

THE SYMPTOM

Universalism versus globalization. This at least will be our US chapter - to be read as United Symptoms - Jacques-Alain Miller

.....EDITORIAL by J.A.

__The Lacanian Real Television

Slavoj Zizek



Author's Bio

Lacan: Television - let's proceed like idiots; let's take this title literally and ask ourselves a question, not the question, "what can we learn about TV from Lacan's teaching?" which would get us on the wrong path of so-called applied psychoanalysis, but the inverse question, "what can we learn about Lacan's teaching from the TV phenomenon?" At first sight, this seems as absurd as the well-known Hegelian proposition defining phrenology, "the spirit is the bone": the equalization of the most sublime, elusive theory with the vulgar mass-cultural phenomenon. But perhaps, as in the Hegelian proposition, there is a "speculative truth" beneath the obvious banality - perhaps certain peculiarities of the American TV program allow us to grasp the fundamental Lacanian proposition that psychoanalysis is not a psychology: the most intimate beliefs - even the most intimate emotions such as compassion, crying, sorrow, laughter - can be transferred, delegated to others without losing their sincerity.

The first TV-lesson: psychoanalysis is not psychology

In his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan is speaking of the role of the Chorus in antique tragedy: we, the spectators, came to the theatre worried, full of everyday problems, unable to accustom ourselves without reserve to the problems of the play, i.e. to feel the required fears and compassions. But no problem; there is the Chorus, which is feeling the sorrow and the compassion instead

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of us, or, more precisely, we are feeling the required emotions through the medium of the Chorus: "You are then relieved of all worries, even if you don't feel anything; it is the Chorus who will do it in your place." [1] Even if we, the spectators, are just drowsily watching the show, objectively - to use this good old Stalinist expression - we are doing our duty of feeling compassion for the heroes. In so-called primitive societies, we find the same phenomenon in the form of "weepers," women hired to cry instead of us. So, through the medium of the other, we accomplish our duty of mourning, while we can spend our time on more profitable exploits, disputing how to divide the inheritance of the deceased, for example.

But to avoid the impression that this exteriorization, this transference of our most intimate feelings, is just a characteristic of the so called primitive stages of development, let's remind ourselves of a phenomenon quite usual in popular TV shows or serials - canned-laughter. After some supposedly funny or witty remark, you can hear the laughter and the applause included in the soundtrack of the show itself. Here we have the exact counterpart of the Chorus in antique tragedy; it's here that we have to look for "living Antiquity." That is to say, why this laughter? The first possible answer - that it serves to remind us when to laugh - is interesting enough because it implies the paradox that laughter is a matter of duty and not of some spontaneous feeling. But this answer isn't sufficient, because usually we don't laugh. The only correct answer would then be that the other - embodied in the TV-set - is relieving us even of our duty to laugh, i.e., is laughing instead of us. So, even if, tired from the hard day's stupid work, we did nothing all evening but gaze drowsily into the TV-screen, we can say afterwards that objectively, through the medium of the other, we had a really good time.

All this is, of course, just to illustrate the alienation of the subject in the signifier as soon as he is caught in the radically exterior signifying network, he is mortified, dismembered, divided. To get an idea of what is meant by the Lacanian division of the subject, one has only to remember the well-known paradox of Lewis Carroll: "I'm so glad I don't like asparagus," said the small girl to a sympathetic friend. "Because, if I did, I should have to eat it - and I can't bear it!" Here you have the whole Lacanian problem of the reflexivity of desire: desire is always a desire of a desire, i.e., the question is not immediately, "what should I desire?" but, "there are a lot of things that I desire; I have a lot of desires - which of them is worth being the object of my desire? Which desire should I desire?" This paradox is literally reproduced in the basic situation of the classic Stalinist political processes where the accused victim is at the same time supposed to confess his love for the asparagus (the bourgeoisie, the counter-revolution) and express an attitude of disgust towards his own activity which goes to the point of demanding the death penalty for himself. That's why the Stalinist victim is the perfect example of the difference between the *sujet d'énoncé* (subject of the statement) and the *sujet d'énonciation* (subject of the enunciating). The demand that the Party addresses to him is: "At this moment, the Party needs the process to consolidate the revolutionary gains, so be a good

communist, do a last service to the Party and confess." Here we have the division of the subject in its purest form: the only way for the accused to confirm himself as a good communist at the level of the *sujet d'annonciation*, is to confess, i.e., to determine himself, at the level of the *sujet d'annoncé*, as a traitor. Ernesto Laclau was perhaps right when he once remarked that it isn't only Stalinism which is a language-phenomenon; it is already language itself which is a Stalinist phenomenon.

