deceased wife of which all her intact objects remind him. Quite on the contrary, the true experience of

absence occurs when the wife is still alive, but not at home, and the husband is gnawed by suspicions about where she is, why she is late (is she with a lover?). Once the wife is dead and buried, however, it is her overwhelming *presence* that the apartment devoid of her flaunts: 'Because she's always away, she's never away. You see, she's never anywhere else. She's not having lunch with anybody, she's not at a cinema with you. There's nowhere for her to be but at home.'⁹⁶ Is this not the very logic of melancholic identification, in which the object is overpresent in its very unconditional and irretrievable loss?

This is also how one should read the medieval notion that the melancholic is unable to reach the domain of the spiritual/incorporeal: instead of merely contemplating the suprasensuous object, he wants to embrace it in lust. Although he is denied access to the suprasensible domain of ideal symbolic forms, the melancholic still displays a metaphysical yearning for another absolute reality beyond our ordinary reality subjected to temporal decay and corruption; the only way out of this predicament is thus to take an ordinary sensual, material object (say, the beloved woman) and elevate it into the Absolute. The melancholic subject thus elevates the object of his longing into an inconsistent composite of a *corporeal Absolute*; however, since this object is subject to decay, one can possess it unconditionally only in so far as it is lost, in its loss. Hegel himself deployed this logic apropos of the Crusaders' search for the tomb of Christ: they also confused the absolute aspect of the Divinity with the material body that existed in Judaea two thousand years ago – their search thus resulted in a necessary disappointment. For this reason, melancholy is not simply attachment to the lost object, but attachment to the very

original gesture of its loss. In his perspicuous characterization of Wilhelm Furtwängler's conducting, Adorno claimed that Furtwängler

was concerned with the salvaging [Rettung] of something which was already lost, with winning back for interpretation what it began to lose at the moment of the fading of binding tradition. This attempt to salvage gave him something of the excessive exertion involved in an invocation for which what the invocation seeks is no longer purely and immediately present.⁹⁷

What one should focus on is the double loss that sustains today's (deserved) cult of Furtwängler, the fascination that his old recordings exert. It is not only that we are fascinated today by Furtwängler's 'naive', immediately organic passion, which no longer seems possible in our era, when conducting is split between cold technical perfection and artificial 'passion' as stage showmanship (Leonard Bernstein); the very lost object of our fascination already involves a certain loss – that is to say, Furtwängler's passion was infused with a kind of traumatic intensity, a sense of urgency proper to the desperate attempt to salvage as part of our tradition what was already endangered, no longer 'at home' in the modern world. So what we are longing to recapture in old Furtwängler recordings is not the organic immediacy of classical music but, rather the organic-immediate experience of the loss itself that is no longer accessible to us – in this sense, our fascination with Furtwängler is melancholy at its purest.

Giorgio Agamben has emphasized how melancholy, in contrast to mourning, is not only the failure of the work of mourning, the persistence of the attachment to the Real of the object, but also its very opposite: 'the melancholy offers the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object'.⁹⁸ That is the melancholic's stratagem: *the only way to possess an object which we never had, which was lost from the very outset, is to treat an object that we still fully possess as if this object is already lost*. The melancholic's refusal to accomplish the work of mourning thus takes the form of its very opposite: of a faked spectacle of *excessive, superfluous mourning* for an object even before this object is lost. This is what provides its unique flavour to a melancholic love relationship (like the one between Newland and Countess Olenska in Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*): although the partners are still together, immensely in love, enjoying each other's presence, the shadow of the future separation already colours their relationship, so that they perceive their current pleasures under the aegis of the catastrophe (separation) to come (in the exact reversal of the standard notion of enduring present hardships with a view to the happiness that will emerge out of them).

The notion that Dmitri Shostakovich, beneath his official Socialist optimism, was a deeply melancholic composer can be supported along the same lines by the fact that he composed his most famous (Eighth) String Quartet (1960) in memory of *himself*.

I reflected that if I die some day then it's hardly likely anyone will write a work dedicated to my memory. So I decided to

write one myself. You could even write on the cover:
 'Dedicated to the memory of the composer of this quartet.'⁹⁹

No wonder, then, that Shostakovich characterized the basic mode of the quartet as 'pseudo-tragicity': in a telltale metaphor, he measured the tears its composition had cost him as the volume of urine after half a dozen beers. In so far as the melancholic mourns what he has not yet lost, there is an inherent comic subversion of the tragic procedure of mourning at work in melancholy, as in the old racist joke about gypsies: when it rains, they are happy because *they* know that after rain there is always sunshine; when the sun shines, they feel sad because they know that after sunshine it will, at some point, rain. In short, the mourner mourns the lost object and 'kills it a second time' through symbolizing its loss; while the melancholic is not simply the one who is unable to renounce the object: rather, he kills the object a second time (treats it as lost) *before the object is actually lost*.

How are we to unravel this paradox of mourning an object which is not yet lost, which is still here? The key to this enigma resides in Freud's precise formulation according to which the melancholic is not aware of what he has lost in the lost object¹⁰⁰ – here one must introduce the Lacanian distinction between the *object* and the (object)-cause of desire: while the object of desire is simply the desired object, the cause of desire is the feature *on account of which* we desire the desired object (some detail, tic, which we are usually unaware of and sometimes even misperceive as the obstacle, as that *in spite of which* we desire the object).

Perhaps this gap between object and cause also explains the popularity of *Brief Encounter* in the gay community: the reason is

not simply that the furtive encounters of the two lovers in the dark passages and on the platforms of the railway station 'resemble' the way gays were compelled to meet back in the 1940s, since they were not yet allowed to flirt openly. Far from being an obstacle to the fulfilment of gay desire, these circumstances actually functioned as its cause: deprived of these undercover conditions, the gay relationship loses a goodly part of its transgressive beguilement. So what we get in *Brief Encounter* is not the object of gay desire (the couple are straight), but its cause. No wonder, then, that gays often express their opposition to the liberal 'inclusive' policy of fully legalizing gay couples: what sustains their opposition is not the (justified) awareness of the falsity of this liberal policy, but the fear that gay desire itself, deprived of its obstacle/cause, will wane.

From this perspective, the melancholic is not primarily the subject fixated on the lost object, unable to perform the work of mourning it, but, rather, the subject who *possesses* the object, but has lost his desire for it, because the cause which made him desire this object has withdrawn, lost its efficacy. Far from accentuating to the extreme the situation of frustrated desire, of desire deprived of its object, melancholy, rather, stands for the presence of the object itself deprived of the desire for itself – melancholy occurs when we finally get the desired object, but are disappointed with it. In this precise sense, melancholy (disappointment with all positive, empirical objects, none of which can satisfy our desire) is in fact the beginning of philosophy.

For example, a person who has lived all his life in a certain city, and is finally compelled to move elsewhere, is, of course,

saddened by the prospect of being thrown into a new environment – what is it, however, that actually makes him sad? It is not the prospect of leaving the place which was his home for long years, but the much more subtle fear of losing his very attachment to this place. What makes me sad is the fact that I am aware that, sooner or later – sooner than I am ready to admit – I will integrate myself into a new community, forgetting the place which *now* means so much to me. In short, what makes me sad is the awareness that I will lose my desire for (what is now) my home.¹⁰¹

We are dealing here with the interconnection between anamorphosis and sublimation: the series of objects in reality is structured around (or, rather, involves) a void; if this void becomes visible 'as such', reality disintegrates. So, in order to maintain the consistent edifice of reality one of the elements of reality has to be displaced on to and occupy the central Void – the Lacanian *objet petit a*. This object is the 'sublime object [of ideology]', the object 'elevated to the dignity of a Thing', and simultaneously the anamorphic object (in order to perceive its sublime quality, we have to look at it 'awry', askew – viewed directly, it looks like just another object in a series). For the straight view', the 'Jew', for example, is one in the series of national or ethnic groups, but at the same time the 'sublime object', the stand-in for the Void (central antagonism) around which the social edifice is structured – the ultimate hidden Master who secretly pulls all the strings; anti-Semitic reference to the Jew thus 'makes things clear', enabling the perception of society as a closed/consistent space.

Is it not the same with the notion that a worker in capitalism

works, say, five hours for himself and three hours for the capitalist master? The illusion is that one can separate the two and ask that a worker should work only the five hours for himself, getting the full pay for his work: within the wage system, this is not possible. The status of the last three hours is thus, in a way anamorphic – they are the embodiment of surplus-value: rather like the toothpaste tube mentioned above whose last third is differently coloured, engraved with 'YOU GET 30% FREE!'.

We can now see why anamorphosis is crucial to the functioning of ideology: anamorphosis designates an object whose very material reality is distorted in such a way that a gaze is inscribed into its 'objective' features. A face which looks grotesquely distorted and protracted acquires consistency; a blurred contour, a stain, becomes a clear entity *if we look at it from a certain 'biased' standpoint* – and is this not one of the succinct formulas of ideology? Social reality may appear confused and chaotic, but if we look at it from the standpoint of anti-Semitism, everything becomes clear and acquires straight contours: the Jewish Plot is responsible for all our woes. . . . In other words, anamorphosis undermines the distinction between 'objective reality' and its distorted subjective perception: in it, the subjective distortion is reflected back into the perceived object itself, and, in this precise sense, the gaze itself acquires 'objective' existence.

Far from involving the idealist denial of the Real, however, the Lacanian notion of *objet petit a* as the purely anamorphic object enables us to provide a strictly *materialist* account of the emergence of the 'immaterial' ideal space. *Objet petit a* exists only as its own shadow/distortion, viewed from the side. from an

incorrect/partial perspective – when one takes a direct look at it, one sees nothing at all. And the space of Ideality is precisely such a distorted space: 'ideas' do not exist 'in themselves', but **only** as a *presupposed* entity, the entity whose existence we are led to presuppose on account of its distorted reflections. Plato was right in a way when he claimed that in our material world we get **only** distorted images of true Ideas – one should add **only** that the Idea itself is nothing but an *appearance of itself*, the 'perspective illusion' which leads us to suppose that there must be an 'original' behind the distortions.

However, the point of *objet petit a* as a 'negative magnitude' – to use a Kantian term – is not **only** that the void of desire paradoxically embodies itself in a particular object which starts to serve as its stand-in, but above all in the opposite paradox: *this primordial void/lack itself 'functions' only in so far as it is embodied in a particular object*, it is this object which keeps the gap of desire open. This notion of 'negative magnitude' is also crucial if one is to grasp the revolution of Christianity. Pre-Christian religions remain on the level of 'wisdom'; they emphasize the insufficiency of every temporal finite object, and preach either moderation in pleasures (one should avoid excessive attachment to finite objects, since pleasure is transitory) or the withdrawal from temporal reality in favour of the True Divine Object which alone can provide Infinite Bliss. Christianity, on the contrary, offers Christ as a mortal-temporal individual, and insists that belief in the *temporal* Event of Incarnation is the only path to *eternal* truth and salvation.

In this precise sense, Christianity is a 'religion of Love': in love, one privileges, focuses on, a finite temporal object which

'means more than anything else'. This same paradox is also at work in the specific Christian notion of Conversion and the forgiveness of sins: Conversion is a *temporal event* which changes *eternity itself*. As we know, late in his life Kant articulated the notion of the noumenal act of choice by means of which an individual chooses his eternal character: prior to his temporal existence, this act delineates the contours of his earthly destiny in advance. Without the Divine act of Grace, our destiny would remain immovable, forever fixed by this eternal act of choice; the 'good news' of Christianity, however, is that in a genuine Conversion one can, as it were, repeat this act, and thus *change (undo the effectsof) eternity itself*.

'Post-secular thought?' No, thanks!

This ultimate paradox of Christianity is obliterated in what poses today as 'post-secular thought', the stance which finds its ultimate expression in a certain kind of Derridean appropriation of Levinas. In contrast to melancholy, in which we have the object deprived of the (cause of) desire for it, the 'post-secular' stance reasserts the very gap between desire and its objects: what we have here is the Messianic longing for the Otherness that is forever 'to come', transcending any given object, haunted by an insistent spectre that can never be translated into a positive, fully present, existing entity. What they both preclude, however is the *act*, which is rendered meaningless in melancholic passive stupor, and reduced in post-secular enthusiasm to a pragmatic intervention that never lives up to the unconditional demand of the abyssal Other.

'Post-secular thought' fully concedes that the modernist critique undermined the foundations of ontotheology, the notion of God as the Supreme Entity, and so on – what, however, if the ultimate outcome of this deconstructive gesture is to clear the slate for a new post-deconstructive and undeconstructible form of spirituality, for the relationship to an unconditional Otherness that precedes ontology? What if the fundamental experience of the human subject is not that of self-presence, of the force of dialectical mediation—appropriation of all Otherness, but that of a primordial passivity, a sentiency, of responding, of being infinitely indebted and responsible to the call of an Otherness which never acquires positive features, but always remains withdrawn, the trace of its own absence? Here one is tempted to evoke Marx's famous quip apropos of Proudhon from his *Poverty Of Philosophy* (instead of actual people in their actual circumstances, Proudhon's pseudo-Hegelian social theory gives us these circumstances themselves, deprived of the people who bring them to life): instead of the religious matrix with God at its heart, post-secular deconstruction gives us this matrix itself, deprived of the positive figure of God that sustains it.

The same configuration is repeated in Derrida's 'fidelity' to the spirit of Marxism: 'Deconstruction has never had any sense or interest, in my view at least, except as a radicalization, which is also to say *in the tradition* of a certain Marxism, in a certain *spirit of Marxism*.'¹⁰² The first thing to note here (of which Derrida is undoubtedly aware) is how this 'radicalization' relies on the traditional opposition between Letter and Spirit: reasserting the authentic spirit of the Marxist tradition means leaving behind its letter (Marx's particular analyses and proposed revolutionary

measures, which are irreducibly tainted by the tradition of ontology) in order to save from the ashes the authentic Messianic promise of emancipatory liberation. What cannot fail to strike us is the uncanny proximity of such 'radicalization' to (a certain common understanding of) Hegelian sublation [*Aufhebung*]: in the Messianic promise, the Marxian heritage is 'sublated' – that is to say, its essential core is redeemed through the very gesture of overcoming/renouncing its particular historical shape. And – here is the crux of the matter, that is, of Derrida's method – the point is not simply that Marx's particular formulation and proposed measures are to be left behind, replaced by other, more adequate formulations and measures; the point is rather, that the Messianic promise that constitutes the 'spirit' of Marxism is betrayed by any particular formulation, by any translation into determinate economico-political measures.

The underlying premiss of Derrida's 'radicalization' of Marx is that the more 'radical' these determinate economico-political measures are (up to the Khmer Rouge or Sendero Luminoso killing fields), the less they are actually radical, the more they remain caught in the metaphysical ethico-political horizon. In other words, what Derrida's 'radicalization' means is in a way (more precisely: in a *practical* way) its exact opposite: the renunciation of any actual radical political measures.

The 'radicality' of Derridean politics involves the irreducible gap between the Messianic promise of 'democracy to come' and all its positive incarnations: on account of its very radicality, the Messianic promise remains forever a promise, can never be translated into a set of determinate economico-political measures. The discrepancy between the abyss of the undecidable

Thing and any particular decision is irreducible: our debt towards the Other can never be repaid; our response to the Other's call is never fully adequate. This position should be opposed to the twin temptations of unprincipled pragmatism and totalitarianism, which both suspend the gap: while pragmatism simply reduces political activity to opportunistic manoeuvring, to limited strategic interventions in contextualized situations, dispensing with any reference to transcendent Otherness, totalitarianism identifies unconditional Otherness with a particular historical figure (the Party is the direct embodiment of historical Reason). In short, the problematic of *totalitarianism* arises here in its specific deconstructionist twist: at its most elementary – one is almost tempted to say *ontological* – 'totalitarianism' is not simply a political force which aims at the total control of social life, at rendering society totally transparent, but the short circuit between Messianic Otherness and a determinate political agent. The 'to come [a *venir*]' is thus not simply an additional qualification of democracy, but its innermost kernel, what makes democracy democracy: the moment democracy is no longer 'to come' but **pretends** to be actual – fully actualized – we enter totalitarianism.

To avoid any misunderstanding: this 'democracy to come' is, of course, not simply a democracy which promises to arrive in the future, but one whose arrival is forever postponed. Derrida is well aware of the 'urgency', of the 'now-ness', of the need for justice – if one thing is foreign to him, it is the complacent postponement of democracy to a later stage in evolution, as in the proverbial Stalinist distinction between the present 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and the future 'full' democracy, legitimizing the

present terror as creating the necessary conditions for the later freedom. Such a 'two-stage' strategy is, for Derrida, the very worst of ontology; in contrast to such a strategic economy of the correct dose of (un)freedom, 'democracy to come' refers to the unforeseeable emergencies/outbursts of ethical responsibility, when I am suddenly confronted with an urgent need to answer the call, to intervene in a situation that I experience as intolerably unjust. However, it is symptomatic that Derrida none the less retains the irreducible opposition between such a spectral experience of the Messianic call of justice and its 'ontologization', its transposition into a set of positive legal, political, etc., measures. Or – to put it in terms of the opposition between ethics and politics – what Derrida mobilizes here is the gap between ethics and politics:

On the one hand, ethics is left defined as the infinite responsibility of unconditional hospitality. Whilst, on the other hand, the political can be defined as the taking of a decision without any determinate transcendental guarantees. Thus, the hiatus in Levinas allows Derrida both to affirm the primacy of an ethics of hospitality, whilst leaving open the sphere of the political as a realm of risk and danger.¹⁰³

So the ethical is the (back)ground of undecidability, while the political is the domain of decision(s), of taking the full risk of crossing the hiatus and translating this impossible ethical request for Messianic justice into a particular intervention that never lives up to this request, that is always unjust towards (some of the) others. The ethical domain proper, the unconditional

spectral request that makes us absolutely responsible and can never be translated into a positive measure/intervention, is thus perhaps not so much a formal a priori background/frame of political decisions but, rather, their inherent indefinite *différance*, indicating that no determinate decision can fully 'hit its target'. This fragile, temporary unity of unconditional ethical injunction and pragmatic political interventions can be best expressed through a paraphrase of Kant's famous formula of the relationship between reason and experience: 'If ethics without politics is empty, then politics without ethics is blind.'¹⁰⁴ Elegant as this solution is (here ethics is the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of the political: it simultaneously opens up the space for the political decision as an act without guarantee in the big Other, and condemns it to its ultimate failure), it is to be opposed to the act in the Lacanian sense, in which, precisely, the distance between the ethical and the political collapses.

Let's take yet again – what else? – the case of Antigone.¹⁰⁵ She can be said to exemplify the unconditional fidelity to the Otherness of the Thing that disrupts the entire social edifice: from the standpoint of the ethics of *Sittlichkeit*, of the mores that regulate the intersubjective collective of the *polis*, her insistence is actually 'mad', disruptive, evil. In other words, is not Antigone – in terms of the deconstructionist notion of the Messianic promise that is forever 'to come' – aproto-totalitarian figure? With regard to the tension (which provides the ultimate co-ordinates of the ethical space) between the Other *qua* the Thing, the abyssal Otherness which addresses us with the unconditional injunction, and the Other *qua* the Third, the agency which mediates my encounter with others (other 'normal' humans) – where this

Third can be the figure of symbolic authority but also the 'impersonal' set of rules that regulate my exchange with others – does not **Antigone** stand for the exclusive and uncompromising attachment to the Other *qua* Thing, eclipsing the Other *qua* Third, the agency of symbolic mediation/reconciliation? Or – to put it in slightly ironic terms – is not **Antigone** the anti-Habermasian *par excellence*? No dialogue, no attempt to convince Creon of the **good** reasons for her acts through rational argumentation, just blind insistence on her rights. . . . If anything, the so-called 'arguments' are on Creon's side (the burial of Polynices would stir up public unrest, etc.), while Antigone's counterpoint is ultimately the tautological insistence: 'OK, you can say whatever you like, it won't change anything, I'm sticking to my decision!' Such a view is far from an elaborate hypothesis: some of those who read Lacan as a proto-Kantian actually (mis)read his interpretation of Antigone, claiming that Lacan condemns her unconditional insistence, rejecting it as a tragic suicidal example of losing the proper distance towards the lethal Thing, of directly immersing oneself into the Thing.¹⁰⁶

So, from this perspective, the opposition between Creon and **Antigone** is the opposition between unprincipled pragmatism and totalitarianism: far from being totalitarian, Creon acts as a pragmatic state politician, mercilessly crushing any activity that would destabilize the smooth functioning of the state and civic peace. To go even further, is not the very elementary gesture of *sublimation* 'totalitarian', in so far as it consists in elevating an object into the Thing? In sublimation, something – an object which is part of our ordinary reality – is elevated into the unconditional object that the subject values more than life itself. And

is not this short circuit between a determinate object and the Thing the minimal condition of 'ontological totalitarianism'? Against this short circuit, is not the ultimate ethical lesson of deconstruction that the gap which separates the Thing from any determinate object is irreducible?

What is also crucial here is the way the ethics of 'respect for alterity' brings together two important recognized 'enemies', Derrida and Habermas. Is not the basic tenor of their respective ethical stances the same, namely, respect for and openness towards an irreducible Otherness that cannot be integrated into the subject's self-mediation, and the concomitant assertion of the gap between ethics and politics, in the sense of some presupposed ethical demand/norm that precedes and sustains every concrete political intervention which is never able fully to live up to it? Of course, the shape of this ethical agency is completely different in each case: for Derrida, it is the abyss of the unconditional demand betrayed by (its translation into) any determinate norm; for Habermas, it is the determinate system of a priori rules of free communication.

All this means, however, is that there is in effect a kind of Hegelian speculative identity between Derrida and Habermas, in the precise sense of mutual supplementing: each of the two philosophers, in a way, articulates what the other has simultaneously to presuppose and disavow in order to sustain his position: Habermasian critics of Derrida are right to point out how, without a set of implicit rules that regulate my relating to the Other, 'respect for Otherness' unavoidably deteriorates into the assertion of excessive idiosyncrasy; Derridean critics of Habermas – also rightly – point out that the Fixation of the subject's relating

to its Other in the set of universal rules of communication already reduces the Other's alterity. This mutual implication is the 'truth' of the conflict between Derrida and Habermas, so it is all the more crucial to emphasize how Lacan rejects the very presupposition that both Derrida and Habermas share: from the Lacanian perspective, this 'respect for Otherness' is in both cases the form of *resistance against the act*, against the 'crazy' short-circuit between the unconditional and the conditioned, the ethical and the political (in Kantian terms: between the noumenal and the phenomenal) that 'is' the act. It is not so much that, in the act, I 'sublate'/'integrate' the Other; it is rather that, in the act, I directly 'am' the impossible Other–Thing.

The Other: Imaginary, symbolic, and real

The problem here is: is not Lacan's 'ethics of the Real' – the ethics that focuses neither on some imaginary Good nor on the pure symbolic form of a universal Duty – another version of this deconstructive-Levinasian ethic of the traumatic encounter of a radical Otherness to which the subject is infinitely indebted? Does not Lacan state that the ethical 'Thing' ultimately refers to the neighbour, *der Nebenmensch*?

The Thing is the neighbour in his or her abyssal dimension of irreducible Otherness; for this reason, our relationship to the neighbour can never be reduced to the symmetry of the mutual recognition of the Subject and his Other, in which the Hegelian–Christian dialectic of intersubjective struggle finds its resolution: that is, in which the two poles are successfully mediated.

Although the temptation to concede this point is great, it is *here* that one should insist on the way Lacan accomplishes the passage from the Law to Love: in short, from Judaism to Christianity – for Lacan, the ultimate horizon of ethics is *not* the infinite debt towards an abyssal Otherness. For him, the act is strictly correlative to the suspension of the 'big Other' – not only in the sense of the symbolic network that forms the 'substance' of the subject's existence, but also in the sense of the absent originator of the ethical Call, of the one who addresses us and to whom we are irreducibly indebted and/or responsible, since (to put it in Levinasian terms) our very existence is 'responsive' – that is to say, we emerge as subjects in response to the Other's Call. The (ethical) act proper is precisely *neither* a response to the compassionate plea of my neighbourly *semblant* (the stuff of sentimental humanism), *nor* a response to the unfathomable Other's call.