Here, however, we must carefully distinguish between this Lacanian notion of the divided subject and the "post-structuralist" notion of the subject-positions. In "post-structuralism," the subject is usually reduced to subjection. He is conceived as an effect of a fundamentally non-subjective process: the subject is always caught in, traversed by, the pre-subjective process (of "writing," of "desire," etc.), and the accent is put on the different modes of how individuals "experience," "live," their positions as "subjects," "actors," "agents" of the historical process. For example, it is only at a certain point in European history that the author of works of art, a painter or a writer, began to see himself as a creative individual who, in his work, is giving expression to his interior subjective richness. The great master of such analysis was, of course, Foucault: one might say that the main point of his late work was to articulate the different modes of how individuals assume their subject-positions.

But with Lacan, we have quite another notion of the subject. To put it in a simple way: if we abstract, if we subtract all the richness of the different modes of subjectivization, all the fullness of experience present in the way individuals "live" their subject-positions, what remains is an empty place which was filled out with this richness; and this original void, this lack of the symbolic structure is the subject, the subject of the signifier. The subject is therefore to be strictly opposed to the effect of subjectivization: what the subjectivization masks is not a pre- or trans-subjective process of writing but a lack in the structure, a lack which is the subject.

Our predominant idea of the subject is, in Lacanian terms, that of the "subject of the signified," the active agent, the bearer of some signification who is trying to express himself in the language. The starting point of Lacan is, of course, that the symbolic representation represents the subject always in a distorted way, that it is always a displacement, a failure, i.e., that the subject cannot find a signifier which would be "his own," that he is always saying less or too much, in short: something other than what he wanted, intended to say. The usual conclusion from this would be that the subject is some kind of interior richness of meaning which always exceeds its symbolic articulation: "language cannot express fully what I'm trying to say..." The Lacanian thesis is its exact opposite: this surplus of signification masks a fundamental lack. The subject of the signifier is precisely this lack, this impossibility to find a signifier which would be "his own": the failure of his representation is a positive condition. The subject tries to articulate himself in a signifying representation, and the representation fails; instead of a richness we have a lack, and

this void opened by the failure is the subject of the signifier. To put it in a paradoxical way: the subject of the signifier is a retroactive effect of the failure of his own representation; that's why the failure of representation is the only way to represent him adequately.

To make this crucial point clearer, let's take again the Hegelian proposition on phrenology: "the spirit (the subject) is a bone, a skull (*der Geist ist ein Knochen*)."¹ If we read this proposition literally, it is vulgar-materialistic nonsense, reducing the subject to his immediate material reality. But where lies, in Hegel's words, the speculative truth of this proposition? The effect of the phrase, "the spirit is a bone." On the listener is the feeling of its utter inadequacy, of its absolute contradiction: it is total nonsense - how can we reduce the spirit, its dialectical movement, to an inert presence of a dead object, of a skull? The Hegelian answer me subject is precisely this absolute contradiction, this absolute negativity that we feel when we experience the uttermost inadequacy of the proposition, "the spirit is the bone." We have here a kind of dialogic economy: we articulate a proposition defining the subject, and our attempt fails; we experience the absolute contradiction, the extreme negative relationship between the subject and the predicate - and it's precisely this absolute discordance which is the subject as absolute negativity. It is the same as with a well-known joke from the Soviet Union about Rabinovitch, a Jew who wants to emigrate. The bureaucrat at the emigration office asks him why; Rabinovitch answers: "There are two reasons why. The first is that I'm afraid that in the Soviet Union, the communists will lose power, there will be a counter-revolution, and the new power will put all the blame for the communist crimes on us Jews - and there will be again the anti-Jewish pogroms..." "But," interrupts the bureaucrat, "this is pure nonsense; nothing can change in the Soviet Union - the Soviet power will last eternally!" "Well," responds Rabinovitch calmly, "that's my second reason." The logic is here the same as with the Hegelian proposition, "the spirit is a bone": the failure itself of a first reading gives us the true meaning.

The second TV-lesson: you only die twice

Hereby, we have touched the other, usually neglected side of the Lacanian teaching: the side of the object in its inertia, the remnants, the left-over of the signifying process. This object - the Lacanian objet petit a - is filling out the void of the symbolic structure which is the subject: $\$ \diamond a$, "the spirit is a bone." In Lacanian theory, it is not the word which replaces the absent object; it is on the contrary the object itself which is filling out a lack of the signifier, a central void in the great Other of the symbolic structure. And here again, the cartoons - another characteristic feature of TV - are useful in more than one way to illustrate some fundamental Lacanian categories.

Let's take the notion of "knowledge in the real": the idea that nature knows its laws and behaves accordingly. We all know the classical, archetypal scene from the cartoons: a cat is approaching the edge of the precipice, but she doesn't stop: she proceeds calmly, and

although she is already hanging in the air, without ground under her feet, she doesn't fall. When does she fall? The moment she looks down and becomes aware of the fact that she is hanging in the air. The point of this nonsense-accident is that, when the cat is walking slowly in the air, it is as if the real has for a moment forgotten its knowledge: when the cat finally looks down. She remembers that she must follow the laws of nature and falls down. It's basically the same logic as in the well-known dream reported in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* of a father who doesn't know that he is dead: the point is again that because he doesn't know that he is dead, he continues to live. He must be reminded of his death, or, to give this situation a comical twist, he is still living because he has forgotten to die. That's how the phrase *memento mori* should be read: don't forget to die!

This introduces us to a distinction between the two deaths: because of the lack of knowledge, the father of Freud's dream is still living although he is already dead. From this perspective, we can also approach the problem of repetition: in a way, everybody must die twice. That's the Hegelian theory of repetition in history. When Napoleon lost for the first time and was consigned to Elba, he didn't know that he was already dead, that his historical role was finished, and he had to be reminded of it through his second defeat at Waterloo. At this point, when he died for the second time, he was really dead. [2]

And, to put it briefly, the place of the Stalinist communist is exactly between the two deaths. The somewhat poetical definitions of the figure of a communist that we find in Stalin's work are to be taken literally. When, for example, in his speech at the funeral of Lenin, Stalin proclaims, "We, the communists, are people of a special mould. We are made of a special stuff," it is quite easy to recognize the Lacanian name for this special stuff: *objet petit a*, the sublime object placed in the interspace between the two deaths. In the Stalinist vision, communists are "men of iron will," somehow excluded from the everyday cycle of ordinary human passions and weaknesses. It is as if they are in a way "the living dead," still alive but already excluded from the ordinary cycle of natural forces. It is as if they possessed another body, the sublime body beyond their ordinary physical body. (Is the fact that in Lubitch's *Ninotchka*, the role of the high party *apparatchik* is played by Bela Lugosi, identified with the figure of Dracula, another "living dead," expressing the presentiment of the described state of things, or is it just a happy coincidence?) The fantasy which serves as a support for the figure of the Stalinist communist is then exactly the same as the fantasy which is at work in the cartoons of Tom and Jerry: behind the figure of the indestructibility and invincibility of the communist who can endure even the most terrible ordeal and survive it intact, reinforced with new strength, there is the same fantasy-logic as that of a cat whose head is blown up by dynamite and who, in the next scene, proceeds intact in its pursuit of its class enemy, the mouse.

The problem is that we find this notion of a sublime body located between the two deaths already with the classical, pre-bourgeois

Master: the King, for example - it is as if he possessed, beyond his ordinary body, a sublime, ethereal, mystical body personifying the State. [3] Where then lies the difference between the classical Master and the totalitarian Leader? The trans-substantiated body of the classical Master is an effect of the performative mechanism already described by la Boétie, Pascal, and Marx: we, the subjects, think that we treat the King as a King because he is in himself the King, but in reality a King is a King because we are treating him like one. And this fact that the charismatic power of a King is an effect of the symbolic ritual performed by his subjects, must remain hidden: as subjects, we are necessarily victims of the illusion that the King is already in himself a King. That's why the classical Master must legitimize his rule with a reference to some non-social, external authority (God, Nature, some mythical past event...). As soon as the performative mechanism which gives him his charismatic authority is unmasked, the Master loses his power.

But the problem with the totalitarian leader is that he doesn't need this external point of reference anymore to legitimize his rule. He isn't saying to his subjects, "You must follow me because I'm your Leader." Quite the opposite: "In myself, I'm nothing. I am what I am only as an expression, an embodiment, an executor of your will; my strength is your strength..." To put it briefly, it is as if the totalitarian Leader is addressing his subjects and legitimizing his power precisely by referring to the above-mentioned Pascalian-Marxian argumentation, i.e., revealing to them the secret of the classical Master. Basically, he is saying to them: "I'm your master because you are treating me as your master; it is you, with your activity, who are making me your master!"