Here, perhaps, one should take the risk of reading Derrida against Derrida himself. In *Adieu a Emmanuel Levinas*, Derrida tries to dissociate the decision from its usual metaphysical predicates (autonomy, consciousness, activity, sovereignty . . .) and think it as the 'other's decision in me': 'The passive decision, condition of the event, is always, structurally, an other decision in me, a rending decision as the decision of the other. Of the absolutely other in me, of the other as the absolute who decides of me in me.'¹⁰⁷ When Simon Critchley tries to explicate this Derridean notion of '*the other's decision in me*' in terms of its political consequences, his formulation displays a radical ambiguity:

the political decision is made *ex nihilo*, and is not deduced or read off from a pre-given conception of justice or the moral

law, as in Habermas, say, and yet it is not arbitrary *It is the demand provoked by the other's decision in me that calls forth political invention, that provokes me into inventing a norm and taking a decision.*¹⁰⁸

If we read these lines closely, we notice that we suddenly have two levels of decision: the gap is not only between the abyssal ethical Call of the Other and my (ultimately always inadequate, pragmatic, calculated, contingent, unfounded) decision how to translate this Call into a concrete intervention – the very decision is split into 'the other's decision in me' and my decision to accomplish some pragmatic political intervention as my answer to this other's decision in me. In short, the first decision is identified with/as the injunction of the Thing in me to decide, it is a *decision to decide*, and it still remains my (the subject's) responsibility to translate this decision to decide into a concrete actual intervention, to 'invent a new rule' out of a singular situation, where this intervention has to obey pragmatic/strategic considerations and is never on the level of *the* decision.

However, returning again to Antigone: does this distinction of the two levels apply to her act? Is it not, rather, that her decision (to insist unconditionally on a proper funeral for her brother) is precisely an *absolute* decision in which the two dimensions of decision *overlap*? This is the Lacanian act in which the abyss of absolute freedom, autonomy and responsibility coincides with an unconditional necessity: I feel obliged to perform the act as an automaton, without reflection (I simply *have* to do it, it's not a matter of strategic deliberation). To put it in more 'Lacanian' terms: the 'other's decision in me' does *not* refer to the old

structuralist jargonized phrases about how 'it is not I, the subject, who is speaking, it is the big Other, the symbolic order itself, which speaks through me, so that I am spoken by it', and other similar babble, but to something much more radical and unprecedented: what gives Antigone such unshakable, uncompromising fortitude to persist in her decision is precisely the *direct* identification of her particular/determinate decision with the Other's (Thing's) injunction/call. Therein lies Antigone's *monstrosity*, therein lies the Kierkegaardian 'madness' of decision evoked by Derrida: Antigone does not merely relate to the Other—Thing, she — for a brief, passing moment of, precisely, decision — directly is the Thing, thus excluding herself from the community regulated by the intermediate agency of symbolic regulations.

The topic of the 'other' is to be submitted to a kind of spectral analysis that reveals its imaginary symbolic and real aspects — it provides perhaps the ultimate case of the Lacanian notion of the 'Borromean knot' that unites these three dimensions. First, there is the imaginary other — other people 'like me', my fellow human beings with whom I am engaged in the mirror-like relationships of competition, mutual recognition, and so on. Then, there is the symbolic 'big Other' — the 'substance' of our social existence, the impersonal set of rules that co-ordinate our coexistence. Finally, there is the Other *qua* Real, the impossible Thing, the 'inhuman partner', the Other with whom no symmetrical dialogue, mediated by the symbolic Order, is possible. And it is crucial to perceive how these three dimensions are linked. The neighbour [*Nebenmensch*] as the Thing means that, beneath the neighbour as my *semblant*, my mirror-image, there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, of a monstrous Thing that

cannot be 'gentrified'. Lacan indicates this dimension in Seminar *III*:

And why [the Other] with a capital A [for *Autre*]? For a no doubt mad reason, in the same way as it is madness every time we are obliged to bring in signs supplementary to those given by language. Here the mad reason is the following. You are my ~~wife~~ – after all, what do you know about it? You are my master – in reality, are you so sure of that? What creates the founding value of those words is that what is aimed at in the message, as well as what is manifest in the pretence, is that the other is there qua absolute Other. Absolute, that is to say he is recognized, but is not known. In the same way, what constitutes pretence is that, in the end, you don't know whether it's a pretence or not. Essentially it is this unknown element in the alterity of the other which characterizes the speech relation on the level on which it is spoken to the other.¹⁰⁹

Lacan's notion, from the early 1950s, of the 'founding word', of the statement which confers on you a symbolic title and thus makes you what you are (wife, master), is usually perceived as an echo of the theory of the performative (the link between Lacan and Austin, the author of the notion of the performative, was Émile Benveniste). It is clear from the above quote, however, that Lacan is aiming at something more: we need the recourse to performativity, to the symbolic engagement, precisely and only in so far as the other whom we encounter is not only the imaginary *semblant*, but also the elusive absolute Other of the Real Thing

with whom no reciprocal exchange is possible. In order to render our coexistence with the Thing minimally bearable, the symbolic order *qua* Third, the pacifying mediator, has to intervene: the 'gentrification' of the Other—Thing into a 'normal fellow human' cannot occur through our direct interaction, but presupposes the third agency to which we both submit – there is no intersubjectivity (no symmetrical, shared relationship between humans) without the impersonal symbolic Order.

So no axis between the two terms can subsist without the third one: if the functioning of the big Other is suspended, the friendly neighbour coincides with the monstrous Thing (Antigone); if there is no neighbour to whom I can relate as a human partner, the symbolic Order itself turns into the monstrous Thing which parasitizes directly upon me (like Daniel Paul Schreber's God, who directly controls me, penetrating me with the rays of *jouissance*): if there is no Thing to underpin our everyday symbolically regulated exchange with others, we find ourselves in a Habermasian 'flat' aseptic universe in which subjects are deprived of their hubris of excessive passion, reduced to lifeless pawns in the regulated game of communication. Antigone–Schreber–Habermas: a truly uncanny *ménage à trois*. . .

The ethical act: Beyond the reality principle

The antinomy of postmodern reason, which demonstrates the difference between reality and the Real, is inherent in the two apparently opposed ideological commonplaces that predominate today. On the one hand, there is the ideology of 'realism': we live in the era of the end of great ideological projects, so let's be

realists, let's give up immature utopian illusions – the dream of the Welfare State is over; one should come to terms with the global market. The title of François Furet's history of Communism, with its reversal of Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* – *The PAST of an Illusion* – relies directly on this postmodern 'realism': 'illusion' is no longer something with a force that will persist long into the future – something that, by definition, *has* a future – but something past, whose time is over. Such reference to 'reality' functions as a direct dogmatic appeal which dispenses with the need for argumentation. On the other hand, the inherent counterpoint to this 'realism' is the notion that there is no 'true' reality, that the Real is the ultimate metaphysical myth and illusion – what we perceive as 'reality' is simply the result of a certain historically specific set of discursive practices and power mechanisms. Here, the ideological criticism of illusions on behalf of reality is universalized and inverted into its opposite: reality itself is the ultimate illusion.

The lesson to be drawn from this paradox concerns the opposition between reality and the Real: deprived of the hard kernel of the Real, of that which *resists* simple integration into our common reality (symbolization, integration into our universe), reality itself turns into a malleable, indefinitely plastic texture which, precisely, loses the character of 'reality', and turns into a fantasmatic effect of discursive practices. And – the obverse of the same paradox – the ultimate experience of the Real is not that of 'reality' which shatters illusions, but that of an 'illusion' which 'irrationally' persists against the pressure of reality, which does not give way to 'reality'. The sad joke, the reversal of received wisdom, of the reformists in the German Democratic Republic

after the Stalinist crackdown on the liberal economic reforms in the early 1970s ('Another reality broke down on the hard rock of the illusion') expresses perfectly this insistence of the Real located in the 'illusion' itself – and the premiss of Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* is that illusion has a future not because people can never accept hard reality and need false dreams, but because 'illusions' are sustained by the unconditional insistence of a drive which is more real than reality itself.

One can now precisely locate the ethical act – or, rather, the act *as such* – with respect to the reign of the 'reality principle': an ethical act is not only 'beyond the reality principle' (in the sense of 'running against the current', of insisting on its Cause–Thing without regard to reality); rather, it designates an intervention that *changes the very co-ordinates of the 'reality principle'*. The Freudian 'reality principle' does not designate the Real, but the constraints of what is experienced as 'possible' within the symbolically constructed social space – that is, the demands of social reality. And an act is not *only* a gesture that 'does the impossible', but an intervention in social reality which changes the very co-ordinates of what is perceived as 'possible'; it is not simply beyond the Good, it redefines what counts as 'Good'.

Let us take the standard case of civil disobedience (which, precisely, is the case of Antigone): it is not enough to say that I decide to disobey the positive public law out of respect for a more fundamental law – that we are dealing with the conflict between different obligations which is resolved when the subject gets his priorities right and establishes a clear hierarchy between these conflicting obligations ('In principle, I obey the public law, but when it encroaches upon my respect for the dead . . .').

Antigone's gesture of civil disobedience is much more radically 'performative': through her insistence on giving her dead brother a proper funeral, she defies the predominant notion of 'Good'.

An act is thus the intervention which goes against the predominant opinion; to put it in the old Platonic terms, it asserts Truth against mere doxa. Here, however, the gap that separates us from Plato – the absence of the dimension of subjectivity in Plato – becomes obvious: to put it in (inappropriate) modern terms, in Plato, opinions are 'merely subjective', while Truth is 'objective', it reflects the actual state of things. In the space of modern subjectivity, however, the relationship is inverted: doxa is 'objective', it reflects the way things 'really are' – opinion polls tell us what people are thinking, while the act intervenes in this actual state of things with a subjective wager.

Let us imagine a situation in which one has to take a radical measure which may appear 'unpopular' according to the opinion polls. The mistake of the opinion polls is that *they forget to comprehend the impact on public opinion of the 'unpopular gesture itself, after this gesture is accomplished*, public opinion is not the same as it was *before*. The clear negative example is Edward Kennedy's candidacy for the American Presidency: before he formally announced it, he was a sure winner in the polls, but the moment he formally proclaimed his candidacy – the moment voters actually had to take into account the *real fact* of his candidacy – his support quickly evaporated. Another imagined case would have been that of a popular charismatic leader who blackmails his party: if you don't support my policies, I'll drop you, and the opinion polls show that if I drop you, you'll lose half your votes. . . . Here, the act would have been to do *precisely that*: to take the

leader at his word, and cause him to quit: such a gesture might change the whole public perception of the party from a bunch of compromisers kept in check by their leader to a political body with a consistent principled stance, and thus turn around public opinion itself.

What people think, their opinion, is always reflexive; it is an *opinion about the opinion*: people are against an option because they do not believe that this option is possible/feasible. An act, however, changes the very parameters of the possible. For example, how did General Pinochet's arrest in the United Kingdom affect his symbolic status? The untouchable all-powerful *éminence grise* was all of a sudden humiliated, reduced to an old man who, just like any other common criminal, can be interrogated, has to invoke his bad health, and so on. The liberating effect of this mutation in Chile itself was exceptional: the fear of Pinochet dissipated, the spell was broken, the taboo subjects of torture and disappearances became the daily grist of the news media; the people no longer just whispered, but openly spoke about prosecuting him in Chile itself; even younger army officers began to distance themselves from his legacy.

This brings us back to Kant. The standard misreading of Kantian ethics reduces it to a theory that posits as the sole criterion of the ethical character of an act the pure interiority of subjective intent, as if the difference between the true ethical act and a mere legal act concerns only the subject's inner attitude: in a legal act, I follow the law on account of some pathological considerations (fear of punishment, narcissistic satisfaction, admiration of my peers . . .), while *the same act* can be a proper moral act, if I perform it only out of pure respect for duty – if

duty is my sole motive for accomplishing it. In this sense, a proper ethical act is doubly formal: it not only obeys the universal form of law, but this universal form is also its sole motive. What, however, if the new 'content' itself can emerge only out of such a redoubling of the form? What if a truly new content that actually breaks up the frame of formalism (of formal legal norms) can emerge only through the reflection-into-self of the form? Or – to put it in the terms of law and its transgression – the ethical act proper is a *transgression* of the legal norm – a transgression which, in contrast to a simple criminal violation, does not simply violate the legal norm, but redefines what *is* a legal norm. The *moral* law does not follow the Good – it generates a new shape of what counts as 'Good'.¹¹⁰ The act is therefore not 'abyssal' in the sense of an irrational gesture that eludes all rational criteria; it can and should be judged by universal rational criteria, the point is only that it changes (re-creates) the very criteria by which it should be judged – there are no *antecedent* universal rational criteria that one 'applies' when one accomplishes an act.

This is where we confront the key problem; that is to say, a naive question emerges here: *why* is it like this? Why is there no possible ethical act that simply realizes an already existing ethical norm in such a way that the subject does it out of sheer duty? Let us approach this problem from the opposite end: how does a new ethical norm emerge? The interplay between the existing frame of norms and the empirical content to which these norms are applied cannot account for it: it is *not* that when the situation gets too complex or changes radically, so that it can no longer be 'covered' adequately by the old norms, we have to invent new norms (as is the case with cloning or organ transplant, where the

direct application of old norms leads to a deadlock). A further condition must be fulfilled: while an act that simply applies an existing norm can be merely legal, this redefining of what counts as ethical norms cannot be accomplished as a mere legal gesture, but has to occur as a formal gesture in the above-mentioned double meaning of the term: it also has to be accomplished for the sake of duty – again, why? Why can it not be accomplished as the accommodation of norms to a 'new reality'?

When we change legal norms in order to accommodate them to the 'new demands of reality' (say, when 'liberal' Catholics 'realistically' make a partial 'concession to new times' and allow for contraception, if it takes place within marital intercourse), we deprive the law, a priori, of its dignity, since we treat legal norms in a utilitarian way, as instruments that enable us to justify the satisfaction of our 'pathological' interests (our well-being). This means that rigid legal formalism (one should adhere unconditionally and in all circumstances to the letter of the law, whatever the cost) and pragmatic utilitarian opportunism (legal norms are flexible; one should bend them in accordance with the demands of life; they are not an end in themselves, but should serve concrete living people and their needs) are two sides of the same coin, that they share a common presupposition: *they both exclude the notion of transgressing the norm as an ethical act, accomplished for the sake of duty*. Furthermore, it means that radical Evil is, at its most extreme, not some barbaric violation of the norm, but the very obedience to the norm for 'pathological' reasons: much worse than simply transgressing the law is 'to do the right thing for the wrong reason', to obey the law because it is to my advantage. While direct transgression simply violates the law, leaving its

dignity untouched (and even reasserting it, in a negative way), 'doing the right thing for the wrong reason' undermines the law's dignity *from within*, not treating the law as something to be respected, but degrading it into an instrument of our 'pathological' interests – no longer an external transgression of the law, but its self-destruction, its suicide.

In other words, the traditional Kantian hierarchy of the forms of Evil should be *reversed*: the worst thing that can happen is external legality, compliance with the law for pathological reasons; then comes a simple violation of the law, disregard for the law; finally, there is the exact symmetrical opposite of 'doing the right (ethical) thing for the wrong (pathological) reason', doing the 'wrong' thing for the right reason – that is to say, the violation of ethical norms for no 'pathological' reasons, but just 'for the sake of it' (what Kant called 'diabolical Evil', although he denied its possibility) – such Evil is formally indistinguishable from the Good.

So it is not only that an ethical act, on top of being accomplished out of duty, *also* has actual effects, *also* intervenes in reality: it does *more* than intervene in reality in the sense of 'having actual consequences' – it *redefines* what counts as reality. In a proper moral act, the inner and the outer, inner intention and external consequences, coincide; they are two sides of the same coin. And, incidentally, the same goes for science: science 'touches the Real' when it not only explains common reality – say, telling us that water is really H_2O – but when it generates new objects that are part of our reality, and simultaneously explode its established framework: the atom bomb, clones like the unfortunate *sheep* Dolly. . . . When water is accounted for as

a certain composition of H and O , this leaves our reality the way it was before this explanation – it simply redoubles it with another level (of formulas, etc.) on which we learn what our common reality 'really is'. The monstrosity of the Real is brought home when, through the mediation of scientific knowledge, new, 'unnatural' objects become part of our daily reality.

Aplea for materialist creationism

Two objections seem to impose themselves immediately with regard to this notion of the act. First, does it not involve the intervention, within the domain of **phenomenal** reality, of what one cannot but designate in Kantian terms as the transphenomenal/noumenal freedom that breaks the causal chain of phenomenal reality? Second, apropos of **Antigone's** act, how can **Antigone** be so sure that her (particular, contingent) insistence on her brother's proper burial is not just her caprice, but in fact overlaps with the Other–Thing's insistence? These two objections are clearly two aspects of the same criticism that there is an illegitimate short circuit between the phenomenal and the noumenal: between the subject's contingent decision and the Other–Thing's unconditional call; between our phenomenal empirical intervention in the world and the noumenal act of freedom. In other words, we have acts which are just contingent empirical gestures; then, from time to time, miraculous Acts occur which announce another dimension. Accordingly, the answer should be in both cases a symmetrical reversal or, rather, displacement of focus: both objections presuppose something as given (our empirical, **phenomenal** reality; the unconditional call

of the Other–Thing) and then raise the question of how one can be certain of breaking out of – or connecting to – it.

It is this very presupposition, however, which has to be dropped: the question to be asked is not 'How can we break out of our ordinary reality?' but, rather, 'Does this ordinary reality fully exist?'; similarly, the question to be asked is not 'How can we be sure of acceding to the noumenal Other–Thing?' but, rather, 'Is this Other–Thing really out there, bombarding us with commandments?'. 'Naive' people are not those who think that we can break out of our ordinary reality; 'naive' people are those who presuppose this reality as an ontologically self-sufficient given.

Or, with regard to the homologous question of the relationship between necessity and freedom: 'naive' people are not those who think that human subjects can miraculously break the causal chain of reality and commit a free act; 'naive' people are those who presuppose the complete chain of causal necessity. What if there is *no 'reality'* in the sense of an ontologically fully constituted cosmos? That is to say, the mistake of those who identify freedom with misrecognition (who claim that we experience ourselves as 'acting freely' only when we misrecognize the causality that determines our acts) is that they stealthily (re)introduce the standard, premodern, 'cosmological' notion of reality as a positive order of being: in such a fully constituted positive 'chain of being', there is, of course, no place for the free subject, so the dimension of freedom can be conceived of only as something which is strictly co-dependent with the epistemological misrecognition of the true positivity of Being. Consequently, the only way really to account for the status of freedom is to assert the *ontological incompleteness of 'reality' itself*: there is 'reality' only in so far

as there is an ontological gap, a crack, at its very heart. It is only this gap which accounts for the mysterious 'fact' of transcendental freedom – for the 'self-positing' subjectivity which is in fact 'spontaneous', whose spontaneity is not an effect of misrecognition of some 'objective' causal process, no matter how complex and chaotic this process is.

And, in an obverse way, the Other–Thing is also nothing but the positivization, the 'reified' representation, of the abyss of freedom itself: ultimately, the only Thing is the act of freedom itself in its terrifying abyss. Of course, partisans of the injunction of the Other–Thing would counter here that this Thing is, precisely, beyond representation, a radical Otherness with regard to the domain of representations. What they accomplish thereby, however is already the minimal reversal of the limit of representation into the representation of this limit itself: the point of freedom at which representation breaks down is again represented in the guise of a terrifying Thing beyond representation. . . .

Again, in the act, in this moment of madness, the subject assumes the nonexistence of the Other–Thing – assumes, that is, the full burden of freedom *impervious* to any call of the Other. The act involves the acceptance of this double impossibility/limit: although our empirical universe is incomplete, this does not mean that there is *another* 'true' reality that sustains it. Although we cannot fully integrate ourselves into our reality, there is no Other Place in which we would be 'truly at home'. What this means with regard to *Antigone* is that her act (her insistence on a proper burial for her brother) not only is not grounded in any mysterious big Other's will, but is in a way even more 'tumultuous' than

a simple caprice: a caprice still presupposes a world of reality towards which the subject behaves in a capricious way, while *Antigone's* act locates her, as it were, in the *ex nihilo* of the interstices of reality, momentarily suspending the very rules that define what counts as (social) reality.

Today more than ever, Lacan's siding with creationism against evolutionism is relevant. This, of course, has nothing to do with the madness of biological pseudo-scientific creationism's battle against Darwinism as practised by the Moral Majority. The true problem lies elsewhere: what do different recently popular evolutionary accounts of the 'emergence of man', from neo-Darwinists a la Dawkins or Dennett, through the New Age notion of the cosmic evolution that culminates in humanity (the so-called 'strong anthropic principle'), to more philosophically orientated phenomenological accounts of the primordial self-affectation through which subjectivity emerges, have in common, despite their irreconcilable theoretical differences? They all participate in the *obliteration of the dimension of the Act proper* – nothing New can emerge, no Event proper can occur; everything can be explained away as the outcome of already-present circumstances, all the gaps in the edifice of the universe can be filled. . . .

Against this ontological closure, Lacan argues for the possibility that the Order of Being does not predetermine everything: from time to time, something genuinely New can emerge *ex nihilo*, out of nowhere (i.e. precisely out of the gaps in the edifice of the universe). The problem of the 'missing link' is thus, for Lacan, ultimately a pseudo-problem: the gap the 'missing link' is supposed to fill is the very gap of negativity which makes authentic Acts possible. This same pseudo-problem of the 'missing link'

also emerges in criticism of **Lacan**, in the guise of the claim that **Lacan's** account of the emergence of subjectivity is not complete, that it does not account for the key dimension of subjectivity the subject's primordial **self-recognition** of **self-acquaintance**, which cannot be deduced from the process of the symbolic lack and/or gap: by 'supplementing' **Lacan** with the subject's primordial **self-disclosure**, his critics in fact take something away from **Lacan's** edifice – they obliterate the very dimension of negativity through which, 'out of nowhere', the New can emerge. . . .

Paradoxical as it may sound, *ex nihilo* is a radically *materialist* notion. When we say that God created the world *ex nihilo*, not just by shaping some pre-existing chaotic stuff, this is not yet the *ex nihilo* proper, since God *is already there*. *Ex nihilo* designates, rather, the opposite paradox of Something (a meaningful order) 'miraculously' emerging out of nothing from the preceding chaos. Take the well-known Hitchcockian anecdote about the ultimate Hitchcockian scene that he never shot:

I wanted to have a long dialogue between **Cary Grant** and one of the factory workers [at a Ford **plant**] as they walk along the assembly line. Behind them a car is being assembled, piece **by** piece. Finally, the car they've seen being put together from a simple nut and bolt is complete, with gas and oil, and all ready to drive off the line. The two men look at each other and say, 'Isn't it wonderful!' Then they open the door of the car and out drops a corpse.'''

This is creatio ex nihilo, when the body, this surplus-object, pops up 'out of nowhere'. What emerges *ex nihilo* are the 'immaterial' pure

semblances (whose First philosophical formulation is the Stoic theory of immaterial events, *phantasmata*) which conceal nothing, which are *nothing but* masks of the Void.

And an act is, in this very sense, an intervention *ex nihilo*. There is one unexpected feature of Lacan's reading of *Antigone* which usually passes unnoticed because it is not a positive feature, but an absence: in his psychoanalytic reading of *Antigone*, there is absolutely no trace of what one would expect from a 'Freudian' – some probing into *Antigone's* traumas, unconscious fixations, desires or conflicts, that would somehow 'explain' her 'irrational' insistence on a proper burial for her brother. Although she is the daughter of Oedipus himself, there is no 'Oedipus complex' in Lacan's reading! Lacan simply takes her – not at her word, but – at her *act*, and reads it precisely as such: as an 'autonomous' ethical act that is emphatically *not* to be read as any kind of symptom, of hysterical acting out.'''

The Pope versus the Dalai Lama

Let us return, however, to a more mundane question: what are the 'practical consequences' of this stance today? When I was finishing the publication of one of my first books in English, the publisher insisted that all the bibliographical references should be done in the infamous Chicago Manual Style: in the main text, one quotes only the author's family name, the year of publication and the page, while a complete reference is provided in alphabetical order at the end of the book. To take revenge on the publisher, I did the same with quotes from the Bible: in the list at the end, there was the item '– Christ, Jesus (33): *Collected*

Speeches and Thoughts, edited by Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, Jerusalem¹ – and then, in the main text, there were passages like '(as to this notion of evil, see also the interesting observations in Christ 33)'.