How, then, can we subvert the position of the totalitarian Leader, if the classical Pascalian-Marxian argumentation doesn't work here any more? Here, the basic deception consists in the fact that the Leader's point of reference, the instance to which he is referring to legitimize his rule (the People, the Class, the Nation) doesn't exist, or, more precisely, exists only through and in its fetishistic representative, the Party and its Leader. The misrecognition of the performative dimension runs here in the opposite direction: the classical Master is the Master only insofar as his subjects are treating him as a Master, but here, the People are the "real People" only insofar as they are embodied in its representative, the Party and its Leader. The formula of the totalitarian misrecognition of the performative dimension would then be the following: the Party thinks that it is the Party because it represents the People's real interests, because it is rooted in the People, expressing their will, but in reality, the People are the People because - or, more precisely, insofar as - they are embodied in the Party. And by saying that the People as a support of the Party don't exist, we don't mean the obvious fact that the majority of the people really don't support the Party rule; the mechanism is a little bit more complicated. The paradoxical functioning of the "People" in the totalitarian universe can be most easily detected through the analysis of phrases like "the whole people supports the Party." This proposition cannot be falsified because, behind the form of a

statement of a fact, we have a circular definition of the People: in the Stalinist universe, "supporting the rule of the Party" is in the last analysis the only feature which - to use Kripkean terms - in all possible worlds defines the People. That's why the real member of the People is only he who supports the rule of the Party: those who are working against the rule of the Party are automatically excluded from the People; they became the "enemies of the People." What we have here is a somewhat crueller version of a well-known joke: "my fiancée never misses an appointment with me because the moment she misses one, she isn't anymore my fiancée." The People always support the Party because any member of the People who opposes the Party-rule automatically excludes himself from the People.

The Lacanian definition of democracy would then be: a socio-political order where the People don't exist - they don't exist as a unity, embodied in their unique representative. That's why the basic feature of the democratic order is that the place of Power is, by the necessity of its structure, an empty place. [4] In a democratic order, sovereignty lies in the People - but what are the People if not, precisely, the collection of the subjects of the power? Here, we have the same paradox as that of a natural language which is at the same time the last, the highest metalanguage. Because the People cannot immediately govern themselves, the place of Power must always remain an empty place; each person occupying it can only do it temporarily, as a kind of surrogate, substitute for the real-impossible sovereign, - "nobody can rule innocently," as Saint-Just puts it. And in totalitarianism, the Party again became precisely the subject who, being the immediate embodiment of the People, can rule innocently. It is not by accident that the real socialist countries call themselves "people's democracies." Here, finally, "the People" exist again.

The death drive

It is at the level of this difference between the two deaths, of this empty place in the very heart of the Other, that we must locate the problematic of the death drive. The connection between the death drive and the symbolic order is a constant with Lacan, but we can differentiate the various stages of his teaching precisely by reference to the different modes of articulation of the death drive and the signifier.

In the first period (the first seminar, "The Function and the Field of Speech and Language..."), it is the Hegelian phenomenological idea that the word is a death, a murder of a thing: as soon as the reality is symbolized, caught in a symbolic network, the thing itself is more present in a word, in its concept, than in its immediate physical reality. More precisely, we cannot return to the immediate reality: even if we turn from the word to the thing, from the word "table" to the table in its physical reality, for example, the appearance of the table itself is already marked with a certain lack. To know what a table really is, what it means, we must have recourse to the word, which implies an absence of the thing.

In the second period (the Lacanian reading of Poe's *Purloined Letter*), the accent is shifted from the word, from speech, to language as a synchronic structure, a senseless autonomous mechanism which produces meaning as its effect. If, in the first period, the Lacanian concept of language is still basically the phenomenological one (Lacan is repeating all the time that the field of psychoanalysis is the field of meaning, *la signification*), here we have a "structuralist" conception of language as a differential system of elements. The death drive is now identified with the symbolic order itself: in Lacan's own words, it is "nothing but a mask of the symbolic order." The main thing here is the opposition between the imaginary level of the experience of meaning and the meaningless signifier/signifying mechanism which produces it. The imaginary level is governed by the pleasure principle; it strives for a homeostatic balance. The symbolic order in its blind automatism is always troubling this homeostasis: it is "beyond the pleasure principle." When the human being is caught in the signifier's network, this network has a mortifying effect on him; he becomes part of a strange automatic order disturbing his natural homeostatic balance (through compulsive repetition, for example).

In the third period, where the main accent of Lacan's teaching is put on the real as impossible, the death drive again radically changes its signification. This change can be most easily detected through the relationship between the pleasure principle and the symbolic order. Till the end of the fifties, the pleasure principle was identified with the imaginary level: the symbolic order was conceived as the real "beyond the pleasure principle." But starting from the late fifties (the seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*) it is on the contrary the symbolic order itself which is identified with the pleasure principle: the unconscious "structured like a language," its "primary process" of metonymic-metaphoric displacements, is governed by the pleasure principle; what lies beyond is not the symbolic order but a real kernel, a traumatic core. To designate it, Lacan uses a Freudian term *das Ding*, the Thing as an incarnation of the impossible *jouissance* (the term Thing is to be taken here with all the connotations it possesses in the domain of horror science-fiction: the "alien" from the movie of the same name is a pre-symbolic, maternal Thing par excellence).

The symbolic order strives for a homeostatic balance, but there is in its kernel, in its very centre, some strange, traumatic element which cannot be symbolized, integrated into the symbolic order: the Thing. Lacan coined a neologism for it: *l'extimité* - external intimacy, which served as a title for one of the seminars of Jacques-Alain Miller. And what is, at this level, the death drive? Exactly the opposite of the symbolic order: the possibility of what was named by de Sade "the second death," the radical annihilation of the symbolic texture through which so-called reality is constituted. The very existence of the symbolic order implies a possibility of its radical effacement, of the "symbolic death" - not the death of the so-called "real object" in its symbol but the obliteration of the signifying network itself.

This distinction between the different stages of Lacan's teaching is not of merely theoretical interest; it has very definite consequences for the determination of the final moment of the psychoanalytic cure. In the first period, where the accent is laid on the word as a medium of the intersubjective recognition of desire, symptoms are conceived as white spots, non-symbolized imaginary elements of the history of the subject, and the process of analysis is that of their symbolization, i.e., of their integration into the symbolic universe of the subject: the analysis gives meaning, retroactively, to what was in the beginning a meaningless trace. So the final moment of analysis is here reached when the subject is able to narrate to the other his own history in its continuity, when his desire is integrated, recognized in a "full speech" (*parole pleine*).

In the second period, where the symbolic order is conceived as having a mortifying effect on a subject, i.e., as imposing on him a traumatic loss - and the name of this loss, of this lack, is of course the symbolic castration - the final moment of analysis is reached when the subject is made ready to accept this fundamental loss, to consent to symbolic castration as a price to pay for access to his desire.

In the third period, we have the great Other, the symbolic order, with a traumatic element in its very heart; and in Lacanian theory, fantasy is conceived as a construction allowing the subject to come to terms with this traumatic kernel. At this level, the final moment of analysis is defined as "going through a fantasy" (*la traversée du fantasme*): not its symbolic interpretation but the experience of the fact that the fantasy-object, by its fascinating presence, just fills out a lack, a void in the Other. There is nothing "behind" the fantasy; the fantasy is precisely a construction the function of which is to hide this void, this "nothing," i.e., the lack in the Other. The crucial element of this third period of Lacan's teaching is then the shift of the accent from the symbolic to the real. [5]

The prohibition of the impossible

The usual idea of the Lacanian "real" is that of a hard kernel resisting symbolization, dialectization, persisting in its place, always returning to it. There is a well-known science-fiction story ("Experiment" by Fredric Brown) perfectly illustrating this point. Professor Johnson has developed a small-scale experimental model of a time machine. Small articles placed on it can be sent into the past or the future. He first demonstrates to his two colleagues a five-minute time travel into the future, by setting the future-dial and placing a small brass cube on the machine's platform. It instantly vanishes and reappears five minutes later. The next experiment, five minutes into the past, is a little trickier. Johnson explains that having set the past-dial at five minutes, he will place the cube on the platform at exactly 3 o'clock. But since time is now running backward, it should vanish from his hand and appear on the platform at five minutes before 3; that is, five minutes before he places it there. One of his colleagues asks the obvious question: "How can you place it there, then?" Johnson

explains that at 3 o'clock the cube will vanish from the platform and appear in his hand, to be placed on the machine. This is exactly what happens. The second colleague wants to know what would happen if, after the cube has appeared on the platform (five minutes before being placed there), Johnson were to change his mind and not put it there at 3 o'clock. Would this not create a paradox?

"An interesting idea," Professor Johnson said. "I had not thought of it and it will be interesting to try. Very well, I shall not..."

There was no paradox at all. The cube remained.

But the entire rest of the Universe, professors and all, vanished.

So, even if all symbolic reality dissolves itself, disappears into nothing, the real - the small cube - will return to its place. This is what Lacan means when he says that the ethical imperative is the mode of the presence of the real in the symbolic: *Fiat justitia, pereat mundus!* The cube must return to its place even if all the world, all symbolic reality perishes.