The publisher rejected this, claiming that I was indulging in tasteless blasphemy, showing no understanding of my counter-argument that such a procedure is deeply Christian, treating Christ – God himself – as fully human, as just another human being (author), just as he was crucified between two ordinary thieves. There is a certain passage from *tragique* to *moque-comique* which is at the very heart of the Christian enterprise: Christ is emphatically *not* the figure of a dignified heroic Master.¹¹³

This is also why every good Christian not only is not offended, but should feel nothing but innocent amusement at parodies like Edward Moser's *The Politically Correct Guide to the Bible*.¹¹⁴ If there is a problem with this hilarious booklet, it is that it relies a little bit too much on the standard procedure of starting a passage with a well-known dignified biblical line and then adding as the final twist some thoroughly contemporary qualification (following Marx's well-known quip about the way the human rights guaranteed by the French Revolution function in the actual life of the market exchange: 'Freedom, equality and Bentham'):

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for 'evil' and 'good' are mere ideological constructs which rely on exclusionary binary logic.¹¹⁵ . . . And they began to speak in tongues, and every man heard them in his own language, because of bilingual education *progams*.

This rewriting reaches its high point when Moser reformulates the Ten Commandments into the 'Ten Recommendations' – suffice it to quote two of them: 'Thou shalt remember the Sabbath day, *so thou can get all thy shopping done at that time.*' . . . 'Thou shalt not take the name of God in vain, *but with gusto, particularly if you are a gangsta rap artist.*'

The problem is that what is evoked here as satirical exaggeration is actually **taking** place today: do we not practise today a similar rewriting of the Decalogue? Is some commandment too severe? Let us regress to the scene on Mount Sinai, and rewrite it! 'Thou shalt not commit adultery – *except if it is emotionally sincere, and serves the goal of your profound self-realization.* . . .' Exemplary here is Donald Spoto's *The Hidden Jesus*, a New Age-tainted 'liberal' reading of Christianity, where we can read apropos of divorce:

Jesus clearly denounced divorce and remarriage. . . . But Jesus did not go further and say that marriages *cannot* be broken . . . nowhere else in his teaching is there any situation when he renders a person forever chained to the consequences of sin. His entire treatment of people was to liberate, not to legislate. . . . It is self-evident that in fact some marriages **simply** do break down, that commitments are abandoned, that promises are violated and love **betrayed**.¹¹⁶

Sympathetic and 'liberal' as these lines are, they involve the fatal confusion between emotional ups and downs and an unconditional symbolic commitment which is supposed to hold **precisely** when it is no longer supported by direct emotions: 'Thou shalt

not divorce – except when your marriage "in fact" breaks down, when it is experienced as an unbearable emotional burden that frustrates your fulfilment in life' – in *short, except when the prohibition to divorce would have regained its full meaning* (since who would divorce if his or her marriage were still flourishing?)! What disappears in this total liability of the past to a subsequent retroactive rewriting are not primarily the 'hard facts', but the Real of a traumatic encounter whose structuring role in the subject's psychic economy forever resists its symbolic rewriting.

Emblematic here is the figure of John Paul II. Even those who respect the Pope's moral stance usually accompany this admiration with the qualification that he nevertheless remains hopelessly old-fashioned, medieval even, sticking to old dogmas, out of touch with the demands of new times: how can one ignore contraception, divorce, abortion today? Are these not simply the facts of our life? How can the Pope deny the right to abortion even to a nun who gets pregnant through rape (as he actually did in the case of the raped nuns during the war in Bosnia)? Is it not clear that even when one is in principle against abortion, one should in such an extreme case bend the principle and consent to a compromise? One can now understand why the Dalai Lama is much more appropriate for our postmodern permissive times: he presents us with a vague feel-good spiritualism without any specific obligations: anyone, even the most decadent Hollywood star, can follow him while continuing his or her money-gabbing promiscuous lifestyle. . . . The Pope, in contrast, reminds us that there is a price to pay for a proper ethical attitude – it is his very stubborn clinging to 'old values', his ignoring the 'realistic' demands of our time even when the arguments seem 'obvious' (as

in the case of the raped nun), that makes him an authentic ethical figure.

John Woo as a critic of Levinas: The face as a fetish

Let us, then, in the guise of a conclusion, clarify the incompatibility between Lacan and Levinas through reference to John Woo's film *Face/Off* (1997), in which the anti-terrorist policeman (John Travolta) and the playful-sadistic ultra-terrorist (Nicholas Cage) are caught in a deadly game. When Cage is in a deathlike coma, the police learn that there is an ultra-strong poisonous bomb ticking away somewhere in Los Angeles; however, since Cage is in a coma, the only way to learn the details about the bomb, and thus prevent the catastrophe, is to gain the confidence of Cage's crippled younger brother. So the police have the idea of using high-tech medicine to lift off the face skin of both Cage and Travolta, preserving Travolta's facial in a special transparent liquid and then transplanting Cage's facial skin on to his head – with Cage's face, Travolta will be able to gain Cage's brother's confidence and prevent the catastrophe.

Unfortunately, what happens is that Cage unexpectedly awakens from the coma, rises from his hospital bed, looks into the mirror and sees the raw red flesh of his face, as well as Travolta's facial skin in the liquid. Guessing what has happened, he gets in contact with his gang, who occupy the hospital, force the doctors to put Travolta's facial skin on to his head, and then kill all the participants and destroy all documentation, so that nobody knows of the exchange. Cage, the arch-villain, is now free to return to 'normal' social life as Travolta, the super-agent; while

Travolta is condemned to stay in the high-security prison, forever identified as the arch-villain Cage. However, while Cage (with Travolta's face) takes over Travolta's job and even his family life (including sex with his wife), Travolta succeeds in escaping and takes over as boss of Cage's gang – they find themselves occupying each other's social role.

We are thus in the hallucinatory domain of *realized fantasy* – the old expression 'to lose face', which usually designates a situation of moral shame and humiliation, acquires a literal meaning here: the skin surface of our faces becomes literally the face we are wearing, a mask which it is possible to exchange, to replace with another. What disappears here is precisely the notion of the proper skin surface of our body: we wear masks that can be replaced, and what is beneath the artificial replaceable mask is no longer the proper bodily skin surface, but the horrifying raw flesh of blood and muscle. 'I' am no longer the face that anyone can see: my face is a mask I can take off. A certain ontological gap is thus opened, a gap often manipulated also by David Lynch: the ordinary reality we know dissolves into the proto-ontological Real of raw flesh and replaceable mask, like the scene from Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* in which the food served in a restaurant consists of an appetizing colour photograph of the meal in a frame above the plate and the formless slime that actually appears on it.

In a first approach, it is obvious how this duel between Travolta and Cage provides a perfect staging of what Lacan calls the mirror-relationship: in a deadly struggle with my mirror-double, every strike at him is a strike at me, and vice versa: by hurting myself I hurt my enemy – no wonder a number of scenes

involve one of the two main characters facing his mirror-image and not being able to endure it, since what he sees is the image of his arch-enemy. This procedure is brought to a higher reflexive ironic level when, in the final confrontation, Travolta and Cage find themselves on opposite sides of a thin wall covered on both sides by a mirror: they draw their guns and turn towards the mirror, seeing in it the image of their own face – that is, seeing in it who the enemy behind the mirror-wall truly is (since the face Cage sees – the Travolta face – is the true face of the person behind the mirror, and vice versa). One can well understand Travolta's hesitation in striking a full blow to Cage's face: since the skin of this face is literally his own, by destroying it he destroys his own face, ruining the chances of ever getting his own face back on his head . . . no wonder the dying Cage tries desperately to cut and damage his face – he knows that by doing this he will prevent Travolta from getting it back.

This mirror-relationship occurs on the level of the interaction between the Real (the raw flesh) and the Imaginary (the replaceable masks we wear). However, this mirror-relationship is not the whole truth about the film; the first thing to do in order to discern the traces of a third, symbolic, dimension is to read this exchange of faces against the background of the obvious fact that, with regard to their screen personas, Travolta is much closer to the Cage character (the 'evil', playfully cynical sadist), while Cage, who usually plays active, strong, but none the less tender and compassionate characters, fits the 'true' character of Travolta in the film much better. No wonder, then, that when the two swap faces, the spectator experiences this exchange as a kind of justified restitution of the proper state of things: Travolta is

extremely convincing when he behaves like the sadistically playful arch-villain; while Cage is no less convincing as the desperate honest policemen trying to convince his family who he really is.

Here we encounter the symbolic efficiency of the mask: it is as if the relationship between the mask and the 'true face' is reversed, as if the 'real faces' of Travolta and Cage are already masks, suppressing their true characters, so that it is by putting on the other person's face-mask that the subject is able freely to articulate his 'true Self'. Against this background, the end of the film, when the situation seems to be back to normal, with everyone returning to his true face (even Travolta's teenage daughter who, during the film, paints her face heavily like a punk rocker, shows her 'natural' face with no make-up or piercing), appears more ambiguous than it may seem: Travolta's desperate endeavour to regain his true face displays not so much his effort to return to his true Self but, rather, his plea to keep at bay, in a state of repression, the so-called dark side of his personality.

Or is this side really so dark? When, in one of the best scenes in the film, Cage-with-the-face-of-Travolta confronts his enemy's daughter and, instead of acting like the usual harsh father that Travolta was, almost flirts with her and offers her cigarettes, do we not get a glimpse here of another daughter-father relationship in which the father drops the mask of rigid paternal authority and shows some understanding for his daughter's lifestyle? Perhaps this fact explains one of the most poignant scenes, in which Cage and Travolta fight in front of Travolta's daughter, who is holding a gun. The daughter is confronted with the Groucho Marx predicament ('Whom do you believe, your eyes or my words?'): she is torn between believing her eyes (which

tell her that the man wearing her father's face is her father) and believing the words (the desperate plea of her true father telling her who he really is). Significantly, she makes the wrong decision, choosing to 'believe her eyes', and shoots her father, wounding him in the arm – or is this decision really wrong, that is, was she really simply the victim of the false evidence of her eyes? What if she deliberately chose the person who presented a more likeable paternal figure than her real, but stiff and authoritarian father?

What the Travolta character tries to elude in his effort to regain his 'true face' is thus the fact that the faces we wear are inherently a deceptive lure, that none of them is our 'true face' – ultimately, the subject's 'true face' beneath the mask is nothing but shapeless, skinned, raw red flesh. The guarantee of our identity is not the face we wear, but the fragile symbolic identity which is threatened all the time by the face's seductive lure. And it is from here that one should approach the key Levinasian notion of encountering the other's face as the epiphany, as the event that precedes Truth itself:

To seek truth, I have already established a relationship with a face which can guarantee itself, whose epiphany itself is somehow a word of honor. Every language as an exchange of verbal signs refers already to this primordial word of honor . . . deceit and veracity already presuppose the absolute authenticity of the face.¹¹⁷

One should read these lines against the background of the circular, self-referential character of the Lacanian 'big Other', the

symbolic 'substance' of our being, which is perhaps best expressed by Donald Davidson's 'holistic' claim that 'our only evidence for a belief is other beliefs. . . . And since no belief is self-certifying, none can supply a certain basis for the rest.'¹¹⁸ Far from functioning as the 'fatal flaw' of the symbolic order, this circularity is the very condition of its effective functioning. So when Levinas claims that a face 'can guarantee itself', this means that, precisely, it serves as the non-linguistic point of reference which also enables us to break the vicious circularity of the symbolic order, providing it with the ultimate foundation, 'absolute authenticity'. The Face is therefore the ultimate *fetish*, the object which fills in (obfuscates) the big Other's 'castration' (inconsistency, lack), the abyss of its circularity.¹¹⁹

On a different level, this fetishization – or, rather, fetishist disavowal – is also discernible in our daily relating to another person's face. This disavowal does not primarily concern the raw reality of flesh ('I know very well that beneath the face, there is just the Real of the raw flesh, bones and blood, but I none the less act as if the face is a window into the mysterious interiority of the soul.') but, rather, on a more radical level, the abyss/void of the Other: *the human face 'gentrifies' the terrifying Thing that is the ultimate reality of our neighbour*. And in so far as the void called 'the subject of the signifier' (§) is strictly correlative **to** this inconsistency (lack) of the Other, subject and face are to be opposed: the Event of encountering the other's face is not the experience of the abyss of the other's subjectivity – the only way to reach this experience is through *defacement* in all its dimensions, from a simple tic or grimace that disfigures the face (in this sense, Lacan claims that the Real is 'the grimace of reality'), up to the extreme

case of losing the face, both morally and physically, as in *Face/Off*.¹²⁰

Perhaps the key moment in Jerry Lewis's films occurs when the idiot he plays is compelled to become aware of the havoc his behaviour has caused: at this moment, when he is stared at by all the people around him, unable to sustain their gaze, he engages in his unique mode of making faces, of ridiculously distorting his facial expression, combined with twisting his hands and rolling his eyes. *This* desperate attempt of the ashamed subject to *efface* his presence, to erase himself from others' view, combined with the endeavour to assume a new face that is more acceptable to the people around him, is subjectivization at its purest.

So what is shame, this experience of 'losing face'? In the standard Sartreian version, the subject, in his 'For-Itself', is ashamed of the 'In-Itself, of the stupid Real of his bodily identity: am I really that, this bad-smelling body, these nails, this excrement? In short, 'shame' designates the fact that 'spirit' is directly linked to inert vulgar bodily reality – this is why it is shameful to defecate in public. Lacan's counterargument here, however, is that shame, by definition, concerns fantasy. Giorgio Agamben has emphasized that shame is not simply passivity but an actively *assumed* passivity: if I am raped, I have nothing to be ashamed of; but if I enjoy being raped, then I deserve to feel ashamed. Actively assuming passivity thus means, in Lacanian terms, finding jouissance in the passive situation in which one is caught. And since the coordinates of jouissance are ultimately those of the fundamental fantasy, which is the fantasy of (finding jouissance in) being put in the passive position (like the Freudian 'My father is beating me'), what exposes the subject to shame is not the disclosure of how he

is put in the passive position, treated **only** as a body: shame emerges only when such a passive position in social reality touches upon the (disavowed intimate) *fantasy*.

Let us take two women, the first liberated and assertive, active; the other secretly daydreaming about **being** brutally treated, even **raped**, by her partner. The crucial point is that if both of them are raped, the rape will be much more traumatic for the second woman, *for the very reason that it will realize in 'external' social reality the 'stuff of her dreams'* – why? There is a gap which forever separates the fantasmatic kernel of the subject's being from the more 'superficial' modes of his or her symbolic and/or imaginary identifications – it is never **possible** for me fully to assume (in the sense of symbolic integration) the fantasmatic kernel of my being: when I approach it too closely, when I get too near it, what occurs is the *aphanisis* of the subject: the subject loses his or her symbolic consistency, it disintegrates. And perhaps the forced actualization in social reality itself of the fantasmatic kernel of my being is the worst, most humiliating kind of violence, a violence which undermines the very basis of my identity (of my 'self-image') by exposing me to an unbearable shame.

We can clearly see, now, how far psychoanalysis is from any defence of the dignity of the human face: is not the psychoanalytic treatment the experience of making **public** (to the analyst, who stands for the **big Other**) one's most intimate fantasies, and thus the experience of *losing face* in the most radical sense of the term?

5 Are Cultural Studies Really Totalitarian?

*in which the reader will witness the ferocious struggle in today's
academia between Cultural Studies and their Third Culture
opponents, who accuse the partisans of Cultural Studies of the
'totalitarian' frame of mind*

The burning question

If we ask an average intellectual today to tell us in a nutshell what Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* is about, he will probably say: for Freud, a dream is the fantasmatic realization of some censored unconscious desire of the dreamer, which is, as a rule, of a sexual nature. Now, let us turn, with this definition in mind, to the very beginning of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where Freud provides a detailed interpretation of his own dream about 'Irma's injection' – it is reasonable to suppose that Freud knew what he was doing, and was careful to choose an appropriate example to introduce his theory of dreams. It is here, however, that we encounter the first big surprise: Freud's interpretation of this dream cannot fail to remind us of the old Soviet joke on Radio Erevan ('Did Rabinovitch win a new car in the state lottery?' 'In principle, yes – he did. Only it was not a car but a bicycle, it was not new but old, and he did not win it, it was stolen from him!'). Is a dream the realization of the dreamer's unconscious sexual desire? In principle, yes. Only the desire in the dream Freud has chosen to demonstrate his theory of dreams is neither sexual nor unconscious, and, to cap it all, it's not his own. . . .

The dream begins with a conversation between Freud and his patient, Irma, about the failure of her treatment due to an infected injection; in the course of the conversation, Freud gets closer to her, approaches her face and looks deep into her mouth, confronting the horrible sight of the live red flesh. At this point of unbearable horror, the tone of the dream changes, the horror turns all of a sudden into comedy: three doctors, Freud's friends, appear, and, in ridiculous pseudo-professional jargon, enumerate multiple (and mutually exclusive) reasons why Irma's poisoning by the infected injection was nobody's fault (there was no injection, the injection was clean . . .). So the desire of the dream, the 'latent thought' articulated in it, is neither sexual nor unconscious, but Freud's (fully conscious) wish to obliterate his responsibility for the failure of his treatment of Irma. How, then, does this fit the thesis of the sexual and unconscious nature of the desire expressed in dreams?

It is here that the crucial distinction should be introduced: the unconscious desire of the dream is *not* the dream's latent thought, which is displaced/translated into the explicit texture of the dream, but the unconscious desire which inscribes itself through the very distortion of the latent thought into the dream's explicit texture. That is the paradox of the *Traumarbeit*: we want to get rid of a certain pressing but disturbing thought of which we are fully conscious, so we distort it, translating it into the hieroglyph of the dream – however, it is through the very distortion of the dream-thought that *another*, much more fundamental desire inscribes itself into the dream, and *this* desire is unconscious and sexual. In the case of 'Irma's injection', Freud himself provides some hints about its unconscious desire: he envisions

himself as the 'primordial father' who wants to possess the women who appear in the dream.

When one compares different verbal accounts of the same event, the standard procedure is to focus on what they all have in common – this common kernel is then considered 'objective reality', while the differences in the descriptions are attributed to the distorting effects of the partial subjective perceptions. When, for instance, of three witnesses, the first reports that the person who entered the room in the twilight was a young man, the second that she was a young woman, and the third that he has seen an indeterminate young person, we tend to conclude that a young person really did come into the room, and that the discrepancies (man or woman) were conditioned by the differences in the horizon of expectations concerning the features of sexual identity, different dress codes, and so on. What Freud proposes when the interpretation of a dream gets stuck is exactly the opposite procedure: the analyst should ask the patient to repeat the narrative of the dream again and again, and the crucial element, the clue to the dream's meaning, will be provided not by what remains the same in the successive narratives, but by the features with regard to which these narratives *differ* – it is the small changes, variations, omissions, discrepancies between the successive narratives which indicate the real kernel repressed by the dream's official narrative. Here, again, we encounter the difference between reality and the Real: the sameness, the overlapping features in the multitude of narratives, signals the reality of what 'actually took place', while the 'insignificant' omissions or added details allude to the Real of the dream.

On a broader level, this crucial distinction also reveals the

weakness of the standard postmodern accusation of Marxism's 'economic essentialism' – is not this accusation strictly correlative to the argument that Freud was a 'pansexualist', that is, a 'sexual essentialist', reducing all desires to sexuality? The answer is the same in both cases. Freud's difference between the dream's latent thought (which, as a rule, is *not* sexual) and the unconscious desire which is sexual, echoes the Marxist difference between the predominant agency of social life (*not*, as a rule, the economy) and the (economic) agency which determines social life 'in the last instance'. So there is no tension between the 'determining role' of sex/economy and the shifting of the predominant agency: the first directly overdetermines the second.

The underlying logic here is that of Hegelian 'oppositional determination': the economy is at one and the same time the genus and one of its own species, just as sexuality, for Freud, is the genus and one of its species (there *are* dreams which stage a direct sexual wish). And – to go right to the end, and put it in basic philosophical terms – are we not dealing here, in *both* cases, with a solution which is simultaneously *materialist* (asserting sexuality and/or economy as the ultimate determining factor) and *dialectical* (rejecting the fetishization of sexuality and/or the economy into the directly determining factor)? The problem with dialectical materialism confronts us with what is arguably the highest paradox in the entire history of philosophy: although, in its Stalinist codification, it degenerated into an inane, philosophically worthless ideological edifice, it is at the same time, in a certain naive sense, simply emphatically true: is not the whole of contemporary 'post-metaphysical' philosophy sustained by the endeavour to think 'materialism' (the rejection of idealist

solutions) and 'dialectics' (in the broadest sense of an approach that is able fully to account for phenomena that break the framework of common-sense realism, from quantum physics to the paradoxes of language) together?

So, returning to Freud's dream: what is its ultimate meaning? As we have just seen, Freud himself focuses on the dream-thought, on his 'superficial' (fully conscious) wish to obliterate his responsibility for the failure of his treatment of Irma; in Lacanian terms, this wish clearly belongs to the domain of the *Imaginary*. Furthermore, Freud provides some hints about the *Real* in this dream: the unconscious desire of the dream is that of Freud himself as the 'primordial father' who wants to possess all the three women who appear in it. In his early *Seminar II*, Lacan proposes a purely *symbolic* reading: the ultimate meaning of this dream is simply that *there is a meaning*, that there is a formula (of trimethylamin) which guarantees the presence and consistency of meaning.¹²²

However, there is yet another enigma in the dream: *whose* desire does the dream actually realize? Some recently published documents¹²³ clearly establish that the true focus of this dream was the desire to save Fliess (Freud's close friend and collaborator who, at that point, was for him the 'subject supposed to know', the object of his *Übertragung*) from his responsibility and guilt: it was Fliess who botched up Irma's nose operation, and the dream's desire is to exculpate not the dreamer (Freud himself), but the dreamer's big Other: to demonstrate that the Other was not responsible for the medical failure, that he was not lacking in his knowledge – in short, that the Emperor wasn't naked. So, yes, the dream does realize Freud's desire – but only in so far as his

desire is already the Other's (Fliess's) desire. In short, the desire realized in the dream is a *transfèrential* one.

To encompass the full scope of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, one should add a further complication. Why do we dream at all? Freud's answer is deceptively simple: the ultimate function of the dream is to enable the dreamer to prolong his sleep. This is usually interpreted as bearing upon the dreams we have just before awakening, when some external disturbance (noise) threatens to wake us up. In such a situation, the sleeper quickly imagines (in the guise of a dream) a situation which incorporates this external stimulus, and thus succeeds in prolonging sleep for a while; when the external signal becomes too strong, he Finally wakes up. . . .

However, are things really so straightforward? In another dream about awakening from *The Interpretation of Dreams*, a tired father, who is spending the night in vigil beside the coffin of his young son, falls asleep and dreams that his son is approaching him all in flames, addressing to him the horrifying reproach: '*Vater, siehst du nicht dass ich verbrenne?*' [Father, can't you see that I'm burning?]' Soon afterwards, the father wakes up and discovers that, because of an overturned candle, the cloth of his dead son's shroud has actually caught fire – the smoke he smelled while he was asleep was incorporated into the dream of the burning son, to prolong his sleep. So was it that the father awoke when the external stimulus (smoke) became too strong to be contained within the dream-scenario? Was it not, rather, the reverse: the father first constructed the dream in order to prolong his sleep – to avoid the unpleasant awakening; however, what he encountered in the dream – literally the burning question, the creepy

*Gespens*t of his son reproaching him – was much more unbearable than external reality, so the father woke up, escaped into external reality – why? *To continue to dream*, to avoid the unbearable trauma of his own guilt for his son's painful death.

In order to get the full weight of this paradox, one should compare this dream with the one about Irma's injection. In both dreams, there is a traumatic encounter (the sight of the raw flesh of Irma's throat; the vision of the burning son); in the second dream, however, the dreamer wakes up at this point, while in the first dream the horror is replaced by the inane spectacle of professional excuses. This parallel gives us the ultimate key to Freud's theory of dreams: the awakening in the second dream (the father awakens into reality in order to escape the horror of the dream) has the same function as the sudden change into comedy, into the exchange between three ridiculous doctors, in the first dream – that is to say, *our ordinary reality has precisely the structure of such an inane exchange, which enables us to avoid an encounter with the real trauma.*

It was Adorno who said that the well-known Nazi motto '*Deutschland, erwache!*' actually meant its exact opposite: the promise that if you obey this call, you will be allowed to continue to sleep and dream (i.e. to avoid an encounter with the Real of social antagonism). The trauma we encounter in the dream is thus, in a way, *more real than (external social) reality itself*. There is a well-known poem by Primo Levi which recounts an instance of traumatic remembrance from concentration camp life. In the first stanza, he is in the camp, asleep, dreaming intense dreams about returning home, eating, narrating his experience to his relatives, when, all of a sudden, he is awakened by the cruel shout of the

Polish *kapo*: 'Wstawac!' ('Rise! Get up!'). In the second stanza, he is at home, after the war and liberation; sitting at the table, well fed, he is telling his story to his family, when all of a sudden the call violently erupts in his mind: 'Wstawac! . . .

Here, of course, the reversal of the relationship between dream and reality in the two stanzas is crucial: their content is formally the same – the pleasurable scene of sitting at home, eating and retelling one's experience is interrupted by the intrusion of the injunction 'Get up!'; in the First stanza, however, the sweet dream is cruelly interrupted by the reality of the call to get up, while in the second, pleasant social reality is interrupted by the hallucinated (or, rather, imagined) brutal call. This reversal expresses the enigma of the *Wiederholungszwang*: why does the subject continue to be haunted by the obscene and brutal call 'Wstawac!', why does this injunction persist and repeat itself? If, the first time, we have the simple intrusion of external reality which disturbs the dream, in the second case we have the intrusion of the traumatic Real which disturbs the smooth functioning of social reality itself. In the slightly changed scenario of Freud's second dream, one can easily imagine it as the dream of a Holocaust survivor whose son, whom his father was unable to save from the crematorium, haunts him after his death, reproaching him with 'Vater, *siehst du nicht dass ich verbrenne?*'.

So we discover here a Freud who is far from the proverbial Victorian caught in his repressive vision of sexuality, a Freud whose moment is, perhaps, coming only today, in our 'society of the spectacle', when what we experience as everyday reality is more and more the incarnated lie. Suffice it to recall the cyberspace interactive games some of us compulsively play – games in

which, as is usually the case, a neurotic weakling imagines himself as (or, rather, adopts the screen persona of) an aggressive macho, beating up other men and violently enjoying women. It is all too easy to say that this weakling takes refuge in cyberspace daydreaming in order to escape from his dull impotent real life. What if the games we are **playing** in cyberspace are more serious than we tend to assume? What if I articulate in them the aggressive perverse core of my **personality** which, owing to ethico-social constraints, I am unable to act out in my real-life exchange with others? Is it not that, in such a case, what I stage in my cyberspace daydreaming is, in a way, 'more real than reality', closer to the true core of my **personality** than the role I assume in my contact with real-life partners? It is **precisely** because I am aware that cyberspace is 'just a game', that I can act out in it what I would never be able to admit in my 'real' **inter-subjective** contacts. In this precise sense, as **Lacan** put it, the Truth has the structure of a fiction: what appears in the guise of dreaming, or even daydreaming is sometimes the hidden truth on whose repression social reality itself is founded. That is the ultimate lesson of *The Interpretation of Dreams*: reality is for those who cannot sustain the dream.

The two Reals

Since we are living today in a universe dominated by scientific discourse, the key question that arises here is: How is this Freudian Real related to the scientific Real? In Andrew Niccol's futuristic thriller *Gattaca* (1998), Ethan Hawke and Uma Thurman prove their love for one another by throwing away the

hair offered by each partner to be analysed in order to establish his or her genetic quality. In this futuristic society, authority (access to a privileged elite) is established 'objectively', through genetic analysis of the newborn – we no longer have symbolic authority proper; authority is grounded directly in the Real of the genome. As such, *Gatacca* merely extrapolates the prospect, opened up today, of the direct legitimization of social authority and power in the Real of the genetic code:

by eliminating artificial forms of inequality, founded on power and culture, [socially egalitarian programmes] could eventually highlight and crystallize natural forms of inequality far more dramatically than ever before, in a new hierarchical order founded on the genetic code.¹²⁴

Against this prospect, it is not enough to insist that the democratic principle of what Étienne Balibar calls *égaliberté* has nothing to do with the genetic-biological similarity of human individuals, but aims at the equality in principle of subjects *qua* participants in the symbolic space. The dilemma *Gatacca* confronts us with is: is the only way to retain the dignity of a human person to accept some limitation, to stop short of full insight into our genome, short of our full naturalization – a gesture of 'I don't want to know what you objectively-really are, I accept you for what you are . . .'? Are we then back with the well-known conservative wisdom which claims that the only way to preserve human freedom and ethical dignity is to restrain our cognitive capacities and renounce probing too deeply into the nature of things?

Today's sciences themselves seem to show us a way out of this predicament: does not contemporary cognitivism often produce formulations that sound uncannily familiar to those who are acquainted with different version of ancient and modern philosophy, from the Buddhist notion of the Void, and the German Idealist notion of reflexivity constitutive of the subject, up to the Heideggerian notion of 'being-in-the-world', or the deconstructionist notion of *différance*? The temptation arises here to fill the gap either by reducing philosophy to science, claiming that modern naturalizing cognitivism 'realizes' philosophical insights, translating them into acceptable scientific form, or, on the contrary, by claiming that, with these insights, postmodern science breaks out of the 'Cartesian paradigm' and approaches the level of authentic philosophical thought. This short circuit between science and philosophy appears today in a multitude of guises: Heideggerian cognitivism (Hubert Dreyfuss); cognitivist Buddhism (Francisco Varela); the combination of Oriental thought with quantum physics (Capra's 'Tao of physics'), up to deconstructionist evolutionism. Let us take a brief look at the two main versions.

DECONSTRUCTIONIST EVOLUTIONISM

There are obvious parallels between the recently popularized readings of Darwin (from Gould to Dawkins and Dennett) and Derridean deconstruction: does not Darwinism practise a kind of 'deconstruction' not only of natural teleology, but also of the very idea of Nature as a well-ordered positive system of species? Does not the strict Darwinian notion of 'adaptation' claim that, *precisely*, *organisms do not directly 'adapt'*, that there is

stricto sensu no 'adaptation' in the teleological sense of the term: contingent genetic changes occur, and some of them enable some organisms to function better and survive in an environment which is itself fluctuating and articulated in a complex way (there is no linear adaptation to a stable environment: when something in the environment changes unexpectedly, a feature which hitherto prevented full 'adaptation' can suddenly become crucial to the organism's survival). So Darwinism, in fact, prefigures a version of Derridean *différance* or Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*: contingent and meaningless genetic changes are retroactively used (or 'exapted', as Gould would put it) as appropriate for survival.

In other words, what Darwin provides is a model explanation of how a state of things which appears to involve a well-ordered teleological economy (animals doing things 'in order to . . .') is actually the outcome of a series of meaningless changes – the temporality here is that of *futur antérieur*; that is to say, 'adaptation' is something that always, and by definition, 'will have been'. And is not this enigma of how (the semblance of) teleological and meaningful order can emerge from contingent and meaningless occurrences also central to deconstruction? One can thus, in effect, claim that Darwinism (in its true radical dimension, of course, not as vulgarized evolutionism) 'deconstructs' not only teleology or Divine intervention in nature, but also the very notion of nature as a stable positive order – this makes all the more enigmatic the deconstructionists' silence about Darwinism, the absence of deconstructionist attempts to 'appropriate' it.

In *Consciousness Explained*, Dennett himself, the great proponent of cognitivist evolutionism (ironically, no doubt, but none

the less with an underlying serious intent), acknowledges the closeness of his pandemonium' theory of the human mind to Cultural Studies deconstructionism:

Imagine my mixed emotions when I discovered that before I could get my version of [the idea of the Self as the Center of Narrative Gravity] properly published in a book, it had already been satirized in a novel, David Lodge's *Me* World. It is apparently a hot theme among the deconstructionists.¹²⁵

Furthermore, a whole school of cyberspace theorists (the best known is Sherry Turkle) advocate the notion that cyberspace phenomena make the deconstructionist 'decentred subject' real in our everyday experience: one should endorse the 'dissemination' of the unique Self into a multiplicity of competing agents, into a 'collective mind', a plurality of self-images without a global co-ordinating centre, which is operative in cyberspace, and disconnect it from pathological trauma – playing in Virtual Spaces enables me to discover new aspects of 'me', a wealth of shifting identities, of masks without a 'real' person behind them, and thus to experience the ideological mechanism of the production of Self. the immanent violence and arbitrariness of this production/construction. . . .

The temptation to avoid here, however, is precisely the hasty conclusion that Dennett is a kind of deconstructionist wolf in the sheep's clothing of empirical science: there is a gap which forever separates Dennett's evolutionary naturalization of consciousness from the deconstructionist 'meta-transcendental' probing into the conditions of (im)possibility of the philosophical discourse.

As Derrida argues cogently in 'White Mythology', it is not sufficient to claim that 'all concepts are metaphors', that there is no pure epistemological cut, since the umbilical cord connecting abstract concepts with everyday metaphors is irreducible.

First, the point is not simply that 'all concepts are metaphors', but that the very difference between a concept and a metaphor is always minimally metaphorical, relying on some metaphor. Even more important is the opposite conclusion: the very reduction of a concept to a bundle of metaphors already has to rely on some implicit *philosophical, conceptual* determination of the difference between concept and metaphor – that is to say, on the very opposition it tries to undermine.¹²⁶ So we are forever caught in a vicious circle: true, it is impossible to adopt a philosophical stance free from the constraints of everyday naive lifeworld attitudes and notions; however, although it is *impossible*, this philosophical stance is simultaneously *unavoidable*. Derrida makes the same point apropos of the well-known historicist thesis that the entire Aristotelian ontology of the ten modes of being is an effect/expression of Greek grammar: the problem is that *this reduction of ontology (of ontological categories) to an effect of grammar presupposes a certain notion (categorical determination) of the relationship between grammar and ontological concepts which is itself already metaphysical-Greek*.¹²⁷

We should always bear in mind this delicate Derridean stance on account of which he avoids the twin pitfalls of naive realism and direct philosophical foundationalism: a 'philosophical foundation' for our experience is *impossible*, but *necessary* – although all we perceive, understand, articulate, is of course overdetermined by a horizon of pre-understanding, this horizon itself

remains ultimately impenetrable. So Derrida is a kind of meta-transcendentalist, in search of the conditions of possibility of philosophical discourse itself – if we miss the precise way in which Derrida undermines philosophical discourse *from* within, we reduce 'deconstruction' to just another naive historicist relativism. Here, therefore, Derrida's position is the opposite of that of Foucault who, in answer to a criticism that he speaks from a position whose possibility is not accounted for within the framework of his theory, retorted cheerfully: 'These kinds of question do not concern me: they belong to police discourse, with its files constructing the subject's identity!'¹²⁸ In other words, the ultimate lesson of deconstruction seems to be that one cannot postpone the ontological question *ad infinitum*, and what is deeply symptomatic in Derrida is his oscillation between, on the one hand, the hyper-self-reflective approach which denounces the question of 'how things really are' in advance, and limits itself to third-level deconstructive comments on the inconsistencies of philosopher B's reading of philosopher A; and, on the other, a direct 'ontological' assertion about how *différance* and *archi-trace* determine the structure of all living things, and are, as such, already operative in animal nature. One should not miss the paradoxical interconnection of these two levels here: the very feature which forever prevents us from grasping our intended object directly (the fact that our grasping is always refracted, 'mediated', by a decentred otherness) is the feature which connects us with the basic proto-ontological structure of the universe.

So deconstructionism involves two prohibitions: it prohibits the 'naive' empiricist approach ('let us examine the material in question carefully, then generalize hypotheses about it . . .'), as

well as global non-historical metaphysical theses about the origin and structure of the universe. This double prohibition, which defines deconstructionism clearly and unambiguously, bears witness to its Kantian transcendental philosophical origins: is not the same double prohibition characteristic of Kant's philosophical revolution? On the one hand, the notion of the transcendental constitution of reality involves the loss of a direct naive empiricist approach to reality; on the other, it involves the prohibition of metaphysics, that is, of the all-encompassing world-view that provides the noumenal structure of the Whole universe. In other words, one should always bear in mind that Kant, far from simply expressing a belief in the constitutive power of the (transcendental) subject, introduces the notion of the transcendental dimension in order to answer the fundamental and unsurpassable *deadlock* of human existence: a human being strives compulsively towards a global notion of truth, of a universal and necessary cognition, yet this cognition is simultaneously forever inaccessible to him.

COGNITIVIST BUDDHISM

Is the outcome any better in the emerging alliance between the **cognitivist** approach to the mind and the proponents of Buddhist thought, where the point is not to naturalize **philosophy** but, rather, the opposite: to use the results of **cognitivism** in order to **(re)gain** access to ancient wisdom? The contemporary **cognitivist** denial of the unitary, stable, self-identical Self – the notion of the human mind as the **pandemonic** playground of multiple agencies, which some authors (like, especially, Francisco Varela¹²⁹) link to the Buddhist denial of the Self as the

permanent substance underlying our mental acts-events – seems persuasive in its critical rejection of the substantive notion of Self.

The paradox on which cognitivists and neo-Buddhists build is the gap between our common experience, which automatically relies on and/or involves a reference to some notion of Self as the underlying substance which 'has' feelings, volitions, and so on, to which these mental states and acts 'happen', and the fact – well known even in Europe, at least from Hume onwards – that no matter how deeply, and in how much detail, we search our self-experience, we encounter only passing, elusive mental events, never the Self as such – that is to say, a substance to which these events could be attributed. The conclusion drawn by both cognitivists and Buddhists is, of course, that the notion of Self is the result of an epistemological (or, in the case of Buddhism, ethico-epistemological) mistake inherent to human nature as such: the thing to do is to get rid of this delusive notion, and fully accept that there is no Self; that 'I' am nothing but a groundless bundle of elusive and heterogeneous (mental) events.

Is, however, this conclusion really unavoidable? Varela also rejects the Kantian notion of the Self, the subject of pure apperception, as the transcendental subject that is nowhere to be found in our empirical experience. Here, though, one should introduce the distinction between egoless/selfless mind events or aggregates and the subject as identical to this void, to this lack of substance, itself. What if the passage from the fact that there is no representation or positive idea of Self to the conclusion that there is no Self is too quick? What if the Self is precisely the 'I of the storm', the void in the centre of the incessant vortex/whirlpool of elusive mental events: something like the 'vacuole' in

biology, the void around which mental events circulate, the void which is nothing in itself, has no substantive positive identity, but none the less serves as the unrepresentable point of reference, as the 'I' to which mental events are attributed? In Lacanian terms, one has to distinguish between 'Self as the pattern of behavioural and other imaginary and symbolic identifications, as the 'self-image', as what I perceive myself to be, and the empty point of pure negativity, the barred' subject (§). Varela himself comes close to this when he distinguishes between (1) the Self qua the series of mental and bodily formations which has a certain degree of causal coherence and integrity through time; (2) the capitalized Self *qua* the hidden substantial kernel of the subject's identity (the 'ego-self'); and, finally, (3) the desperate craving/grasping of the human mind for/to the Self. for/to some kind of firm bedrock. From the Lacanian perspective, however, is this 'endless craving' not the *Subject itself*, the Void that 'is subjectivity'?

Neo-Buddhists are justified in criticizing cognitivist proponents of the 'society of mind' notion for endorsing the irreducible split between our scientific cognition (which tells us that there is no Self or free will) and the everyday experience in which we simply cannot function without presupposing a consistent Self endowed with free will – cognitivists thus condemn themselves to a nihilistic stance of endorsing beliefs which they know to be wrong. The neo-Buddhists' effort is to bridge this gap by translating/transposing the very insight that there is no substantive Self into our daily human experience (this is what Buddhist meditative reflection is ultimately about).

When Jackendoff, author of one of the ultimate cognitivist attempts to explain consciousness, suggests that our

awareness—consciousness emerges from the fact that we are, **precisely**, not aware of the way awareness—consciousness itself is generated **by** worldly processes (there is consciousness only in so far as its biological-organic origins remain opaque),¹³⁰ he comes very close to the Kantian insight that there is self-consciousness, that I think, only in so far as the 'I or he or It (the Thing) which thinks' remains impenetrable for me. Varela's counterargument that there is a confusion in Jackendoff's reasoning (these processes of which we are unaware are just that – processes which are not part of our **daily** human experience but totally beyond it, **hypostasized by** cognitivist scientific practice¹³¹) therefore misses the point: this **inaccessibility** of the substantive-natural Self (or, rather, of its **substantive-natural** base to my Self) *is* part of our daily non-scientific experience, **precisely** in the guise of our ultimate failure to find a positive element in our experience that would directly 'be' our Self (the above-mentioned experience, already formulated **by** Hume, of how no matter how **deeply** we **analyse** our mental processes, we never find anything that would be our Self). So what if one should apply to Varela here the joke about the madman who was looking for his lost key under a streetlamp, not in the dark corner where he actually lost it, because it was easier to search under the **light**? What if we are looking for the Self in the wrong place, in the false evidence of positive empirical facts?

Our conclusion, therefore, is that there is in fact no way to overcome the abyss that separates the transcendental a priori

horizon from the domain of positive scientific discoveries: on the one hand, the standard 'philosophical reflection of science' (positive sciences 'do not think', they are unable to reflect their horizon of pre-understanding, accessible only to philosophy) increasingly resembles an old automatic trick that is losing its efficacy; on the other hand, the idea that some 'postmodern' science will attain the level of philosophical reflection (say, that quantum physics, by including the observer in the observed material objectivity, breaks out of the frame of scientific objectivism/naturalism and reaches the level of the transcendental constitution of reality) clearly misses the proper level of transcendental a priori.

It is true that modern philosophy is, in a way, 'on the defensive' against the onslaught of science: Kant's transcendental turn is linked to the rise of modern science not only in the obvious way (providing the a priori of the Newtonian physics), but in the more radical way of taking into account how, with the rise of modern empirical science, a direct metaphysical Theory of Everything is no longer viable, cannot be combined with science. So the only thing philosophy can do is 'phenomenalize' scientific knowledge, and then provide its a priori hermeneutic horizon – all this on the basis of the ultimate inscrutability of universe and man. It was Adorno who emphasized the thorough ambiguity of Kant's notion of transcendental constitution: far from simply asserting the Subject's constitutive power, it can also be read as the resigned acceptance of the a priori *Limitation* of our approach to the Real.

The 'Third Culture' as ideology

Far from being limited to a purely theoretical debate, this clash between postmodern-deconstructionist Cultural Studies and the cognitivist popularizers of 'hard' sciences – that is to say, proponents of the so-called 'Third Culture' – also functions as the struggle for intellectual hegemony (for who will occupy the universal place of the public intellectual'). This struggle, which first caught the attention of the general public through the so-called de Man affair (where his opponents endeavoured to prove the irrational proto-Fascist tendencies of deconstruction), reached its peak in the Sokal–*Social Text* affair (in 1997, the journal *Social Text* was duped into publishing a poststructuralist critique of modern physics, written by the physicist Alan Sokal and actually intended as a mocking satire). In Cultural Studies, 'Theory' usually refers to the mixture of literary/cinema criticism, mass culture, ideology, queer studies, and so on – here it is worth quoting the surprised reaction of Dawkins:

I noticed, the other day, an article by a literary critic called 'Theory: What Is It?' Would you believe it? 'Theory' turned out to mean 'theory in literary criticism.' . . . The very word 'theory' has been hijacked for some extremely narrow parochial literary purpose – as though Einstein didn't have theories; as though Darwin didn't have theories.¹³²

Dawkins is in deep solidarity with his great opponent Gould, who also complains that 'there's something of a conspiracy among literary intellectuals to think they own the intellectual landscape

and the reviewing sources, when in fact there are a group of nonfiction writers, largely from sciences, who have a whole host of fascinating ideas that people want to read about'.¹³³ These quotes clearly stake out the terms of the debate as the fight for ideological hegemony in the precise sense this term has acquired in Ernesto Laclau's writings: the fight over a particular content which always 'hegemonizes' the apparently neutral universal term.¹³⁴

The Third Culture comprises the vast field which reaches from the evolutionary theory debate (Dawkins and Dennett versus Gould) through physicists dealing with quantum physics and cosmology (Hawking, Weinberg, Capra), cognitive scientists (Dennett again; Marvin Minsky), neurologists (Sacks), theorists of chaos (Mandelbrot, Stewart), authors dealing with the cognitive and general social impact of the digitalization of our daily lives, up to the theorists of the autopoietic system, which endeavours to develop a universal formal notion of self-organizing emergent systems which can be applied to 'natural' living organisms and species and social 'organisms' (the behaviour of markets and other large groups of interacting social agents). Three things should be noted here:

1. As a rule, we are not dealing with scientists themselves, but (although they are often the same individuals) with authors who address a large public, whose success exceeds by a long way the public appeal of Cultural Studies (suffice it to recall the big bestsellers of Sacks, Hawking, Dawkins and Gould);
2. As in the case of Cultural Studies, we are dealing not with a homogenized field, but with a rhizomatic multitude connected

through 'family resemblances', within which authors are often engaged in violent polemics, but interdisciplinary connections also flourish (between evolutionary biology and cognitive sciences, etc.);

3. In general, authors who are active in this domain are sustained by a kind of missionary zeal, by a shared awareness that they are all participating in a unique shift in the global paradigm of knowledge.

As a kind of manifesto of this orientation, one could quote the 'Introduction' to *The Third Culture* reader, in which the editor (John Brockman) clearly presents the great narrative which sustains the collective identification of these authors: back in the 1940s and 1950s, the idea of a public intellectual was identified with an academic versed in 'soft' human (or social) sciences, who addressed issues of common interest, taking a stance towards the big issues of the day, and thus triggering or participating in major and passionate public debates; what happened then, with the onslaught of 'French postmodern deconstructionist theory, was the passing of the generation of public thinkers and their replacement by 'bloodless academicians', that is, by Cultural Scientists whose pseudo-radical stance against 'power' or 'hegemonic discourse' in fact involves the accelerating disappearance of direct and actual political engagement outside the narrow confines of academia, as well as increasing self-enclosure in an elitist jargon which precludes the very possibility of functioning as an intellectual engaged in public debates.

Fortunately, however, this retreat of the 'public intellectual' was counteracted by the surge of the Third Culture – by the

emergence of a new type of public intellectual, the Third Culture author, who, in the eyes of the wider public, stands more and more for the one 'supposed to know', trusted to reveal the keys to the great secrets which concern us all. . . . Here again the problem is the gap between actual 'hard' sciences and their Third Culture ideological proponents, who elevate scientists into a 'subject supposed to know': not only for ordinary people, who buy these volumes in droves, but also *for postmodern theorists themselves* who are intrigued by it, 'in love with it', and suppose that they 'really know something about the ultimate mystery of being'. The encounter here is failed: no, popular Third-Culturalists do *not* possess the solution that would solve the crisis of Cultural Studies, they do not have what Cultural Studies are lacking. The love encounter has therefore failed: the beloved does not stretch out his hand and return love.

It is therefore crucial to distinguish between science itself and its inherent ideologization, its sometimes subtle transformation into a new holistic, etc., 'paradigm' (new codename for 'world-view'): a series of notions (complementarity, anthropic principle . . .) are here doubly inscribed, functioning as scientific *and* ideological terms. It is in fact difficult to estimate the extent to which the 'Third Culture' is infested with ideology; among its obvious ideological appropriations (but are they merely secondary appropriations?) one should, again, note at least two obvious cases:

1. The often present New Age inscription in which the shift in paradigm is interpreted as the outgrowing of the Cartesian mechanic-materialist paradigm towards a new holistic approach

bringing us back to the wisdom of ancient Oriental thought (the Tao of physics, etc.); sometimes, this is even radicalized into the assertion that the scientific shift in the predominant paradigm is an epiphenomenon of the fact that the whole of humanity is on the verge of the biggest spiritual shift in its entire history, of entering a new epoch in which egotistic individualism will be replaced by a transindividual cosmic Awareness.

2. The 'naturalization' of certain specific social phenomena clearly discernible in so-called cyberrevolutionism, which relies on the notion of cyberspace (or World Wide Web) as a self-evolving 'natural' organism: the 'naturalization of culture' (the market, society, etc., as living organisms) overlaps here with the 'culturalization of nature' (life itself is conceived as a set of self-reproducing information – 'genes are memes'). This new notion of Life is therefore neutral with respect to the distinction between natural and cultural or 'artificial' processes – the Earth (as Gaia), as well as the global market, both appear as gigantic self-regulated living systems whose basic structure is defined in terms of the process of coding and decoding, of passing on information, and so on.

So, while cyberspace ideologists can dream about the next step of evolution, in which we will no longer be mechanically interacting 'Cartesian' individuals, in which each 'person' will cut his or her substantive link to his or her individual body, and conceive him- or herself as part of the new holistic Mind which lives and acts through him or her, what is obfuscated in such direct 'naturalization' of the World Wide Web or market is the set of power relations – of political decisions, of institutional conditions –

which is necessary for 'organisms' like the Internet (or the market or capitalism . . .) to thrive. We are dealing here with an all-too-fast metaphorical transposition of certain biological-evolutionist concepts to the study of the history of human civilization, like the jump from 'genes' to 'memes' – that is, the idea that not only do human beings use language to reproduce themselves, multiply their power and knowledge, and so on, but also, on perhaps a more fundamental level, language itself uses human beings to replicate and expand itself, to gain new wealth of meanings, and so on.