But this is just one side of the Lacanian real; it's the side which predominates in the fifties, when we have the real - the brute, pre-symbolic reality which always returns to its place, then the Symbolic order, which structures our perception of reality, and finally the Imaginary, the level of illusory entities whose consistency is the effect of a kind of mirror-play, i.e., which have no real existence but are just a structural effect. With the development of the Lacanian teaching in the sixties and seventies, what he calls "the real" more and more approaches what he called, in the fifties, the imaginary. Let's take the case of traumatism: in the fifties, in his first seminar, the traumatic event is defined as an imaginary entity which wasn't yet fully symbolized, given a place in the symbolic universe of the subject. In the seventies, the traumatism is real; it is a hard core resisting symbolization. But the point is that it doesn't matter if it took place, if it "really occurred" in so-called reality; the point is just that it produces a series of structural effects (displacements, repetitions, etc.). The real is an entity which should be constructed afterwards so that we can account for the distortions of the symbolic structure. The most famous Freudian example of such a real entity is of course the primal parricide: it would be senseless to search for its traces in prehistoric reality, but it must nonetheless be presupposed if we want to account for the present state of things. It's the same as with the primal fight to death between the (future) master and servant in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*: it is senseless trying to determine when this event could have taken place; the point is just that it must be presupposed, that it constitutes a fantasy-scenario implied by the very fact that people are working - it is the intersubjective condition of the so-called "instrumental relation to the world of objects."

The paradox of the Lacanian real is then that it is an entity which, although it doesn't exist (in the sense of "really existing," taking place in reality), has a series of properties. It exercises a certain structural causality; it can produce a series of effects in the symbolic

reality of subjects. That's why it can be illustrated by a multitude of well-known jokes based on the same matrix: "Is this the place where the Duke of Wellington spoke his famous words?" "Yes, this is the place, but he never spoke those words." These never-spoken words are a Lacanian real. One can quote the examples ad infinitum - "Smith not only doesn't believe in ghosts, he isn't afraid of them!" etc. - up to the God himself who, according to Lacan, belongs to the real: "God has all perfections except one - he doesn't exist!" In this sense, the Lacanian *sujet-supposé-savoir* (the subject supposed to know) is also such a real entity: it doesn't exist, but it produces a decisive shift in the development of the psychoanalytic cure. And, to mention the last example: the famous MacGuffin, the Hitchcockian object, the pure pretext the sole role of which is to set in motion the story, but which is in itself "nothing at all." The only signification of the MacGuffin lies in the fact that it has some signification for the characters, i.e., that it must seem to be of vital importance to them. The original anecdote is well known: two men are sitting in a train. One of them asks, "What's that package up there in the baggage rack?" "Oh, that's a MacGuffin." "What's a MacGuffin?" "Well, it's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands." "But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands." "Well, then, that's not a MacGuffin." There is another version which is much more to the point: it runs the same as the other with the exception of the last answer: "Well, you see how efficient it is!" That's a MacGuffin, a pure nothing which is nonetheless efficient. It is needless to add that the MacGuffin is the purest case of what Lacan calls *objet petit a*: a pure void which functions as the object-cause of desire.

That would be, then, the precise definition of the real object: a cause which in itself doesn't exist, i.e., which is present only in a series of its effects, but always in a distorted, displaced way. If the real is impossible, it is precisely this impossibility to be grasped through its effects. Laclau and Mouffe [6] were the first to develop this logic of the real in its relevance for the social-ideological field in their concept of antagonism: antagonism is precisely such an impossible kernel, a certain limit which is in itself nothing, and which is only to be constructed retroactively, from a series of its effects, as the traumatic point which escapes them and prevents a closure of the social field. We might reread this way even the classical notion of the "class struggle": it is not the last signifier giving the meaning to all social phenomena ("all social processes are in the last instance expressions of the class struggle"), but quite the contrary a certain limit, a pure negativity, a traumatic limit which prevents the final totalization of the socio-ideological field. The "class struggle" is present only in its effects, in the fact that every attempt to totalize the social field, to assign to social phenomena a definite place in the social structure, is always doomed to failure.

If we define the real as such a paradoxical, chimerical entity which, although it doesn't exist, has a series of properties and can produce a series of effects, it becomes clear that the real par excellence is *jouissance*: *jouissance* doesn't exist; it is impossible, but it produces a lot of traumatic effects. And this paradoxical nature of *jouissance*

offers us also a clue to explain the fundamental paradox which unflinchingly attests the presence of the real: the fact of the prohibition of something which is already in itself impossible. The elementary model of it is, of course, the prohibition of incest; but there are many other examples. Let's just mention the usual conservative attitude towards child sexuality: it doesn't exist, children are innocent beings, that's why we must strictly control them and fight child sexuality. Not to mention the obvious fact that the most famous phrase of all analytical philosophy - the last proposition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* - implies the same paradox: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." Immediately, the stupid question arises: if it is already stated that it's impossible to say anything about the unspeakable, why add that we must not speak about it? We find the same paradox in Kant: when treating the question of the origins of legitimate state power, he says directly that we cannot penetrate the obscure origins of power because we shouldn't do it (i.e. because by doing it, we put ourselves outside its domain and so automatically subvert its legitimacy). A curious variation on his basic ethical imperative *Du kannst, denn du sollst!* - you can because you must.