The standard counterargument of proponents of Cultural Studies against Third Culture criticism is that the loss of the public intellectual bemoaned in these complaints is in fact the loss of a certain traditional type of (usually white male) modernist intellectual: in our postmodernist era, he has been replaced by a proliferation of theoreticians who operate in a different mode (replacing concern with one Big Issue with a series of localized strategic interventions) and do in fact address issues which concern the wider public (racism and multiculturalism, sexism, how to overthrow the Eurocentrist curriculum, etc.), and thus trigger public debates (like the 'political correctness' or sexual harassment controversies). Although this answer is all too easy, the fact remains that themes addressed by Cultural Studies do stand at the centre of public ideologico-political debates (hybrid multiculturalism versus the need for a close community identification; abortion and queer rights versus Moral Majority fundamentalism; etc.), while the first thing which strikes the eye apropos of the Third Culture is how its proponents, busy as they are clarifying the ultimate enigmas ('reading the mind of God', as

Hawking was once credited with), silently pass over the burning questions which actually occupy centre stage in current politico-ideological debates.

Finally, one should note that despite the salient distinction between science and ideology, obscurantist New Age ideology is *an immanent outgrowth of modern science itself*—from David Bohm to Fritjof Capra, examples abound of different versions of 'dancing Wu Li masters', teaching us about the Tao of physics, the 'end of the Cartesian paradigm', the significance of the anthropic principle and the holistic approach, and so on.¹³⁶ To avoid any misunderstanding: as an old-fashioned dialectical materialist, I am opposed as ferociously as possible to these obscurantist appropriations of quantum physics and astronomy; all I claim is that these obscurantist shoots are not simply imposed from outside, but function as what Louis Althusser would have called a 'spontaneous ideology' of scientists themselves, as a kind of spiritualist supplement to the predominant reductionist-proceduralist attitude of 'only what can be precisely defined and measured counts'

Much more worrying than the 'excesses' of Cultural Studies are the New Age obscurantist appropriations of today's 'hard' sciences which, in order to legitimize their position, invoke the authority of science itself ('today's science has outgrown mechanistic materialism, and points towards a new spiritual holistic stance . . .'). Significantly, defenders of scientific realism like Bricmont and Sokal refer only briefly to some 'subjectivist' formulations of Heisenberg and Bohr which can give rise to relativist/historicist misappropriations, qualifying them as the expression of their author's philosophy not part of the scientific

edifice of the quantum physics itself. Here, however, problems begin: Bohr's and Heisenberg's 'subjectivist' formulations are not a marginal phenomenon, but were canonized as 'Copenhagen orthodoxy', that is, as the 'official' interpretation of the ontological consequences of quantum physics.

The fact is that the moment one wants to provide an ontological account of quantum physics (what notion of reality fits its results), paradoxes emerge which undermine standard common-sense scientific objectivism – this fact is constantly emphasized by scientists themselves, who oscillate between the simple suspension of the ontological question (quantum physics functions, so do not try to understand it, just do the calculations . . .) and different ways out of the deadlock (Copenhagen orthodoxy, the Many Worlds Interpretation, some version of the 'hidden variable' theory which would save the notion of one unique objective reality, like the one proposed by David Bohm, but which none the less involves paradoxes of its own, like the notion of causality which runs backwards in time).

The more fundamental problem beneath these perplexities is: can we, in fact, simply renounce the ontological question and limit ourselves to the mere functioning of the scientific apparatus, its calculations and measurements? A further impasse concerns the necessity somehow to relate scientific discoveries to everyday language, to translate them into it: it can be argued that problems emerge only when we try to translate the results of quantum physics back into our common-sense notions of reality – but is it possible to resist this temptation? All these topics are widely discussed in the literature on quantum physics, so they have nothing to do with Cultural Studies' (mis)appropriation of sciences – it

was Richard Feynman himself who, in his famous statement, claimed that 'nobody really understands quantum physics', implying that one can no longer translate its mathematical-theoretical edifice into the terms of our everyday lifeworld notions of reality. The impact of modern physics was the shattering of the traditional naive-realist epistemological edifice: sciences themselves opened up a gap in which obscurantist shoots were able to grow, so, instead of pouring all our scorn on to poor old Cultural Studies, it would be much more productive to approach anew the classic topic of the precise epistemological and ontological implications of the shifts in 'hard' sciences themselves.

The impasse of historicism

On the other hand, the problem with Cultural Studies is that – at least in their predominant form – they *do* involve a kind of cognitive suspension (the abandonment of the consideration of the inherent truth-value of the theory under consideration) characteristic of historicist relativism: when a typical Cultural Theorist deals with a philosophical or psychoanalytic edifice, the analysis focuses exclusively on unearthing its hidden patriarchal, Eurocentrist, identitarian, etc., 'bias', without even asking the naive but none the less necessary question: OK, but what *is* the structure of the universe? How *does* the human psyche 'really' work? Such questions are not even taken seriously in Cultural Studies, since they simply tend to reduce them to historicist reflection upon conditions in which certain notions emerged as a result of historically specific power relations. Furthermore, in a typical rhetorical move, Cultural Studies denounce the very

attempt to draw a clear line of distinction between, say, true science and pre-scientific mythology, as part of the Eurocentrist process of imposing its own hegemony by means of the exclusionary discursive strategy of devaluing the Other as not-yet-scientific.

In this way, we end up arranging and analysing science proper, premodern 'wisdom', and other forms of knowledge as different discursive formations evaluated not with regard to their inherent truth-value, but with regard to their sociopolitical status and impact (so a native 'holistic' wisdom can be considered much more 'progressive' than the 'mechanistic' Western science that is responsible for the forms of modern domination). The problem with such a procedure of historicist relativism is that it continues to rely on a set of silent (non-thematized) ontological and epistemological presuppositions about the nature of human knowledge and reality usually a proto-Nietzschean notion that knowledge is not only embedded in but also generated by a complex set of discursive strategies of power (re)production, and so on. So it is crucial to emphasize that Lacan, at this point, parts company with Cultural Studies historicism: for him, modern science is absolutely *not* one of the 'narratives' comparable in principle to other modes of 'cognitive mapping' – modern science *touches the Real* in a way that is totally absent from premodern discourses.

Here Cultural Studies must be put in their proper context: since the demise of the great philosophical schools in the late 1970s, European academic philosophy itself, with its basic hermeneutical-historical stance, paradoxically shares with Cultural Studies the stance of cognitive suspension: excellent studies of great authors of the past have been produced recently,

yet they focus on the correct reading of the author in question, while mostly ignoring the naive, but unavoidable question of truth-value – not only 'Is this the right reading of Descartes's notion of body? Is this what Descartes's notion of body has to repress in order to retain its consistency?', and so on, but also 'What, then, is the true status of the body? How do we feel about Descartes's notion of the body?' And it seems as if these prohibited 'ontological' questions are returning with a vengeance in today's Third Culture: what characterizes the recent rise of quantum physics and cosmology if not a violent and aggressive rehabilitation of the most fundamental metaphysical questions (what is the origin and putative end of the universe?, etc.)?

The explicit goal of people like Hawking is a version of TOE (Theory Of Everything), that is, the endeavour to discover the basic formula of the structure of the universe that one could print and wear on a T-shirt (or, for a human being, the genome that identifies what I objectively am). So, in clear contrast to Cultural Studies' strict prohibition of direct 'ontological' questions, the proponents of Third Culture unabashedly approach the most fundamental pre-Kantian metaphysical issues (the ultimate constituents of reality; the origins and end of the universe; what is consciousness?; how did life emerge?; etc.) – as if the old dream, which died with the demise of Hegelianism, of a broad synthesis of metaphysics and science, the dream of a global theory of *all* grounded in exact scientific insights, is coming alive again.

In contrast to these two version of cognitive suspension, the cognitivist approach opts for a naive direct inquiry into 'the nature of things' (What is perception? How did language

emerge?); however – to use the well-worn phrase – **by** throwing out the bathwater, it loses the baby too: that is, the dimension of proper **philosophico-transcendental** reflection. That is to say: is historicist relativism (which ultimately leads to the untenable solipsist position) **really** the only alternative to naive scientific realism (according to which, in the sciences and in our knowledge in general, we are gradually approaching the proper image of the way things really are out there, independently of our consciousness of them)?

From the standpoint of a proper philosophical reflection, it can easily be shown that both these positions miss the properly transcendental-hermeneutical level. In what does this level consist? Let us take the classical line of realist reasoning which claims that the passage from premodern mythical thought to the modern scientific approach to reality cannot **simply** be interpreted as the replacement of one predominant 'narrative' with another – the modern scientific approach definitely brings us closer to what 'reality' (the 'hard' reality which exists independently of the scientific researcher) actually is. **A** hermeneutic philosopher's basic response to this stance would be to insist that, with the passage from the premodern mythical universe to the universe of modern science, *the very notion of what 'reality' (or 'actually to exist') means, of what 'counts' as reality, has also changed*, so that we cannot **simply** presuppose a neutral external measure which allows **us** to judge that, with modern science, we come closer to the 'same' reality as that with which premodern mythology was dealing – as **Hegel** would have put it, with the passage from the premodern mythical universe to the modern scientific universe, the measure, the standard which we implicitly use or

apply in order to measure how 'real' what we are dealing with is, has itself undergone a fundamental change.

The modern scientific outlook involves a series of distinctions (between 'objective' reality and 'subjective' ideas—impressions of it in the subject; between hard neutral facts and 'values' that we, the judging subjects, impose on the facts, etc.) which are, *stricto sensu*, meaningless in the premodern universe. Of course, a realist could retort that that is the whole point – that only with the passage to the modern scientific universe do we get an appropriate notion of what 'objective reality' is, in contrast to the premodern outlook which confused 'facts' and 'values'; against this, the transcendental-hermeneutic philosopher would be fully justified in insisting that, none the less, we cannot get out of the vicious circle of presupposing our result: the most fundamental way reality 'appears' to us, the most fundamental way we experience what 'really counts as actually existing', is always-already presupposed in our judgements on what 'really exists'. This transcendental level was indicated by Kuhn himself when, in *The Structure Of Scientific Revolutions*, he claimed that the shift in a scientific paradigm is *more* than a mere shift in our (external) perspective on – or perception of – reality but *less* than our actually 'creating' another new reality.¹³⁸

For that reason, the standard distinction between the social or psychological contingent conditions of a scientific invention and its objective truth-value falls short here: the least one can say about it is that the very distinction between the (empirical, contingent sociopsychological) genesis of a certain scientific formation and its objective truth-value, independent of the conditions of this genesis, already presupposes a set of distinctions

(between genesis and truth-value, etc.) which are by no means self-evident. So, again, one should insist here that the hermeneutic-transcendental questioning of implicit presuppositions in no way endorses the historicist relativism typical of Cultural Studies.

What, then, is the nature of the ultimate difference between cognitivism and Cultural Studies? On the one hand, there is neutral objective knowledge – the patient empirical examination of reality cognitivists like to emphasize that, politically, they are not against the Left – their aim is precisely to liberate the Left from the irrationalist-relativist-elitist, etc., postmodern fake; nevertheless, they accept the distinction between neutral theoretical (scientific) insight and the possible ideologico-political bias of its author. . . . In contrast, Cultural Studies involve the properly dialectical paradox of a Truth that relies on an engaged subjective position. This distinction between the Knowledge inherent to the academic institution, defined by the standards of professionalism', and, on the other hand, the Truth of a (collective) subject engaged in a struggle (elaborated, among others, by philosophers from Theodor Adorno to Alain Badiou), enables us to explain how the difference between cognitivists and Cultural Studies functions as a shibboleth: it is properly visible only from the standpoint of Cultural Studies. So, on the one hand, one should fully acknowledge the solid scholarly status of much of the cognitivist endeavour – often, it is academia at its best; on the other hand, there is a dimension that simply eludes its grasp.

On the other hand, Politically Correct Cultural Studies often pay for their arrogance and lack of serious approach by confusing Truth (the engaged subjective position) and Knowledge – by

disavowing the gap that separates them, by directly subordinating Knowledge to Truth (for example, a quick sociocritical dismissal of a specific science like quantum physics or biology without proper acquaintance with the inherent conceptual structure of this field of Knowledge). In effect, the problem of Cultural Studies is often a lack of specific disciplinary skills: a literary theorist without a proper knowledge of philosophy can write disparagingly about Hegel's phallogocentrism, on film, and so on – we are dealing with a kind of false universal critical capacity to pass judgement on everything, without proper knowledge. With all their criticism of traditional philosophical universalism, Cultural Studies actually function as a kind of ersatz, philosophy. Notions are thus transformed into ideological universals: in postcolonial studies, the notion of 'colonization' starts to function as a hegemonic notion, is elevated into a universal paradigm, so that, in relations between the sexes, the male sex colonizes the female sex, the upper classes colonize the lower classes. . . .

Especially with some 'progressive' interpreters of contemporary biology, it is popular to focus on the way the opposing positions are overdetermined by the politico-ideological stance of their authors: does not Dawkins's 'Chicago gangster theory of life', his reductionist determinist theory about 'selfish genes' caught in the deadly struggle for survival, express the stance of a bourgeois individualist competitive society? Is not Gould's emphasis on sudden genetic change and ex-aptation a sign of the more supple, dialectical and 'revolutionary' Leftist stance of its author? Do not those (like Lynn Margulis) who emphasize spontaneous co-operation and emerging order express a longing

for a stable organic order, for Society **as** a 'corporate body'? Do we thus not have here the scientific expression of the basic triad of Right, Centre and Left: the organicist conservative notion of society as a Whole; the bourgeois individualist notion of society as the space for the competition between individuals; and the revolutionary theory of sudden change? (Of course, the insistence on the holistic approach and emerging order can be given a different emphasis: it can display the conservative longing for a stable order, or the progressive utopian belief in a new society of solidary co-operation in which order grows spontaneously from below and is not imposed from above.)

The standard form of the opposition is the one between 'cold' mechanistic **probing** into causality, displaying the attitude of the scientific manipulator in the service of exploitative domination over nature, and the new 'holistic' approach focused on spontaneously emerging order and co-operation, pointing towards what Andrew Ross has called a 'kindler, gentler science'.¹³⁹ The mistake here is the same **as** that of Stalinist Marxism, which opposed bourgeois' to 'proletarian' science, or that of the pseudo-radical feminism which opposes 'masculine' to 'feminine' discourse **as** two self-enclosed Wholes engaged in warfare: we do not have *two* sciences, but *one* universal science split from within – that is to say, caught in the battle for **hegemony**.¹⁴⁰

Theoretical state apparatuses

Academically recognized 'radical thought' in the liberal West does not operate in a void, but is part of the social relations of power. Apropos of Cultural Studies, one has again to ask the

old Benjaminian question: not how do they explicitly *relate* to power, but how are they themselves *situated within* the predominant power relations? Do not Cultural Studies also function as a discourse which pretends to be critically self-reflective, revealing predominant power relations, while in reality it obfuscates its own mode of participating in them? So it would be productive to apply to Cultural Studies themselves the Foucauldian notion of productive 'bio-power' as opposed to 'repressive'/prohibitory legal power: what if the field of Cultural Studies, far from actually threatening today's global relations of domination, fit their framework perfectly, just as sexuality and the 'repressive' discourse that regulates it are fully complementary? What if the criticism of patriarchal/identitarian ideology betrays an ambiguous fascination with it, rather than an actual will to undermine it? Crucial here is the shift from English to American Cultural Studies: even if we find in both the same themes, notions, and so on, the socio-ideological functioning is completely different: we shift from an engagement with real working-class culture to academic radical chic.

Despite such critical remarks, however, the very fact of *resistance* against Cultural Studies proves that they remain a foreign body unable to fit fully into existing academia: cognitivism is ultimately the attempt of the standard functioning of academic knowledge – 'professional', rational, empirical, problem-solving . . . theory – to reoccupy the terrain, to get rid of this intruder. So the distinction between cognitivism and Cultural Studies is not simply the distinction between two doctrines or two theoretical approaches; it is ultimately a much more radical distinction between two totally different modalities or, rather, *practices* of

knowledge, inclusive of two different institutional apparatuses of knowledge. This dimension of 'theoretical state apparatuses' – to use the Althusserian formulation – is crucial: if we do not take it into account, we simply miss the point of the antagonism between cognitivism and Cultural Studies. No wonder cognitivists like to emphasize their opposition to psychoanalysis: two exemplary cases of such non-academic knowledge are, of course, Marxism and psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis differs from cognitivist psychology and psychotherapy in at least three crucial features:

1. Since it does not present itself as empirically tested objective knowledge, there is the perennial problem (in countries where psychiatric care is covered by medical insurance) of the extent to which the state or the insurance company will reimburse the patient.
2. For the same reason, psychoanalysis has inherent difficulties in integrating itself into the academic edifice of psychology or medical psychiatry departments, so it usually functions as a parasitic entity which wanders around, attaching itself either to psychology departments or to Cultural Studies or Comparative Literature departments.
3. As to their inherent organization, psychoanalytic communities do not function as 'normal' academic societies (like sociological, mathematical, etc., societies); they function in a way which, from the standpoint of 'normal' academic societies, cannot but appear as a 'dogmatic' discipline engaged in eternal factional struggles between subgroups dominated by a strong authoritarian or charismatic leader – conflicts are not resolved through rational

argumentation and empirical testing, but are more like sectarian religious struggles. In short, the phenomenon of (personal) transference functions here in a wholly different way from in the 'standard' academic community. (In a slightly different way, the same goes for Marxism.)

Just as Marxism interprets resistance against its insights as the 'result of the class struggle in theory', as accounted for by its very object, psychoanalysis also interprets resistance against itself as the result of the very unconscious processes that are its topic – in both cases, **theory** is caught in a self-referential loop; in a way, it is *theory about the resistance against itself*. Concerning this crucial point, the situation today is entirely different, almost the opposite, of the situation in the 1960s and early 1970s, when 'marginal' disciplines (like the Cultural Studies version of psychoanalysis) were perceived as 'anarchic', as liberating us from the 'repressive' authoritarian regime of the standard academic discipline: what cognitivist critics of Cultural Studies play upon is the common perception that, today, (what remains of) the Cultural Studies version of psychoanalysis is perceived as sectarian, 'Stalinist', authoritarian, engaged in ridiculous pseudo-theological factional struggles in which the problems of the Party line prevail over open empirical research and rational argumentation, while **they** present themselves as the fresh air that chases away this close and stuffy atmosphere – at last, we are free to formulate and test different hypotheses, no longer 'terrorized' by some dogmatically imposed global Party line. So we are a long way from the anti-academic-establishment logic of the 1960s: today, academia presents itself as the place of

free, open discussion, as liberating us from the stuffy constraints of 'subversive' Critical Studies. And although, of course, 'regression' into authoritarian prophetic discourse is one of the dangers that threaten Cultural Studies, their inherent temptation, one should none the less focus on how the cognitivist stance succeeds in unproblematically presenting the framework of *institutional* academic university discourse as the very locus of intellectual *freedom*.

**Conclusion: ' . . . and what are the
destitute (totalitarians) for in a
poetic time?'**

*in which the reader is cautioned ~~that~~ the spectre of 'totalitarianism'
is still roaming around (the Third World's 'mad dictators'; the
populist New Right; the digital Big Brother)*

In the unconstrained autopoiesis of capitalism which followed the demise of Socialism, the spectre of the 'totalitarian threat' survives in three forms: the new religious-ethnic fundamentalisms, usually *personalified* in Evil Dictators (Slobodan Milošević, Saddam Hussein); the rise of New Right populism in the West itself; and, last but not least, the notion that the digitalization of our lives poses the ultimate threat to our freedom – soon, our *daily* lives will be registered and controlled to such an extent that the former police state control will look like a childish game: the 'end of privacy' is in sight.

Let us, then, start with the first form. There seems to be a fundamental miscommunication in the way Western 'Enlightened' liberal states perceive and treat today's 'fundamentalist' regimes of rulers like Milošević and Saddam Hussein. They seem to be impervious to all the pressure from the West: one bombards them, one chips off parts of their territory, one isolates them from the international community and imposes tough sanctions, one humiliates them in every possible way, yet they survive with their glory intact, maintaining the appearance of courageous leaders who dare to defy the New World Order. It is not so much that they turn defeat into triumph; it is rather that, like a kind of a Buddhist sage, they sit in their palaces and carry on, occasionally defying expectations with eccentric gestures of almost Batailleian extravagance, like Milošević's son opening a local version of Disneyland in the midst of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, or Saddam constructing a large amusement park for his elite *nomenklatura*. Sticks (threats and bombings) achieve nothing, neither do carrots. . . .

So where did the Western perception go wrong? In reading the situation through the lenses of the opposition between the hedonistic rational pursuit of happiness and ideological fanaticism, it failed to take note of another couple of opposites: apathy and obscenity. The apathy that pervades daily life in today's Serbia does not express *merely* disillusionment with the 'democratic opposition' to Milošević, but a more profound indifference towards sacred nationalist goals. How was it that the Serbs did not rally against Milošević when he lost Kosovo? Every ordinary Serb knows the answer, it's an open secret in Yugoslavia: *they* really don't *care* about Kosovo. So when Kosovo was lost, the

secret reaction was a sigh of relief: at last we're rid of that piece of 'sacred' land which has caused us so much trouble!

One of the reasons why even the most antinationalist Western Leftist intellectuals fail to detect this fundamental apathy is the whole plethora of standard Leftist prejudices and dogmas which occlude their perception of the Yugoslav crisis, first among them the secret belief in the viability of Yugoslav self-management Socialism, and the notion that small nations like Slovenia (or Croatia) cannot actually function like modern democracies but, left to their own devices, necessarily regress to a proto-Fascist 'closed' community (in clear contrast to Serbia, whose potential as a modern democratic state is never put in doubt). On this key point, even such a penetrating philosopher as Alain Badiou insists that the only Yugoslavia worthy of respect was Tito's Yugoslavia, and that in its disintegration along ethnic lines, all sides are ultimately the same, 'ethnic cleansers' in their own entity, Serbs, Slovenes or Bosnians:

Serb nationalism is worthless. But in what way is it worse than others? It is broader, more widespread, better armed; it had without doubt more opportunities to exercise its criminal passion. But this is a mere matter of circumstances. . . . Let us suppose that, tomorrow, the Kosovar nationalist KLA takes power: is it conceivable that one Serb will remain in Kosovo? Outside the victimizing rhetoric, we haven't seen one good political reason to prefer a Kosovar (or Croat, or Albanian, or Slovene, or Muslim-Bosnian) nationalist to the Serb nationalist. . . . Sure, Milošević is a brutish nationalist, as are all his colleagues from Croatia, Bosnia, or Albania. . . .

Since the beginning of the conflict, the Westerners have in effect sided only – and awkwardly – with weak (Bosnian, Kosovar) nationalism against strong (Serb and subsidiary Croat) nationalism.¹⁴¹

The ultimate irony of such a nostalgic Leftist longing for the lost Yugoslavia is that it ends up identifying as the successor of Yugoslavia the very force that actually killed it: the Serbia of Milošević. In the post-Yugoslav crisis of the 1990s, what could be said to embody the positive legacy of Titoist Yugoslavia – its much-praised multiculturalist tolerance – was ('Muslim') Bosnia: the Serb aggression against Bosnia was (also) the aggression of Milošević, the first true post-Titoist (the first Yugoslav politician who really acted as if Tito was dead, as a perceptive Serb social scientist put it more than a decade ago), against those who clung desperately to the Titoist legacy of ethnic 'brotherhood and unity'. No wonder the supreme commander of the 'Muslim' army was General Rasim Delić, an ethnic *Serb*; no wonder that, all through the 1990s, 'Muslim' Bosnia was the only part of ex-Yugoslavia in whose government offices Tito's portraits were still hanging. To obliterate this crucial aspect of the Yugoslav war, and to reduce the Bosnian conflict to civil war between different 'ethnic groups' in Bosnia, is not a neutral gesture, but a gesture that adopts in advance the standpoint of one of the sides in the conflict (Serbia).