The solution to this paradox - why forbid something which is already in itself impossible? - lies in the fact that the impossibility regards the level of existence (it's impossible, i.e., it doesn't exist), while the prohibition regards the properties, its predicates (*jouissance* is forbidden because of its properties).

Freedom as real

In this sense, we may say that the status of freedom itself is real. The usual "(post)structuralist" approach would be to denounce "freedom" as an imaginary experience resting on misrecognition, on blindness to the structural causality which determines the activity of subjects. But, on the basis of Lacan's teaching of the seventies, we can approach freedom from another perspective: freedom, "free choice" as a point of the real-impossible.

A few months ago, a Yugoslav student was called to regular military service. In Yugoslavia, at the beginning of military service, there is a certain ritual: every new soldier must solemnly swear that he is willing to serve his country and to defend it even if it means losing his life, etc. - the usual patriotic stuff. After the public ceremony, everybody must sign the solemn document. The young soldier simply refused to sign, saying that an oath depends upon a free choice, that it is a matter of free decision, and he, from his free choice, didn't want to give his signature to the oath. But, he was quick to add, if one of the officers present was prepared to give him a formal order to sign the oath, he was of course prepared to do it. The perplexed officers explained to him that because the oath depended upon his free decision (an oath obtained by force is valueless), they could not give him such an order, but that, on the other hand, if he still refused to give his signature, he would be prosecuted for refusing to do his duty and condemned to prison. Needless to say, it was exactly

this that happened; but before going to prison, the student did succeed in obtaining from the military court of law the paradoxical decision, a formal document ordering him to sign a free oath.

In the relation of the subject to the community to which he belongs, there is always such a paradoxical point of *choix forcé*. At this point, the community is saying to the subject: you have a freedom to choose, but on the condition that you choose the right thing; you have, for example, the freedom to choose to sign the oath or not, on the condition that you choose rightly, that you choose to sign it. If you make the wrong choice, you lose the freedom of choice itself. And it is by no means accidental that this paradox arises at the level of the relation of the subject to the community to which he belongs: the situation of the forced choice consists in the fact that the subject must freely choose the community to which he already belongs independently of his choice: he must choose what is already given to him. The point, then, is that he is never actually in a position to choose: he is always treated as if he had already chosen. And, contrary to the first impression that such a forced choice is a trap by means of which the totalitarian Power catches its subjects, we must stress that there is nothing "totalitarian" about it. The subject who thinks he can avoid this paradox and really have a free choice is precisely a psychotic subject, the one who keeps a kind of distance to the symbolic order, i.e., who isn't really caught in the signifying network. The "totalitarian" subject is closer to this psychotic position: the proof would be the status of the "enemy" in totalitarian discourse (the Jew in fascism, the traitor in Stalinism) - precisely the subject supposed to make a free choice and to choose freely the wrong side.

This is also the basic paradox of love, not only of one's country, but also of a woman or a man. If I'm directly ordered to love a woman, it is clear that it doesn't work: in a way, love must be free. But, on the other hand, if I'm proceeding as if I really have a free choice, if I start to look around and say to myself, "Let's choose which of these women I will fall in love with," it's clear that this also doesn't work, that it isn't "real love." The paradox of love is that it is a free choice, but a choice which never happens in the present, i.e., which is always already done - at a certain moment, I can only state retroactively that I've already chosen./font>

In the philosophical tradition, we find the clearest formulation of this paradoxical choice in Schelling's *Treatise on Human Freedom* (1809). Schelling's initial problem is the so-called sentiment of irrational, unfounded guilt: sometimes we feel guilty even for things for which rationally, on the level of our conscious decisions and aims, we are not responsible. His answer is a radical distinction between freedom and consciousness: the basic character of each human being - good or evil - is the result of an original, eternal, eternally past, a priori, transcendental choice, i.e., of a choice which was always already made although it never took place in temporary, ordinary, everyday reality. Such a free unconscious choice must be presupposed to account for the above-mentioned sentiment that we are guilty even for things which don't depend upon our conscious decision.