The partisans of global liberal capitalism see the choice that confronts ex-Yugoslav republics as that between embracing Western liberal capitalism or persisting in their ethnic self-enclosure – what, however, if this is a false alternative and there

is a third choice, the combination of the two that Vesna Pešić, a member of the Serb democratic opposition, called the possible 'Russification' of Serbia? What if, after Milošević, we get a new ruling elite, composed of corrupt *nouveaux* riches and members of the current political class, who will present themselves to the West as 'pro-Western' (in order to get Western financial support), while endlessly postponing true democratic changes, justifying this by special circumstances, and (while actually following the nationalist line in internal politics) claiming that if the West withdraws its support, the nationalist hardliners will take over again? In other words, what if Milošević, upon his (eventual) demise, were to play a Christ-like role of taking all their sins upon himself? Milošević is a pariah who, for the Western powers, embodies all that is wrong in Yugoslavia, so that his demise will be hailed as the chance for a new democratic beginning – Yugoslavia will be accepted again, without paying any price. This same scenario is already taking place in Croatia, after the death of President Franjo Tuđman. His funeral was ignored by the international community; the leitmotiv of most of the commentators was that his obstinacy was the main obstacle to the democratization of Croatia, so that his demise opens up a new prospect for a democratic Croatia – as if all the dark aspects of the independent Croatia, from corruption to its own 'ethnic cleansing', have now magically disappeared from the scene and are interred with Tuđman's body. Is this also the last favour Milošević will be able to do his nation?

This phenomenon is more general than it may appear. In a lot of Third World states, the ideological interpellation of the ruling elite is double: the elite in the cities resort to liberal-democratic

interpellation, while simultaneously interpellating individuals (especially in remote areas) as members of an exclusive ethnic community. And the illusion of several political agents, from patronizingly benevolent Western interveners to Mandela, is that it is possible simply to suspend ethnic identification, this alleged source of 'tribal ethnic savage violence', and directly impose the regime of universal democratic citizenship. As experience from Bosnia to Kenya demonstrates, this solution doesn't work: in this case, the catastrophic outcome is that the main political options are overdetermined (or infested, coloured) by ethnic differences (a certain political orientation is identified with members of a certain ethnic community).

So the problem is not so much what the West should do (or should have done), but what it should *not* do. The dismal result of Western procrastination and then excessive (re)action to the Yugoslav crisis is that now, in 2000, a large area of the central Balkans (Yugoslavia, Albania, Macedonia, Bosnia) is an area in which the rule of law is largely suspended, political power itself is openly linked to organized crime, smuggling is directly organized by the state, murder is tolerated as a political weapon – in short, an area under the direct rule of political banditry. So what is at the root of the West's misperception?

About a year ago, Austrian television staged a debate on Kosovo between a Serb, an Albanian and an Austrian pacifist. The Serb and the Albanian each presented their view in a consistent and rational way (consistent and rational, of course, if and only if one accepts the basic premiss of each of them: that Kosovo is the historical cradle of Serbia, to which the Serbs have an inalienable right; that the Albanians, oppressed by the Serbs

for decades, have the right to a sovereign political entity). The Austrian pacifist, in contrast, tried to play a conciliatory role, imploring the two opponents: 'Whatever you think, just promise that you won't shoot at each other, that you'll do your best to resist the terrible temptation of hatred and vengeance!' At this point, the Serb and the Albanian, the two 'official' opponents, briefly exchanged glances in a solidary gesture of shared perplexity, as if saying to each other: 'What is this idiot talking about? Does he understand *anything at all*?' In this brief exchange of glances, I see a glimmer of hope; if the Serb and the Albanian, instead of fighting each other, had been able to join forces and knock out the stupid pacifist, there would still have been some hope for Yugoslavia.

To avoid a fatal misunderstanding: I am well aware that it is easy to mock a powerless pacifist. However, that exchange of glances between the Serb and the Albanian was not the mutual recognition of solidarity between two aggressive nationalists, but their perplexity at what the Austrian pacifist was saying. Their surprise was not that the pacifist was unaware of the ethnic, religious, etc., complexity of the Balkan situation, but that he *took all too seriously all the babble about hundred-year-old ethnic myths and passions, and did not see that the Serbs and the Albanians themselves, far from being 'caught' in these myths, manipulate them.* What was false about the pacifist was not his pacifism as such, but his depoliticized and racist view that the ultimate cause of the post-Yugoslav war was ethnic intolerance and the re-emergence of old ethnic hatreds.

I am thus tempted to propose here a simple test of the reader's implicit racism, which follows the lines of Robespierre's famous quip when, at the height of the Revolutionary terror, he showed

the National Assembly a booklet which, he claimed, contained the names of the traitors among the members: 'If anyone in this room now fears that his name may be in this booklet, this very fear is an irrefutable proof that he is a traitor!' *Mutatis mutandis*, I am tempted to claim: if anyone who reads these lines was just a tiny little bit embarrassed about my thesis that the exchange of glances between the Serb and the Kosovar offers a glimmer of hope, if he is just a tiny little bit uneasy about my apparent mocking of the poor benevolent pacifist, *this uneasiness is an irrefutable proof that he is a racist.*

This brings us conveniently to Austria: one can be sure that, in the early months of 2000, this same pacifist was fully involved in demonstrations against the prospect of Jörg Haider's *Freidemokraten* participating in the Austrian government. This prospect aroused horror throughout the entire spectrum of the 'legitimate democratic' political bloc in the Western world: from the Social Democratic Third Way Left to Christian conservatives; from Chirac to Clinton – not to mention, of course, Israel – they all expressed 'concern' and announced at least symbolic measures for Austria's diplomatic quarantine, until this disease disappears or is proved to be not really dangerous. Some commentators perceived this horror as proof of how the basic post-World-War-II anti-Fascist democratic consensus in Europe still holds – however, are things really so unequivocal?

The first thing to do here is to recall the well-concealed but none the less unmistakable sigh of relief in the predominant democratic political field when, a decade ago, the Rightist populist parties became a serious presence (Haider in Austria, le Pen in France, Republicans in Germany, Buchanan in the USA). The

message of this relief was: at last an enemy whom we can properly hate all together, whom we can sacrifice – excommunicate – in order to demonstrate our democratic consensus! This relief is to be read against the background of what is usually referred to as the emerging 'post-political consensus': the only political force with the serious weight which does still evoke the properly political antagonistic response of Us against Them is the new populist Right.

A strange thing happened in New York politics at the end of November 1999: Lenora Fulani, a Black activist from Harlem, endorsed Patrick Buchanan's Reform Party presidential candidacy, declaring that she would try to bring him to Harlem and mobilize the voters there on his behalf. While both partners admitted their differences on a number of key issues, they stressed 'their common economic populism, and particularly their antipathy to free trade'. Why this pact between Fulani, the far-Left espouser of Marxist–Leninist politics, and Buchanan, a Reaganite Cold Warrior and the leading right-wing populist figure? Liberal common wisdom had a ready answer: extremes – Right and Left 'totalitarianism' – meet in their rejection of democracy and, especially today, in their shared inability to adapt to the new trends of the global economy. Furthermore, do they not share an anti-Semitic agenda? While the anti-Semitic bias of radical African-Americans is well-known, who can forget Buchanan's provocative designation of the US Congress as an Israeli-occupied territory? Against such liberal platitudes, one should focus on what really unites Fulani and Buchanan: they both (pretend to) speak on behalf of the proverbial 'disappearing working class'.

Postmodern 'radical' politics *accepts* this thesis of the 'disappearing of the working class' and its corollary, the growing irrelevance of class antagonism; as its proponents like to put it, class antagonism should not be 'essentialized' into the ultimate hermeneutic point of reference to whose 'expression' all other antagonisms can be reduced. Today, we witness the thriving of new multiple political subjectivities (class, ethnic, gay, ecological, feminist, religious . . .), and the alliance between them is the outcome of open, thoroughly contingent *hegemonic* struggle. However, philosophers as different as Alain Badiou and Fredric Jameson have pointed out, apropos of today's multiculturalist celebration of the diversity of lifestyles, how this thriving of differences relies on an underlying One: on the radical obliteration of Difference, of the antagonistic *gap*.¹⁴² The same goes for the standard postmodern critique of sexual difference as a 'binary opposition' to be deconstructed: 'there are not just two sexes, but a multitude of sexes, sexual identities . . . ' – the truth of these multiple sexes is *Unisex*, the obliteration of Difference in the boring repetitive perverse Sameness which serves as the container of this multitude. In all these cases, the moment we introduce the 'thriving multitude', what we are in fact asserting is its exact opposite, the underlying all-pervasive Sameness – the notion of a radical antagonistic gap that affects the entire social body is obliterated: here the non-antagonistic Society is the very global 'container' in which there is enough room for all the multitude of cultural communities, lifestyles, religions, sexual orientations. . . .¹⁴³

There is already a very precise *philosophical* reason why the antagonism has to be a dyad – why the 'multiplication' of

differences amounts to the reassertion of the underlying One. As Hegel emphasized, each genus ultimately has only two species – that is to say, the specific difference is ultimately the difference between the genus itself and its species 'as such'. In our universe, for example, sexual difference is not simply the difference between the two species of the human genus, but the difference between one term (man) which stands for the genus as such, and the other term (woman) which stands for the Difference within the genus as such, for its specifying, particular moment. So, in a dialectical analysis, even when we have the appearance of multiple species, we must always look for the exceptional species which directly gives body to the genus as such: the true Difference is the 'impossible' difference between this species and all others.

Paradoxically, Ernesto Laclau is close to Hegel here: inherent to his notion of hegemony is the idea that, among the particular elements (signifiers), there is one which directly 'colours' the empty signifier of the impossible universality itself, so that, within this hegemonic constellation, opposing this particular signifier equals opposing 'society' as *such*.¹⁴⁴ When the antagonistic dyad is replaced by the notorious 'thriving multitude', the gap which is thereby obliterated is, consequently, not simply the gap between different contents *within* society, but the antagonistic gap between Social and non-Social, the gap that affects the very Universal notion of the Social. To avoid a misunderstanding: there is, of course, a plurality of sexual subjective positions and practices, which cannot be reduced to variations of or deviations from some fundamental symbolic Norm (like 'straight' heterosexuality). The key question, however, is: Does this plurality

emerge as the series of failed attempts to symbolize the Real of an antagonism/impossibility, or is it simply a multitude thriving against the background of the all-encompassing One, its medium?

In this universe of Sameness, the main form of the semblance of political Difference generated is the two-party system, this *semblance of a choice where there is basically none*. Both poles converge on economic policy as in the recent elevations, by Clinton and Blair, of a 'tight fiscal policy' as the key tenet of the modern Left: a tight fiscal policy sustains economic growth, and growth allows us a more active social policy in our fight for better social security, education and health. Their differences are ultimately reduced to opposed cultural attitudes: multiculturalist, sexual, etc., 'openness' versus traditional 'family values'. And, significantly, it is the Rightist option that addresses and attempts to mobilize whatever remains of the mainstream 'working class' in our Western societies, while multiculturalist 'tolerance' is becoming the motto of new privileged 'symbolic classes' (journalists, academics, managers . . .). This political choice – Social Democrat or Christian Democrat in Germany; Democrat or Republican in the USA – cannot fail to remind us of our predicament when we want artificial sweetener in an American cafeteria: the ever-present alternative of *Nutra-Sweet Equal* and *High&Low*, of little blue or red bags, where almost everyone has his or her preferences (avoid the red ones, they contain cancerous substances, or vice versa); and this ridiculous sticking to one's choice merely accentuates the utter meaninglessness of the alternative.

And does not the same go for late-night television chat shows,

where the 'freedom to choose' is the choice between Jay Leno and David Letterman? Or for soft drinks: Coke or Pepsi? It is a well-known fact that the 'Close door' button in most lifts is a totally dysfunctional placebo, put there simply to give individuals the impression that they are somehow participating, contributing to the speed of the lift – when we press this button, the door closes in exactly the same time as it did when we pressed the floor button, without 'speeding up' the process by also pressing the 'Close door' button. This extreme case of fake participation is an appropriate metaphor for individuals' participation in our 'postmodern' political process. . . .

Of course, the postmodern answer to all this would be that radical antagonism emerges only in so far as society is still perceived as a totality – was it not Adorno who said that contradiction is difference under the aspect of identity?¹⁴⁵ So the idea is that, with the postmodern era, the retreat of the identity of Society involves *simultaneously* the retreat of the antagonism that traverses the social body – what we get instead is the One of indifference as the neutral medium in which the multitude (of lifestyles, etc.) coexists. The answer of materialist theory is to demonstrate how this very One, this common field within which multiple identities thrive, already relies on certain exclusions, is already sustained by an invisible antagonistic split.

And this brings us back to the new populist Right, which plays a key structural role in the legitimacy of the new liberal-democratic tolerant multiculturalist hegemony. They are the negative common denominator of the entire centre-left liberal spectrum: they are the excluded ones who, through this very exclusion (their unacceptability as the party of government),

provide the negative legitimacy of the liberal hegemony, the proof of their 'democratic' attitude. In this way, their existence displaces the *true* focus of the political struggle (which is, of course, the stifling of any Leftist radical alternative) on to the 'solidarity' of the entire 'democratic' bloc against the Rightist threat.

That is the ultimate proof of the liberal-democratic hegemony of today's ideologico-political scene, the hegemony which was accomplished with the emergence of 'Third Way' social democracy: the 'Third Way', as precisely social democracy under the hegemony of liberal-democratic capitalism (i.e. deprived of its minimal subversive sting), thus succeeds in excluding the last reference to anti-capitalism and class struggle. Furthermore, it is absolutely crucial that the new Rightist populists are the only 'serious' political force today which addresses the people with an anti-capitalist rhetoric, albeit in nationalist/racist/religious clothing (multinational corporations who 'betray' the ordinary decent working people of our nation).¹⁴⁶

At the Front National congress a couple of years ago, le Pen brought on to the stage an Algerian, an African and a Jew, embraced them all and told the assembled public: 'They are no less French than I am – it is the representatives of big multinational Capital, ignoring their duty to France, who are the true danger to our identity!' Hypocritical as such statements are, they nevertheless show how the populist Right is moving to occupy the terrain left vacant by the Left. Here, the liberal-democratic New Centre plays a double game: it suggests that Rightist populists are our true common enemy, while it actually manipulates this Rightist scare in order to hegemonize the 'democratic' field –

to define the terrain and win over, discipline, its *true* adversary, the radical Left.

Haider likes to emphasize the affinity between New Labour and his Austrian Free Democrats, which allegedly renders irrelevant the old Left/Right opposition: they both break with the old ideological ballast, combine a flexible market economy (deregulation, etc.) with the community-based politics of solidarity (help for the old, children, and the socially deprived) – that is, they seek to assert communal solidarity outside the old welfare state dogma.¹⁴⁷ Such statements are, of course, deliberately and intentionally misleading intended to cover up the xenophobic populist kernel of Haider's politics – they belong to the same series as the old South African apartheid partisans' attempts to present their politics as just another version of 'identity politics', guaranteeing the survival of the wealth of different cultures. Ernesto Laclau¹⁴⁸ introduced the distinction between the *elements* of an ideological edifice and the *articulation* of these elements which confers their meaning on them: Fascism is not characterized simply by a series of features (economic corporatism, populism, xenophobic racism, militarism, etc.) – these features are not in themselves 'Fascist', but can also be included in different ideological articulations – what makes them 'Fascist' is their specific articulation into the global Fascist ideological project (extensive public works, for instance, did not play the same role in both Nazi Germany and New Deal America). Along the same lines, it would be easy to show where Haider's manipulation lies: even if Haider and Blair do in fact propose a set of identical measures, these measures are inscribed into a different global project.

This, however, is not the whole story: Haider is in fact a kind

of uncanny double for Blair, his obscene sneer trailing New Labour's big smile like a shadow. To put it in good old Stalinist terms: although Haider is **lying** in equating himself with Blair, his statements are 'objectively true': New Right populism is the 'return of the repressed', the necessary supplement, of **global** capitalist **multiculturalist** tolerance. The 'truth' of Haider's claim lies not in the direct identity between New Labour and New Right populism, but in the fact that this populism is **generated** by the very inconsistencies of the Third Way project. In Haider's clinching of Blair (and the term 'clinching' is used here in the precise sense it has in boxing), as well as the uncanny coalition between Buchanan and **Fulani**, the Third Way Left gets its own message back in its inverted – true – form. The far Right's participation in government is not a punishment for Leftist 'sectarianism' and 'not coming to terms with new postmodern conditions' – it is, on the contrary, the price the Left is paying for its renunciation of any radical political project, for accepting market capitalism as 'the only game in town'.

From this perspective, even the neoconservative defence of traditional values appears in a new light: as a reaction against the disappearance of ethical and **legal normativity**, which is gradually replaced **by** pragmatic regulations that co-ordinate the **particular** interests of different groups. This thesis may appear **paradoxical**: do we not live in the era of universal human rights which assert themselves even against state sovereignty? Was the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia not the first case of military intervention accomplished (or, at least, **presenting** itself as accomplished) out of pure normative concern, without reference to any 'pathological' politico-economic interest? This **newly** emerging normativity of

'human rights' is nevertheless *the form of appearance of its very opposite*. The point here is not simply the old Marxist one about the gap between the ideological appearance of the universal legal form and the particular interests that actually sustain it; on this level, the counterargument (made, among others, by Lefort and Rancière¹⁴⁹) that the form, precisely, is never a 'mere' form, but involves a dynamics of its own which leaves its traces in the materiality of social life, is fully valid (bourgeois 'formal freedom' set in motion the process of very 'material' political demands and practices, from trade unions to feminism).

Rancière's basic emphasis is on the radical ambiguity of the Marxist notion of the gap 'between formal democracy (the rights of man, political freedom, etc.) and the economic reality of exploitation and domination. One can read this gap between the 'appearance' of equality—freedom and the social reality of economic, cultural, etc., differences either in the standard 'symptomatic' way (the form of universal rights, equality, freedom and democracy is simply a necessary but illusory form of expression of its concrete social content, the universe of exploitation and class domination); or in the much more subversive sense of a tension in which the 'appearance' of *égalité*, precisely, is *not* a 'mere appearance' but evinces an effectivity of its own, which allows it to set in motion the process of the rearticulation of actual socioeconomic relations by way of their progressive 'politicization'. (Why shouldn't women vote too? Why shouldn't conditions in the workplace also be of public political concern? etc.) Here one is tempted to use the old Lévi-Straussian term 'symbolic efficiency': the appearance of *égalité* is a symbolic fiction which, as such, possesses an actual efficiency of its own –

one should resist the thoroughly cynical temptation to reduce it to a mere illusion that conceals a different actuality.

What we have today, on the contrary, is postmodern cynicism: the tact that, beneath the universal form (of a legal norm), there is some particular interest, or a compromise among the multitude of such interests, is *directly* (even *formally*) *taken into account* – the legal norm that imposes itself is 'formally' perceived/posited as the regulatory compromise between the multitude of 'pathological' (ethnic, sexual, ecological, economic . . .) interests. The argument of the classic Marxist critique of ideology is thus, perversely, directly included and instrumentalized, and ideology retains its hold through this false self-transparency. What evaporates in today's post-political ideological universe, therefore, is not the 'reality' occluded by ideological phantasmagorias, but *appearance itself*, the appearance of some binding norm, its 'performative' strength: 'realism' – taking things the way they 'really are' – is the worst ideology.¹⁵⁰

The main political problem today is: how are we to break this cynical consensus? Formal democracy itself should not be fetishized here – its limit is perfectly illustrated by the situation in Venezuela after the election of General Chavez to the presidency in 1998. He is 'authoritarian' – a charismatic, anti-liberal populist – but one has to take this risk, in so far as traditional liberal democracy is unable to articulate a certain kind of radical popular demand. Liberal democracy tends towards 'rational' decisions within the limits of (what is perceived as) the possible; for more radical gestures, proto-'totalitarian' charismatic structures, with a plebiscitarian logic where one 'freely chooses the imposed

solution', are more effective. The paradox to accept is that in democracy, individuals *do* tend to remain stuck on the level of 'servicing goods' – often, one *does* need a Leader in order to be able to 'do the impossible'. The authentic Leader is literally the One who enables me actually to *choose myself* – subordination to him is the highest act of freedom.

All these threats seem to pale, however, in comparison to the new life Orwell's half-forgotten notion of Big Brother is receiving recently from the threat generated by the digitalization of our lives – nothing less than the 'end of privacy', the disappearance of the last refuges from the Big Other's omnipresent Gaze. Nevertheless, things are more twisted than they may appear to be. A funny thing happened not long ago to a friend of mine in Slovenia. Returning to his office late one night to finish some work, he noticed in the office across the courtyard a senior (married) manager and his secretary copulating passionately on the big desk – their passion made them oblivious to the fact that there was a building across the courtyard from which they could be clearly seen, since their office was brightly lit, and there were no curtains at the large windows. My friend phoned this office, and when the manager, interrupting his sexual activity for a brief moment, picked up the phone, he whispered ominously into the receiver: 'God is watching you!' The poor manager collapsed, and almost had a heart attack. . . .

The intervention of such a traumatic voice, which cannot be directly located in reality, is perhaps the closest we can come to the experience of the Sublime – why? Because it is not that the poor manager was simply unpleasantly surprised; quite the contrary, the surprise, for him, was to see the innermost fantasy of

being observed realized in such a direct way. This brings us to the core of the psychoanalytic notion of *fantasy*. Fantasy proper is not the scene itself that attracts our fascination, but the nonexistent imagined gaze observing it – like the impossible gaze from above for which the Aztecs drew gigantic figures of birds and animals on the ground, or the impossible gaze for which details of the sculptures on the old aqueduct to Rome were formed, although they were not visible from the ground. In short, the most elementary fantasmatic scene is not that of a fascinating scene to be looked at, but the notion of 'there's someone out there looking at us'; it is not a dream, but the notion that 'we are the objects in someone's dream'.

Milan Kundera, in *La lenteur*, presents as the ultimate sign of today's false aseptic pseudo-voluptuous sex the couple pretending to make love anally close to a hotel pool, in full view of the guests in the rooms above, faking pleasurable cries but not actually even accomplishing penetration – to this he opposes the slow intimate erotic *galant* games of eighteenth-century France.

Did not something similar to this scene from *La lenteur* in fact take place in Khmer Rouge Cambodia where, after too many people had died from purges and starvation, the regime, eager to increase the population, designated every first, tenth and twentieth day of the month days for copulation? In the evening, married couples (who otherwise had to sleep in separate barracks) were allowed to sleep together, compelled to make love. Their private space was a small cubicle cordoned off by a half-transparent bamboo curtain; in front of the row of cubicles, Khmer Rouge guards patrolled, making sure that the couples were really copulating. Since the couples knew that not making

love was considered an act of sabotage, to be severely punished; and since, on the other hand, after a fourteen-hour working day, they were usually too tired actually to have sex, they *pretended* to make love in order to dupe the *guards*: they made false movements and faked sounds.

Is this not the exact reverse of the experience from the pre-permissive youth of some of us, when we had to sneak into the bedroom with our partner and make love as silently as possible, so that our parents, if they were still awake, would not suspect that sex was going on? What if, then, such a spectacle for the Other's gaze is part of the sexual act: what if – since, as Lacan put it, 'there is no sexual relationship' – it can be staged only for the Other's gaze?

The Internet has recently been overtaken by the '-cam' websites which realize the logic of Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*: in these sites, we are able to follow some event or place continuously: the life of a person in his or her apartment, what goes on in a street, and so on. Does not this trend display this same urgent need for the fantasmatic Other's Gaze serving as the guarantee of the subject's being: 'I exist only in so far as I am looked at all the time'? (Similar to this is the phenomenon of the television set which is left on all the time, even when no one is actually watching – it serves as the minimum guarantee of the existence of the social link.) What we have here is the tragicomic reversal of the Benthamite–Orwellian notion of the panopticon society in which we are (potentially) 'observed all the time', and have nowhere to hide from the omnipresent gaze of Power: today, anxiety seems to arise from the prospect of *not* being exposed to the Other's gaze all the time, so that the subject needs the

camera's gaze as a kind of ontological guarantee of his or her existence.

This tendency reached its peak in the outrageously popular TV show ironically called 'Big Brother', first produced in the Netherlands in 1999 by Endemol. Now a tell-tale term is already established for it: 'reality soap'; the formula is to be applied in Germany and the United Kingdom, and plans for its use are under way in the USA. In 'reality soap', a kind of soap-opera counterpart to amateur porn, a group of about fifteen people are isolated in a large apartment complex where every room is under camera surveillance twenty-four hours a day, following everything the (volunteer) actors are doing, including sex. Once a week, the actors are allowed to contact the outside, discuss their problems with psychologists or TV directors, and get messages about which direction their interpersonal relationships should take. (The usual subrule is that every week, the person who is voted least popular in an audience poll goes back into the 'real' world, so that the series ends when only one person is left.)

What is so uncanny is that this show, in a way, goes even further than *The Truman Show*: the naivety of Truman is that he still has to be duped into truly believing that he lives in a real community, since the whole dramaturgy of the film relies on the rising doubts about what is actually going on around him that start to gnaw at him. Although, in contrast to *The Truman Show*, the subjects/actors of 'Big Brother' act their roles in an artificial secluded space, in a way they act them 'for real', so that, literally, fiction becomes indistinguishable from reality subjects get involved in 'real' emotional conflicts, and when they consult people from the 'real' outside, it is not so much a gesture of

returning to 'real life' as, rather, a way of magically stepping *out* of it, treating 'real life' as a virtual game from which one can acquire a temporary distance and ask advisers what one should do. (There are also time-slots when actors directly discuss with the public what they should do in their roles, so that the game is literally interactive, that is, the spectators can co-determine what will happen.) The distinction between real life and acted life is thus 'deconstructed': in a way, the two coincide, since people *act their 'real life' itself*, that is, they literally *play themselves* in their screen roles (here, the Benthamite paradox of the self-icon is finally realized: the actors 'look like themselves').

And was not the lesson of the American TV show 'How to Marry a Multimillionaire' (February 2000) the same? What was so shocking in it was the idea that the anonymous millionaire behind the protective screen selected a woman to marry (and then actually married her) from the seven contestants presented to him during the show itself, and after consulting the spectators – again, his most intimate personal life was totally externalized, with the line of separation between 'show' and 'reality' blurred. And, again, is not something strictly homologous going on in Celebration, the (in)famous Disney city in Florida, the real-life re-creation of a small idyllic American town of 'human' dimensions, in which inhabitants also, in a way, 'play themselves', or 'lead their real life on the stage'? So the circle is, in a way, closed: television was supposed to offer, as the ultimate escapist entertainment, a fictional world far removed from our actual social reality – however, it is as if, in 'reality soaps', reality itself is re-created and offered as the ultimate escapist fiction. . . .

So what is so unsettling about 'reality soaps'? The horror that

sensitive souls experience apropos of 'Big Brother' is of the same order as the horror many of us experience at cyberspace Virtual Sex. The hard lesson of Virtual Sex is not that we no longer have 'real sex', intense contact with another person's body, simply a stimulation engendered by substanceless images which bombard us from the screen. Rather, it is the much more uncomfortable discovery that there never was 'real sex': sex was always-already a game sustained by some masturbatory *fantasmatic* scenario. The common notion of masturbation is that of 'sexual intercourse with an imagined partner': I do it to myself, while I imagine doing it with or to another. Lacan's 'there is no sexual relationship' can be read as an inversion of this common notion: what if 'real sex' is nothing but masturbation with a real partner? What if, even when I am doing it with a real partner, what ultimately sustains my enjoyment is not the partner as such, but the secret fantasies I invest in it? And the same goes for complete exposure to Big Brother's gaze: what if Big Brother was always-already there, as the (imagined) Gaze for whom I was *doing* things, whom I tried to impress, to seduce, even when I was alone? What if the 'Big Brother' show simply makes this universal structure apparent? In other words, what if, in our 'real lives', we always-already play a certain role – we are not what we are, we play ourselves? The achievement of 'Big Brother' is to remind us of this uncanny fact.

As for the 'totalitarian threat' allegedly posed by this actualization of the Other's Gaze, the properly materialist response to it was provided not so long ago by social reality itself (to use a worn-out Marxist phrase). In the last days of 1999, people all around the (Western) world were bombarded by numerous

versions of the same message, which perfectly expresses the fetishist split 'I know very well, but . . .'. Tenants of apartments in big cities were getting letters from their managers, telling them that there was nothing to worry about, that **everything** would be OK, but *none the less* they should fill their bath with water, and prepare a supply of food and candles; banks were telling their customers that their deposits were safe, but *none the less* they should, *just in case*, provide themselves with some cash and a printed bank statement; **right** up to New York Mayor Rudolf Giuliani himself who, although he repeatedly reassured his citizens that the city was well prepared, *none the less* spent New Year's Eve in the concrete bunker beneath the World Trade Center, protected against biological and chemical weapons.

The cause of all this anxiety? A *non-entity* usually referred to as the 'Millennium Bug'. Are we fully aware of how *uncanny* our obsession with the Millennium Bug was? And of how much this obsession tells us about our society? Not only was the Bug **man-**generated; one can even locate it in a very precise way: owing to the limited imagination of the original programmers, their stupid digital machines did not know how to read '00' at midnight on 1 January 2000 (1900 or 2000). This simple limitation of the machine was the *cause*, but the gap between the cause and its potential *effects* was incommensurable. Expectations varied from the silly to the scary, since even the experts did not know for sure what would happen: maybe a total breakdown of social services, maybe nothing at all (which was actually the case).

Were we really dealing here with the threat of a simple mechanical malfunctioning? Of course, the digital network is materialized in electronic chips and circuitry; but one should

always bear in mind that this circuitry is, in a way, 'supposed to know': it is supposed to give body to a certain *knowledge*, and it is this knowledge – or, rather, its lack – that caused all the worries (the inability of computers to read '00'). What the Millennium Bug confronted us with was the fact that our 'real' life itself is sustained by a virtual order of objectivized knowledge whose malfunctioning can have catastrophic consequences. Lacan called this objectivized Knowledge – the symbolic substance of our being, the virtual order that *regulates* intersubjective space – the 'big Other'. A more popular-paranoiac version of the same notion is *the Matrix* from the Wachowski brothers' film of the same name.

What actually threatened us under the name of the 'Millennium Bug' was the suspension of the Matrix. Here we can see in what sense *Matrix* (the film) was right: the reality we live in is regulated by the invisible and all-powerful digital network to such an extent that its collapse can cause 'real' global disintegration. This is *why* it is a dangerous illusion to claim that the Bug could have brought liberation: had we been deprived of the artificial digital network that mediates and sustains our access to reality, we would have found not natural life in its immediate truth, but the unbearable wasteland – 'Welcome to the desert of the real!', as Neo, the hero of *Matrix*, is ironically greeted when he sees reality as it *really* is, without the Matrix.

What, then, was the Millennium Bug? Perhaps the ultimate example of what Lacan called *objet petit a*, the 'small other', the object-cause of desire, a tiny particle of dust which gives body to the lack in the big Other, the symbolic order. And this is where *ideology* comes in: the Bug is the sublime object of ideology. The

very term is revealing with regard to its five meanings: a glitch/defect; an illness, like a flu virus; an insect; a fanatic; a concealed microphone.¹⁵¹ This drift of meaning performs the most elementary ideological operation: a simple lack or glitch is imperceptibly transformed into an illness, which is then allocated a positive cause, a disturbing 'insect' endowed with a certain psychic attitude (zealotry) which secretly monitors us. A purely negative malfunctioning thus acquires positive existence in the guise of an eavesdropping zealot that should be exterminated as an insect. . . we are already knee-deep in paranoia. Towards the end of December 1999, the main Slovene right-wing newspaper ran the headline: 'Is it really a danger – or a cover?', implying that some obscure Financial circles had staged the Y2K panic, and would use it to enact a gigantic swindle. Is not the Bug the best animal metaphor for the anti-Semitic image of the Jew: a rabid insect which introduces degeneration and chaos into social life, the true hidden cause of social antagonisms?

In a move which symmetrically mirrors the Rightist paranoia, Fidel Castro also – once it had become clear that there was no Bug, that things would continue to run more or less smoothly – denounced the Bug scare as a plot promoted by the large computer companies and designed to seduce people into buying new computers. And in fact, once the scare was over, and it became clear that the Millennium Bug was a false alarm, accusations were heard from all quarters that there must have been a reason why there was such a fuss about nothing, some hidden (financial) interest which promulgated the scare in the first place – it could not be that all the programmers simply made such a big mistake! The topic of the discussion thus turned into a typical

post-paranoid dilemma: was there really a Bug, whose catastrophic consequences were averted by careful preventive measures, or was there simply nothing, so that things would have continued to run smoothly without the billions of dollars spent on these measures? This, again, is the *objet petit a*, the Void that 'is' the object-cause of desire, at its purest: a certain 'nothing at all', an entity about which it is not clear even if it 'really exists' or not, which none the less, like the eye of a storm, causes a gigantic commotion all around. In other words, was not the Millennium Bug a MacGuffin of which Hitchcock himself would have been proud?

So, perhaps, one can conclude with a modest Marxist point: since the digital network affects us all – since it already *is* the network that regulates our daily life **right** down to its most common features, like the water supply – it should be *socialized* in some form or another. The digitalization of our daily lives, in effect, makes **possible** a Big Brother control in comparison with which the old Communist secret **police** supervision cannot but look like primitive child's play. Here, therefore, more than ever, one should insist that the proper answer to this threat is not retreat into islands of privacy, but an even stronger socialization of cyberspace. One should summon up the visionary strength to discern the emancipatory potential of cyberspace in what we (mis)perceive today as its 'totalitarian' threat.¹⁵²

NOTES

1. The first to use the term 'the total state' was Mussolini in the 1920s, as a designation for Fascist Italy; however, the *notion* of 'totalitarianism' was elaborated by liberal critics.

2. See Darian Leader, *Why Do Women Write More Letters Than They Post?*, London: Faber & Faber 1996, p. 72.

3. I am, of course, referring here to *Hamlet's Mill*, Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend's notorious New Age classic (Boston, MA: David R. Godine 1977).

4. See Chapters XIX–XXII of Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre VII: Le transfert*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1985.

5. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1979, pp. 116–19.

6. Along the same lines, *Antigone* shines with sublime beauty, while in *Oedipus at Colonus* we find the ultimate will to self-erasure: Oedipus curses the whole world, himself included, then vanishes into the underworld.

7. Incidentally, do we not encounter a similar situation – a dazzlingly beautiful daughter as the offspring of an ugly hunchback – in Verdi's *Rigoletto*?

8. Jean is thus similar to the father figure in Paul Theroux's *The Mosquito Coast*.

9. See Phil Powrie, *French Cinema in the 1980s*, Oxford: Clarendon 1977, pp. 50–61.

10. The same unexpected 'diagonal' link can be discerned in Hegel's early theologico-political writings, which are based on a double opposition: sub-

jective versus objective (institutional) religion; private versus popular religion [*Volksreligion*]. We do not get the expected couple of private-subjective versus popular-objective: the link is 'diagonal', that is to say, modern religion is private and objective (caught in the opposition of privacy versus externally imposed institution), in contrast to the Ancient Greek religion, which was simultaneously popular (penetrating public sociopolitical life) and 'subjective', that is, experienced as the subject's own (not an alien) spiritual substance.

In the same way, the interconnection between the two couples of formulas in Lacan's 'formulas of sexuation' runs diagonally: non-all without exception versus universality with exception. And the link is even immanent: the masculine Universal is 'objective', with the private as its exception, versus the feminine domain which is non-all, that is, subjective, and simultaneously without exception, that is, popular.

11. Another example: during the 1930s in the Soviet Union, the newspapers were full of advertisements for new products associated with the new affluence, from perfumes to ice cream (see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999). The problem was not how to sell these products: as a rule, they were available only for brief periods of time in a few stores in big cities like Moscow. So why this outburst of advertising? It was not advertising destined to help the sale of the products themselves, but a kind of meta- or reflexive advertising proclaiming the fact that such products were now on sale (even if they were in fact difficult to buy). Far from being specific to Stalinism, this reflexive dimension is operative in all advertising: advertising is simultaneously also self-confessed publicity for itself, for a lifestyle within which it appears.

12. The interest of the ideological content of *The Waste Land* lies in its very inconsistency – the poem involves a reference to three incompatible myths: the pagan Grail myth of the dry land and its regeneration; the Christian myth of Resurrection; the Buddhist myth of nirvana. Eliot yearns for a Christian regeneration from the spiritual poverty of modern life; however, he tends to reinscribe it into the pagan myth of the renewed fecundity of the 'waste land' and is, at the same time, prone to a proto-Buddhist yearning for total annihilation rather than regeneration.

13. Robert Coover, 'You Must Remember This', in *A Night at the Movies*, New York: Dalkey 1987.

14. Heinrich von Kleist, *The Marquise of O— and Other Stories*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1978, p. 68.

15. Ibid., p. 70.

16. See Walter Benjamin, 'Critiques of Violence', in *Reflections*, New York: Schocken Books 1978.

17. Ernst Bloch, *Über Rechtsleidenschaft innerhalb des positiven Gesetzes*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1972, p. 96. I draw here on David Ratmoko's outstanding *Lizentiatsarbeit* 'Agency, Fiction and Act: Paranoia's Invisible Legacy', Zurich 1999.

18. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, London: Verso 1978, p. 84.

19. See Michael Atkinson, *The Secret Marriage of Sherlock Holmes and Other Eccentric Readings*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1996.

20. "Ulysses," Order and Myth', in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux 1975, p. 177.

21. Ibid., p. 178.

22. Martin Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on Human Freedom*, Athens: University of Ohio Press 1985, p. 146.

23. Jacques Lacan, 'Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*', in *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Shoshana Felman, Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press 1982, p. 40. In defence of Marx, one might add that this 'neglect' is not so much the mistake of Marx, but of capitalist reality itself – of the 'accommodations worked out by modern society between use values and exchange values'.

24. For this entire subchapter, I am deeply indebted to conversations with Mladen Dolar, who developed these notions much further, encompassing also the genesis of the anti-Semitic figure of the Jew from these paradoxes of the Miser.

25. *Hegel's Science of Logic*, London: George Allen & Unwin 1969, p. 431.

26. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1972, p. 99.

27. Lacan, 'Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*', p. 15.

28. This aria is to be read as part of a triangle, together with the other two great self-presentations, 'Largo il factotum' and 'La calumnia'.

29. Here I develop another aspect of the capitalist superego, whose logic

is more fully developed in Chapter 3 of Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, London and New York: Verso 2000.

30. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, New York: Norton 1979, p. 253.

31. Today's preoccupation with drug addiction as the ultimate danger to the social edifice can be properly understood only against the background of the predominant subjective economy of consumption as the form of appearance of thrift: in previous epochs, the consumption of drugs was simply one among the half-concealed social practices of real (de Quincey, Baudelaire) and fictional (Sherlock Holmes) characters.

32. On the materialist reading of this notion, see Chapters 11–15 of Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*.

33. Gerald O'Collins, *Christology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995, pp. 286–7.

34. I draw here on Alister E. McGrath, *An Introduction to Christianity*, Oxford: Blackwell 1997, pp. 138–9.

35. Quoted from *ibid.*, p. 141.

36. Quoted from *ibid.*, pp. 141–2.

37. Private conversation, October 1999.

38. The following paragraph is intended as self-criticism with regard to Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*.

39. See Jean Laplanche, *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1989.

40. Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, London: Routledge 1999, p. 255.

41. See 'Interpretation between Determinism and Hermeneutics', in Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*. And one should also fully endorse Laplanche's magnificent reconstruction of where Freud went astray in his hypothesis of the 'death drive': there is only one drive, the sex drive as the incessant, 'undead' pressure that persists beyond the pleasure principle; the Freudian hypothesis of the 'death drive' is (not so) simply the result of Freud's regression to the evolutionist-determinist problematic, which compelled him to identify libido with the unifying life-force, so that he was then compelled to invent a counter-drive to account for the destructive/destabilizing impact of sexuality, which he formulated through a totally confusing reference to the philosophical tradition of Schopenhauer.

42. **Laplanche**, *Essays on Otherness*, p. 160.

43. **Jacques Lacan**, 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"', in *The Purloined Poe*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press 1988, p. 29.

44. The difference between Name-of-the-Father and 'names of the father' consists in the fact that the Name-of-the-Father stands for paternal symbolic authority, while 'names of the father' stands for the father *qua* Real Thing which can be approached only through a multitude of names, as in mysticism, where there is a strict distinction between God's Name and 'names of God': God's Name is, in a way, 'the thing itself, the very kernel of God's symbolic authority; while the multitude of Divine names indicates the Divine Thing which eludes symbolic apprehension.

45. **Lacan's** counterargument to **Laplanche** would have been that there is something *missing* in his account: why does the small child get caught in the enigma of/in the Other? It is not enough here to evoke the premature birth and the child's helplessness – in order for this gap to appear, in order for parental gestures to appear as an enigmatic message, a message that is an enigma for the parents themselves also, *the symbolic order must already be there*.

46. I am drawing here on Ron Rosenbaum's (theoretically all too naive and journalistic, but otherwise interesting) *Explaining Hitler*, New York: Harper 1999.

47. 'Foreword by Elie Wiesel', in **Annette Insdorf**, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press 1989, p. xi.

48. It is significant, however, that there are not only no Gulag comedies, but also no films whose action takes place in a Gulag – the honourable exception is **Tom Courtney's** version of **Solzhenitsyn's** *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, an English production shot in the early 1970s in Norway, which quickly fell into oblivion.

49. There were similar attempts in the theatre: in the late 1980s, a Soviet cabaret staged a song-and-dance spectacle part of which was set in the gas chamber of a concentration camp.

50. I draw here on Chapter 2 of **Giorgio Agamben's** *Ce qui reste d'Auschwitz*, Paris: Rivages 1999. Incidentally, the traces of anti-Arab racism in this designation are more than evident: the designation 'Muslim', of course, emerged because the prisoners identified the behaviour of the 'living dead'

as close to the standard Western image of a 'Muslim', a person who is totally resigned to his fate, passively enduring all calamities as grounded in God's will. Today, however, in view of the Israeli–Arab conflict, this designation regains its actuality: the 'Muslim' is the extimate kernel, the zero-level, of the 'Jew' himself.

51. 'A rare survivor described them turned to robots, their grey-yellow faces rimmed with ice and bleeding cold tears. They ate in silence, standing packed together, seeing no one' (Colin Thubron, *In Siberia*, New York: HarperCollins 2000, p. 40).

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 42–3.

53. On this term, see Chapter 1 of Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, London and New York: Verso 1999.

54. For a closer analysis of this shot, see Slavoj Žižek, 'In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large', in Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, London: Verso 1992.

55. Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, New York: Routledge 1992, pp. 313–14. It was Simon Critchley who drew attention to this comic aspect of *das Ding* in Lacan – see Simon Critchley, 'Comedy and Finitude: Displacing the Tragic-Heroic Paradigm in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis', in *Ethics–Politics–Subjectivity*, London and New York: Verso 1999.

56. See Jacques-Alain Miller, 'The Desire of Lacan', *lacanian ink* 14, Spring 1999. From a different theoretical perspective, this same shift was also perceived by Simon Critchley (see Critchley, *Ethics–Politics–Subjectivity*).

57. See Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*, London: Faber & Faber 1990.

58. For the historical data. I draw here on the otherwise standard Western liberal journalistic report by Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution*, New York: PublicAffairs 1998.

59. Quoted from Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1995, p. 134.

60. This logic was nicely formulated by Ayn Rand apropos of anti-trust laws: everything a capitalist does becomes a crime – if his prices are higher than others' prices, he is exploiting his monopolistic position; if they are lower, he is practising unfair competition; if they are the same, it's collusion and conspiracy to undermine true competition. . . . And is this not similar to

the time of the patient's arrival in psychoanalysis? If the patient is late, it's a hysterical provocation; if he is early, it's an obsessional compulsion; if he arrives exactly on time, it's a perverse ritual.

61. J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks. 1932–39*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press 1999, p. 370. The same uncanny laughter also appears in other places: 'Bukharin: Whatever they are testifying against me is not true. (Laughter, noise in the room.) Why are you laughing? There is nothing funny in all this' (ibid., p. 394).

62. Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1985, p. 48.

63. Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, pp. 315–16.

64. Ibid., p. 322.

65. Ibid., p. 321.

66. Ibid., p. 399.

67. Ibid., pp. 404–5.

68. Ibid., p. 556.

69. Ibid., pp. 558–60.

70. Ibid., p. 558.

71. Ibid., pp. 387–8.

72. Ibid., p. 100.

73. For a more detailed account of this key feature of Kant's ethics, see Chapter 2 of Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, London and New York: Verso 1996.

74. See Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan*, London and New York: Verso 1999.

75. Let us also remember that in the weeks before the October Revolution, when the debate between the Bolsheviks was raging, Stalin did side *against* Lenin's proposal for an immediate Bolshevik takeover, arguing, along Menshevik lines, that the situation was not yet 'ripe', and that instead of such dangerous 'adventurism' one should endorse a broad coalition of all anti-Tsarist forces.

76. V.I. Lenin, 'The Draft Rules of the RSDLP', in *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers 1960–70, vol. 6, p. 476.

77. V.I. Lenin, 'Letter to Central Committee Members', in *Collected Works*, vol. 26, p. 234.

78. See Alain Badiou, *L'être et l'événement*, Paris: Editions du Seuil 1988.
79. Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, p. 480.
80. Ibid., p. 481.
81. See Sigmund Freud, 'Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia', in *The Pelican Freud Library*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1979, p. 211.
82. Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, p. 14.
83. Ibid.
84. See Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, pp. 124–5.
85. Incidentally, Heidegger had recourse to this same formulation in his defence of his Nazi involvement: when he held his seminar on logos in Heraclitus in the mid-1930s, it was clear to everyone 'with ears to hear' that he was dealing a devastating blow to Nazi ideology!
86. For a closer analysis of these two levels, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime*, Seattle: University of Washington Press 2000.
87. Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, p. 586.
88. See Alain Badiou, *Saint Paulou la naissance de l'universalisme*, Paris: PUF 1997, p. 41.
89. See Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, New York: Routledge 1992, p. 137.
90. In what follows I draw on Charity Scribner's dissertation 'Working Memory' (Columbia University, New York 2000).
91. See Georg Lukacs, *Solzhenitsyn*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1971.
92. It is to the credit of Fredric Jameson that he insists on this point again and again.
93. That is also the weak point of such otherwise highly articulate critics of 'totalitarianism' as Claude Lefort. In his recent *La Complication: Retour sur le Communisme* (Paris: Fayard 1999), Lefort puts forward a convincing rejection of François Furet's simplifications, emphasizing how many measures which today are part of the liberal consensus were accepted as a result of the Communist struggle: that is, appropriated into this consensus after fierce liberal resistance (progressive income tax, free education for all). However, what crucially limits his perspective is his endeavour to deploy a purely political logic of the 'democratic invention'. It is this limitation that prevents him from properly explaining 'totalitarian' phenomena: they emerge

precisely when politics directly takes over – as such, they indicate the political agent's *failure* actually to restructure the **sphere** of production.

94. The most illustrative example of such a 'sublation' of historical reality in its symbolic notion is **Hegel's** idea that **Thucydides'** history of the **Peloponnesian War** was the true spiritual goal of the actual war itself: from the spiritual standpoint, the actual war was itself a pretext; it was fought *so that a text about it which encapsulates its essence could be written*.

95. Here I draw on **Giorgio Agamben**, *Stanzas*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993, chs 3–5.

96. **Graham Greene**, *The End of the Affair*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1975, p. 169.

97. **Theodor W. Adorno**, *Musikalische Schriften VI*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1984, p. 469. The concrete context of this observation is, of course, **Furtwängler's** attempt to salvage the classic tradition of German music from the onslaught of the Nazi barbarism.

98. **Agamben**, *Ce qui reste d'Auschwitz*, p. 20.

99. Quoted from **Laurel E. Fay**, *Shostakovich: A Life*, London: Oxford University Press 2000, p. 217.

100. See **Sigmund Freud**, 'Mourning and Melancholy', in **James Strackey**, ed., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIV, London: The Hogarth Press 1957, p. 245.

101. What we have here is the logical opposition between external and internal negation (say, between [passively] not wanting to participate and [actively] wanting not to participate) which is also discernible in the dialectic of desire and prohibition: often, the subject's active rejection of a desire experienced by him as abhorrent ('I find it disgusting that I desire *that* woman . . .') is a defence mechanism against the much more horrifying prospect of passive indifference, of *not desiring at all*. Prohibition sustains desire, while what really undermines it is indifference. The gap that separates *renouncing* the desired object from *no longer desiring* it is immense: renunciation can well sustain desire. At its most radical, anxiety is not the anxiety of losing the desired object, but the anxiety of losing desire itself. A similar phenomenon occurs when we accept some medical prohibition (not to eat the food we enjoy most): what we fear most is that we will lose the very taste for the food we have to renounce. In short, what we fear most is that the prohibition will

affect not only our relation to objects but our very subjective symbolic universe. For example, when we are separated from our lover for a year or two, what we fear most is not the pain of separation itself but the prospect of indifference, of becoming accustomed to the absence of the beloved.

102. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, New York: Routledge 1994, p. 92.

103. Critchley, *Ethics–Politics–Subjectivity*, p. 275.

104. Ibid., p. 283.

105. What Lacan does with *Antigone* is a double move: on the one hand, he endeavours to reveal the contours of the Greek tragic experience of life obfuscated by Christian 'comedy'; on the other, he secretly Christianizes Antigone, whose sublime figure becomes, like the image of the Crucifixion, 'the image that obliterates all (other) images'.

106. See Rudolf Bernet, 'Subjekt und Gesetz in der Ethik von Kant und Lacan', in *Kant und Psychoanalyse*, ed. Hans-Dieter Gondek and Peter Widmer, Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag 1994.

107. Jacques Derrida, *Adieu a Emmanuel Levinas*, Paris: Galilée 1997, p. 87.

108. Critchley, *Ethics–Politics–Subjectivity*, p. 277; emphasis in the original.

109. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre III: Les psychoses*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1981, p. 48.

110. Here I draw on conversations with Alenka Zupančič; see also her outstanding *Ethics of the Real*.

111. François Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1985, p. 257.

112. It is against this background that one should read Martin Amis's *The Night Train*, a novel which focuses on the effort to 'pathologize' suicide. When the young, apparently happy daughter of a senior police officer kills herself, the heroine (a police investigator), asked by her father to probe into the mystery of this suicide, soon discovers that the clues left behind by the deceased (having a casual lover, drug addiction . . .) are false clues – that she did not kill herself for any specific reason. Knowing, however, that this pure existential malaise would be too traumatic for the father, in her final report to him she presents the false picture of a woman caught up in drugs and casual sex – such a picture, where the act is reduced to clear causes, is much easier to endure than the pure abyssal act.

113. For the same reason, a true Christian should find nothing objectionable in the properly obscene *Cliff Notes* volume on the Bible, which treats it as just another literary text, and supplements a book-by-book account of its contents with brief descriptions of the main 'characters', in the style of: 'GOD – an old, violently jealous, but powerful and creative person'; or 'CHRIST – a young, gentle Jewish son of a carpenter endowed with a great mission.

114. Edward P. Moser, *The Politically Correct Guide to the Bible*, New York: Three Rivers Press 1997.

115. This, of course, is only one in the series of variations which reproduce the multitude of today's ethico-political attitudes – suffice it to mention the opposite one: 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, *because I myself am the meanest mother-cker in the whole valley!*'

116. See Donald Spoto, *The Hidden Jesus*, New York: St. Martin's Press 1998, pp. 153–4.

117. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff 1979, p. 202.

118. Quoted from *Truth and Interpretation*, ed. Ernest Lepore, Oxford: Blackwell 1986, p. 331.

119. This circularity is best exemplified by the paradox of Saussure's definition of the signifier: there is *nothing* in a signifier *but* a bundle of differences from other signifiers, and if the same goes for all the others, what sustains the whole edifice? How is it that it does not collapse and implode? The structural answer is, of course, to introduce the paradoxical excessive signifier which, far from serving as the ultimate foundation, gives body to its lack 'as such', that is to say, the signifier which is not one in the series, but stands for the very presence of the signifier as opposed to its absence: for the Difference 'as such'.

120. See Michael Taussig, *Defacement*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1999, pp. 223–5.

121. See Agamben, *Ce qui reste d'Auschwitz*, pp. 143–5.

122. See Chapter 14 of *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, New York: Norton 1991.

123. See Lisa Appignanesi and John Forrester, *Freud's Women*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995.

124. Perry Anderson, 'A Sense of the Left', *New Left Review* 231 (September/October 1998), p. 76.

125. Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, New York: Little, Brown 1991, p. 410.

126. See Jacques Derrida, 'La mythologie blanche', *Poétique* 5 (1971), pp. 1–52.

127. See Jacques Derrida, 'Le supplément de la copule', in *Marges de la philosophic*, Paris: Minuit 1972.

128. Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1977, p. 124.

129. See Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1993.

130. See Ray Jackendoff, *Consciousness and the Computational Mind*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1987.

131. See Varela, Thompson and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, p. 126.

132. In John Brockman, ed., *The Third Culture*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1996, p. 23.

133. *Ibid*, p. 21.

134. See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London: Verso 1984.

135. See John Brockman, 'Introduction', in *The Third Culture*.

136. See, as one among the thousands of passages making this points

Is there, as David Bohm says, an 'implicate order' to matter that is beyond our present comprehension and presumes a 'wholeness' to all things? Can we conceive of a 'tao of physics', as Fritjof Capra's million-selling book terms it, in which Eastern philosophies parallel the mind-wrenching paradoxes of the quantum world? (Pat Kane, 'There's Method in the Magic', in *The Politics of Risk Society*, ed. Jane Franklin, Oxford: Polity Press 1998, pp. 78–9)

137. Richard Feynman, *The Character of Physical Law*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1967, p. 129.

138. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996.

139. See Andrew Ross, *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life*, London and New York: Verso 1995.

140. It is interesting to note how the opposition of 'hard' science, whose conceptual structure embodies the stance of domination, and 'gentle' science (bent on collaboration, etc.), comes dangerously close to the New Age ideology of two mental universes: masculine and feminine, competitive and co-operative, rational-dissecting and intuitive-encompassing. In short, we come dangerously close to the premodern sexualization of the universe, which is conceived of as the tension between the two **principles** – Masculine and Feminine.

141. Alain Badiou, *La Sainte-Alliance et ses serviteurs* (April 1999), distributed on the Internet.

142. Alain Badiou, in *Deleuze* (Paris: PUF 1998), is absolutely right to emphasize how Deleuze, philosopher of the thriving rhizomatic multitude, is at the same time the most radical monist in modern philosophy, the philosopher of the Sameness, of the One that pervades all differences – not only on the level of the content of his writings, but on the level of his formal procedure: is not Deleuze's style characterized by an obsessive compulsion to assert the same notional pattern or matrix in all the **phenomena** he is **analysing**, from **philosophical** systems to literature and cinema?

143. Illustrative of the impasse that emerges when one tries to circumvent sexual difference is Judith Butlers notion according to which sexual difference is constructed through melancholic identification with the lost object: in the (mythical, 'primordially repressed') beginning, a woman (or a man) is **libidinally** attached to the same-sex object; when, due to the pressure of the sociosymbolic normative order, this attachment has to be renounced, the subject identifies with the renounced libidinal object: 'woman' is a subject who herself becomes the **lost/renounced** feminine libidinal object, and the same goes for 'man' . . . (see Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1998). The **problem** with this otherwise very elegant solution is that it explains sexual difference **by** presupposing it: how can a woman, before becoming a woman, choose as her libidinal object another woman (*and not a man*), if the sexual difference between man and woman is not already there? If one counters this **by** claiming that the circularity is **only** apparent, since the first identification is

with the (same) sex as a **simple** biological fact, and only the second is with sex as the symbolic pattern, one relies on an all too simple opposition between nature and culture that Butler herself successfully 'deconstructed' in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge 1990).

This circularity apropos of sexual difference occurs because of the **unclarified** status of sexual difference as real. Butler's basic argument against the Lacanian Real is that the very act of making a difference between (what can be included in) the Symbolic and the (**non-symbolizable**) Real is a symbolic gesture *par excellence*. Such a notion draws on the standard idealist argument against reality outside representation: since we are constrained to the domain of representations, every attempt to distinguish between representation and the represented Beyond is already internal to the domain of representations – or, as **Hegel** would have put it, the difference between In-Itself and For-Us is already For-Us: that is to say, it is consciousness itself which distinguishes what is merely for itself from what exists 'out **there**', independently of itself. However, the Lacanian Real is not the inattainable In-Itself outside the domain of (symbolic) representations, but its **internallimitation**, the internal obstacle on account of which representations *fail*, although there is nothing '*outside*' *their* domain.

144. See Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, London and New York: Verso 1996.

145. See **Theodor W. Adorno**, *Negative Dialectics*, New York: Continuum 1983, p. 43.

146. The Left's confusion in the face of – and failure to grasp – the dynamic of today's ethno-religious 'fundamentalisms' is betrayed by the symptomatic recurrence of the term 'neo-' or 'proto-Fascist', the term which, far from being a concept, signals **precisely** the lack of the proper concept (its only positive content is 'something which, although it **partially** resembles Fascism, is not really Fascism').

147. See **Jörg Haider**, 'Blair and me versus the forces of conservatism', *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 February 2000.

148. See Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*. London: Verso 1975.

149. See Claude **Lefort**, *The Political Forms of Modern Life*, Cambridge, MA:

MIT Press **1986**; Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press **1998**.

150. Another aspect of this ideological antinomy is how the very people who warn against the 'totalitarian' dangers of state *intervention* demand strong state *protection* for their specific rights. The same **people** who focus on the free realization of their potential without state control and interventions *cry* out for state protection the moment someone threatens this free realization.

151. Thanks to Gillian Beaumont for drawing my attention to these Five meanings.

152. Much of the present book, especially the passages on mourning and melancholy in Chapter 4, is stimulated by ongoing discussion with Charity Scribner – see her *Working Memories* (dissertation, Columbia University **2000**).

INDEX

- Abelard 48
 Abraham (biblical) 14, 45
Adieu a Emmanuel Levinas (Derrida) 161
 Adorno, Theodor
 contradiction 241
 on '*Deutschland, erwache!*' 196
 Dialectic of Enlightenment (with Horkheimer) 5, 39
 on Furtwängler 145
 Kant's ambiguity 209
 Minima Moralia 34
 myths 37
 no poetry after Auschwitz 87
 Agamben, Giorgio 78
 melancholy 146
 shame 188
The Age of Innocence (Wharton) 12, 146
 Althusser, Louis 216
 with Havel 90
 Andersen, Hans Christian
 'The Emperor's New Clothes' 124–5
 Anselm of Canterbury 47
 Antigone 83, 157–9, 167
 Lacan's reading 178
 the Other 162–3, 173–6
 Arendt, Hannah
 authority 2–3
 banality of evil 70
 Badiou, Alain 117, 238
 death 79
 production 137
 socialism 130–31
 Yugoslavia 231
 Bakhtin, Mikhail 86
 Balibar, Étienne 199
The Barber of Seville (Rossini) 42
 Barth, Karl
 'The Judge Judged in Our Place' 48
 Beethoven, Ludwig van 111
Behemoth (Neuman) 92
 Benigni, Roberto
 Life Is Beautiful 68–73, 83
 Benjamin, Walter
 law-making violence 33
 Benveniste, Émile 164
 Berlin, Isaiah 6
 Bernstein, Richard 2

INDEX

- Berri, Claude 26
- Blair, Tony 240
 - and Haider 243–4
- Bloch, Ernst 34
- The Blue Light* (film) 24
- Bohm, David 216, 217
- Bohr, Niels 216–17
- Brazil* (film) 183
- Bricmont 216
- The Bridges of Madison County* (film) 12
- Brief Encounter* (film) 147–8
- Brockman, John
 - The Third Culture Reader* 212
- Buchanan, Pat 236, 237, 244
- Buddhists 52–4, 200
 - cognitivist 205–8
- Bukharin, Nicolay Ivanovich
 - trial 102–11
- Camus, Albert
 - The Myth of Sisyphus* 27
- Capra, Fritjof 200, 211, 216
- Casablanca* (film) 30
- Castro, Fidel 255
- Chaplin, Charlie
 - The Great Dictator* 71, 72
- Chavez, General 246
- Claudel, Paul 8
 - Coûfontaine trilogy 15
- Clinton, Bill 240
- Conquest, Robert 6
- Consciousness Explained* (Dennett) 201–2
- Coover, Robert
 - 'You Must Remember This' 30, 31
- Critchley, Simon 161
- Dahl, John
 - The Last Seduction* 98
- Dalai Lama 181
- Darwin, Charles 176
 - new interpretations 200–201
- Davidson, Donald 187
- Dawkins, Richard 210–11, 224
- De Man, Paul 210
- Deleuze, Gilles
 - radical deterritorialization 2
- Delić, Rasim 232
- Dennett, Daniel C. 211
 - Consciousness Explained* 201–2
- Derrida, Jacques 152
 - Adieu a Emmanuel Levinas* 161
 - and Habermas 159–60
 - radicalization of Marx 153–7
 - 'White Mythology' 203–4
- Descartes, René 220
- Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno and Horkheimer) 5, 39
- Divided Heaven* (Wolf) 133
- Dreyfuss, Hubert 200
- Duchamp, Marcel 52
- Dunayevsky, Isaac 100
- Durkheim, Émile
 - suicide 28
- Egoyan, Atom
 - The Sweet Hereafter* 35
- Eisenstein, Sergei 28
- Eliot, T. S.
 - Murder in the Cathedral* 101
 - on Stravinsky 36–7
 - The Waste Land* 28
- The End of the Affair* (Greene) 143–4
- Equus* (Schaffer) 35–6

- Face/Off* (film) 182–8
 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' (Poe) 78
Faust (Goethe) 88
 Feynman, Richard 218
 Fliess, Wilhelm 194
 Ford, John
 The Quiet Man 82
 Frankfurt School
 and Stalinism 92–3
 Freud, Sigmund
 anal character 39–40
 displacement 11
 dream about Irma's injection
 23, 190–96
 The Future of an Illusion 166, 167
 The Interpretation of Dreams
 190–98
 and Jung 55
 melancholy and mourning
 141–2, 147
 murder of God in New
 Testament 11
 myth of primordial father 39
 Schreber's case 120, 165
 Fulani, Lenora 237, 244
 Furet, François
 The Past of an Illusion 166
 Furtwängler, Wilhelm 145
The Future of an Illusion (Freud)
 166, 167

Gatacca (film) 198–9
 Getty, J. Arch
 The Road to Terror (with Naumov)
 130
 Gilliam, Terry
 Brazil 183

 Giuliani, Rudolf 253
 Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von
 Faust 88
 Gould, Stephen Jay 211, 224
The Great Dictator (film) 71, 72
 Greene, Graham
 The End of the Affair 143–4
 Groys, Boris 51

 Habermas, Jürgen 92
 and Derrida 159–60
 flat universe 165
 production and symbolic
 exchange 137
 Haider, Jörg 236, 243–4
Hamlet (Shakespeare) 39–40
 psychoanalytic reading 8–12
 Havel, Václav
 The Power of the Powerless 89–92
 socialism with a human face
 94–5, 96
 Hawking, Stephen 211, 216, 220
 Hegel, Georg F. W.
 Christ's sacrifice 50
 concrete universality 4
 enigma of the Sphinx 56
 genus and species 239
 Lord and Bondsman 139–40
 melancholy 143, 144
 the modern scientific universe
 221
 the night of the world 77
 oppositional determination 193
 phallogocentrism 224
 subject's struggle 32
 Heidegger, Martin 76
 atheist notion of human
 existence 89

- being-in-the-world 200
- das Man 28
- death 79
- mythical Asiatic 38–9
- production 137
- Heisenberg, Werner 216–17
- 'Heroine' (Highsmith) 49
- The Hidden Jesus* (Spoto) 180
- Highsmith, Patricia
 - 'Heroine' 49
- Himmler, Heinrich 62
- History and Class Consciousness*
 - (Lukács) 113–17
- Hitchcock, Alfred
 - creatio ex nihilo* 177
 - Murder* 80
 - Psycho* 80
 - Vertigo* 80
- Hitler, Adolf
 - four possible explanations for anti-Semitism 61–5
 - Mein Kampf* 64
- Homer
 - Odyssey* 38
- Hopper, Edward 29–30
- Horkheimer, Max
 - Dialectic of Enlightenment* (with Adorno) 5, 39
 - liberal democracy 93
- Hume, David 208
- The Interpretation of Dreams* 190–98
- Jackendoff, Ray 208
- Jacob the Liar* (film) 69
- Jakobson, Roman 27
- James Bond* films 134–5
 - sexual relationships 34–5
- Jameson, Fredric 131, 238
- Jean de Florette* (film) 16–21
 - community and tragic individual 22–5
 - mythical form 25–7
- Jesus Christ
 - mortal-temporal being 151
 - sacrifice 45–54
- Jews
 - enigma of God 64–7
 - film interpretations of Holocaust 68–73
 - four possible explanations for Hitler's actions 61–5
 - the Holocaust as sublime evil 65–8
 - 'Muslims' 71, 73, 76–80, 86, 87–8
 - in the Nazi camps 75
- John, Book of 45
- John Paul II, Pope 181–2
- Joyce, James
 - Ulysses* 35, 38
- 'The Judge Judged in Our Place' (Barth) 48
- Jung, Carl Gustav
 - and Freud 55
- Kafka, Franz
 - The Trial* 103
- Kant, Immanuel
 - duty 112–13
 - ethics 169–73
 - Self 206
 - transcendental dimension 205, 209
- Kennedy, Edward 168
- Keo Meas 98.99

- Khrushchev, Nikita 135
 Kierkegaard, Søren 55
 Klaus, Václav 131
 Kleist, Heinrich von
 'The Marquise of O—' 30–32
 Michael Kohlhaas 33–4
 Kojève, Alexandre 140
 Kotsk, Rabbi of 67
 Kristeva, Julia
 and Arendt 2
 Kuhn, Thomas S.
 *The Structure of Scientific
 Revolutions* 222
 Kundera, Milan
 La lenteur 248
 Lacan, Jacques
 'The Agency of the Letter in the
 Unconscious' 7
 analysis of Claudel's
 Coûfontaine trilogy 15
 anti-Americanism 8
 Antigone 178
 Borromean knot 163
 comedy and the phallic signifier
 82–4, 86
 creationism 176–8
 enigma 57–60
 ethics of the Real 160–61
 'God is unconscious' 88
 jouissance and the Big Other 23
 lamella 39
 Laplanche's criticism 57–8
 mirror-relationship 183–4
 modern science 219
 on Molière's *Miser* 41–2
 objet petit a 149–51, 254
 the Other 162–5
 the quilting point' 132
 Seminar III 164
 Seminar XI 44
 shame and fantasy 188
 symbolic reading of Freud's
 dream 194
 there is no sexual relationship
 249, 252
 thrift 40
 Laclau, Ernesto 211, 239, 243
Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk
 (Shostakovich) 126
 Lanzmann, Claude 65–6
 Laplanche, Jean 56, 57–8
The Last Bolshevik (film) 125
The Last Seduction (Dahl) 98
 Leader, Darian
 *Why Do Women Write More Letters
 Than They Post?* 4
 Lefort, Claude 245
 Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich
 Lukács's analysis 113–17
 too much Beethoven 111
La lenteur (Kundera) 248
 Levi, Primo 196–7
 Levinas, Emmanuel 152, 187
 Lewis, Jerry 188
Life Is Beautiful (film) 68–73, 83
 Lodge, David
 Nice Work 202
 Lubitsch, Ernst
 To Be or Not to Be 71, 72
 Lukacs, Georg
 Augenblick 117
 History and Class Consciousness
 113–17
 on *Ivan Denisovich* 135–6
 Lynch, David 183
 Lyotard, Jean-François 6

- Malebranche, Nicolas 101
Mandelbrot, Benoit 211
Manon des Sources (film) 16–21
 community and tragic individual 22–5
 mythical form 25–7
Marcuse, Herbert
 Soviet Marxism 92
Margulis, Lynn 224
Mark, Book of 46
Marker, Chris
 The Last Bolshevik 125
'The Marquise of O—' (Kleist) 30–32
Marx, Karl
 Cultural Studies 227, 228
 Derrida's 'radicalization' 153–7
 economic essentialism 193
 French Revolution 179
 The Poverty of Philosophy 153
 production 41
 proletarian 13940
 real abstraction 2
 social life and production 136–7
 thrift 40
Matrix (film) 254
Medvedkin, Alexander 125
Mein Kampf (Hitler) 64
Men in Black (film) 31
Michael Kohlhaas (Kleist) 33–4
Miller, Jacques-Alain 86
Milošević, Slobodan 229–33
Minima Moralia (Adorno) 34
Minsky, Marvin 211
Molière, Jean-Baptiste Poquelin 41–2
Molotov, Vyacheslav Mikhailovich 104
Moser, Edward
 The Politically Correct Guide to the Bible 179–80
Müller, Heiner 94
Murder (film) 80
Murder in the Cathedral (Eliot) 101
The Myth of Sisyphus (Camus) 27
Naumov, Oleg V.
 The Road to Terror (with Getty) 130
Neumann, Franz
 Behemoth 92
Nicol, Andrew
 Gatacca 198–9
Nice Work (Lodge) 202
Night Hawks (Rosen) 29
Odyssey (Homer) 38
One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich (Solzhenitsyn) 135–6
Orwell, George 247
Pagnol, Marcel
 community and tragic individual 22–5
 Jean de Florette and *Manon des Sources* 16–21
 mythical form 25–7
Parsifal (Wagner) 86–7
The Past of an Illusion (Furet) 166
Saint Paul 46, 52
Le Pen, Jean-Marie 236
 double game 242
Pešič, Vesna 233
Phenomenology of Spirit (Hegel) 140
The Philosophy of Right (Hegel) 32
Pinochet, General Augusto 169

- Plato
 appearances 151
 myth of the cave 38–9
- Poe, Edgar Allan
 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' 78
- Pol Pot 97
- The Politically Correct Guide to the Bible* (Moser) 179–80
- Popper, Karl 6
- The Poverty of Philosophy* (Marx) 153
- The Power of the Powerless* (Havel) 89–92
- Proudhon, Pierre Joseph 153
- Psycho* (Film) 80
- The Quiet Man* (film) 82
- Rancière, Jacques 245
- Riefenstahl, Leni
The Blue Light 24
- The Rite of Spring* (Stravinsky) 36–7
- The Road to Terror* (Getty and Naumov) 130
- Robespierre, Maximilien de 235–6
- Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare) 43
- Rosen, Lynn
Nighthawks 29
- Rosenberg, Ethel and Julius 110
- Ross, Andrew 225
- Rossini, Gioacchino
The Barber of Seville 42
- Sacks, Oliver 211
- Saddam Hussein 229–30
- Sade, Marquis de 113
- Schaffer, Peter
Equus 354
- Schindler's List* (film) 69–71
- Schreber, Daniel Paul 120, 165
- Seminar II* (Lacan) 194
- Seminar III* (Lacan) 164
- Seminar XI* (Lacan) 44
- Seven Beauties* (film) 71, 72, 83
- Shakespeare, William
Hamlet 8–12, 3940
Romeo and Juliet 43
- Sherman, Cindy 29
- Shostakovich, Dmitri 100
 as a closet dissident 123–7
 Eighth String Quartet 146–7
 Fifth Symphony 126–7
Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk 126
 melancholy 146–7
 and Zanchevsky 123
- Sokal, Alan 210, 216
- Solzhenitsyn, Alexander
One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich 135–6
- Soviet Marxism (Marcuse) 92
- Spielberg, Steven
Schindler's List 69–71
- Spoto, Donald
The Hidden Jesus 180
- Stalin, Josef 96
 absence of theoretical confrontation 92–3
 and Bukharin 102–11
 death 74
 gulags 73–4, 87
 radical ambiguity of ideology 127–32
 repression and purges 117–23
 show trials 102
 Trotsky's analysis 129–30

INDEX

- Stewart, H. Bruce 211
- Stravinsky, **Igor**
The Rite of Spring 36–7
The Structure of Scientific Revolutions
 (Kuhn) 222
The Sweet Hereafter (film) 35
- Terms of Endearment* (film) 13
- The Third Culture Reader*
 (Brockman) 212
- Timothy, Book of 46
- Tito** (Josip Broz) 231, 232
- To Be or Not to Be* (film) 71, 72
- The Train of Hope* (film) 69
- The Trial* (Kafka) 103
- Trotsky, Leon** 118
 analysis of Stalinism 129–30
- The Truman Show* (film) 259–61
- Trump, Donald 43
- Tudjman, **Franjo** 233
- Turkle, Sherry 202
- Ulysses* (Joyce) 35, 38
- Varela, Francisco 200, 205–8
- Velásquez, Diego Rodriguez de
 Silva
Las Meninas 30
- Vertigo* (film) 80
- Wachowski brothers
Matrix 254
- Wagner, Richard
Parsifal 86–7
Twilight of the Gods 28
- The Waste Land* (Eliot) 28
- Weinberg, Stephen 211
- Weir, Peter
The Truman Show 259–61
- Wertmüller, Lina**
Seven Beauties 71, 72, 83
- Wharton, Edith**
The Age of Innocence 12, 146
- White Mythology' (Derrida)
 203–4
- Why Do Women Write More Letters
 Than They Post?* (Leader) 4
- Wolf, Christa 94
Divided Heaven 133
- Woo, John
Face/Off 182–8
- Yezhov, Nicolai** 120
- 'You Must Remember This'
 (Coover) 30, 31
- Zanchevsky** 123
- Zionoviev, Alexander 106
- Zyuganov, Gennadi** 129

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