Coincidentia oppositorum

The real is then at the same time the hard, impenetrable kernel resisting symbolization and a purely chimerical entity which has in itself no ontological consistency. To use Kripkean terminology, the real is the rock upon which every attempt at symbolization stumbles, the hard core which remains the same in all possible worlds (i.e., symbolic universes); but at the same time its status is thoroughly precarious: it's something that persists only as failed, missed, in a shadow, and dissolves itself as soon as we try to grasp it in its positivity. As we have already seen, this is precisely what defines the notion of a traumatic event: a point of failure of symbolization, but at the same time never given in its positivity. It can only be constructed backwards, from its structural effects. All its efficacy lies in these effects, in the distortions it produces in the symbolic universe of the subject. The traumatic event is ultimately just a fantasy-construct filling out a certain void in a symbolic structure and as such the retroactive effect of this structure.

There is a series of other oppositions which define the Lacanian concept of the real. First, we have the real as the starting point, the basis, the foundation of the process of symbolization (that's why Lacan speaks of the "symbolization of the real"), i.e., the real which in a sense precedes the symbolic order and is subsequently structured by it when it gets caught in its network. This is the great Lacanian motif of symbolization as a process which mortifies, drains off, empties, carves the fullness of the real of the living body. But the real is at the same time the product, remainder, left-over, scraps of this process of symbolization, the remnants, the excess which escapes symbolization and which is as such produced by symbolization itself. In Hegelian terms, the real is at the same time presupposed and posed by the symbolic. Insofar as the kernel of the real is *jouissance*, this duality takes the form of a difference between *jouissance*, and *plus-de-jouir*: *jouissance* is the basis upon which symbolization works, the basis emptied, disembodied, structured by symbolization. But this process produces at the same time a remainder, a left-over which is the *surplus-jouissance*.

Second, the real is the fullness of the inert presence, positivity; nothing is lacking in the real, i.e., the lack is introduced only by the symbolization; it is a signifier which introduces a void, an absence into the real. But at the same time, the real is in itself a hole, a gap, an opening in the middle of the symbolic order. It is the lack around which the symbolic order is structured. The real as a starting point, as a basis, is a positive fullness without lack; as a product, a left-over of symbolization, it is on the contrary the void, the emptiness created, encircled by the symbolic structure. We might approach the same couple of opposites also from a perspective of negativity: the real is something that cannot be negated, a positive inert datum which is insensitive to negation, which cannot be caught in the dialectics of negativity. But we must add at once, that it is so because the real itself, in its positivity, is nothing but an

embodiment, a positivation of a certain void, lack, radical negativity. It cannot be negated because it is already in itself, in its positivity, nothing but an embodiment of a pure negativity, emptiness. That's why the real object is a sublime object in a strict Lacanian sense, i.e., an object which is just a positivation of the lack in the Other, in the symbolic order. The sublime object is an object which cannot be approached too closely: if we get too near it, it loses its sublime features and becomes an ordinary vulgar object. It can persist only in an interspace, in an intermediate state, viewed from a certain perspective, half-seen. If we want to see it in the light of day, it changes into an everyday object, it dissipates itself, precisely because in itself, it is nothing at all. Let's take a well-known scene from Fellini's *Roma*. The workers digging tunnels for a subway find the remnants of some old Roman buildings; they call the archeologists, and when together they enter the buildings, a beautiful view is awaiting them, walls full of frescoes of immobile, melancholy figures. But the paintings are too fragile; they cannot sustain the open air and immediately begin to dissolve, leaving the spectators alone with the blank walls.

Third, as has been pointed out by Jacques-Alain Miller, the status of the real is at the same time that of pure contingency and that of logical consistency. In a first approach, the real is the shock of a contingent encounter which derails the automatic circulation of the symbolic mechanism, a grain of sand preventing its smooth function: a traumatic encounter which ruins the balance of the symbolic universe of the subject. But, as we have seen with regard to the trauma, precisely as an irruption of a total contingency, the traumatic event isn't anywhere given in its positivity; it can only be logically constructed afterwards as a point which escapes symbolization.

Fourth, if we try to seize the real from the perspective of the distinction between *quid* and *quod*, between the properties of a symbolic-universal nature attributed to an object and this object itself in its givenness, a surplus of an X escaping, in its positivity, the network of universal-symbolic determinations - i.e., if we try to approach the real through the field opened by the Kripkean criticism of the theory of descriptions - we should say, first, that the real is the surplus of *quod* over *quid*, a pure positivity beyond the series of properties, beyond a set of descriptions; but at the same time, the example of the trauma proves that the real is also the exact opposite: an entity which doesn't exist but nevertheless has a series of properties.

Last, if we try to define the real in its relation to the function of writing (*écrit*, not the post-structuralist *écriture*), we must, of course, in a first approach state that the real cannot be inscribed, that it escapes the inscription (the real of the sexual relation, for example). But at the same time, the real is writing itself as opposed to the signifier. As has been pointed out by Jacques-Alain Miller, the Lacanian *écrit* has the status of an object and not of a signifier.

This immediate coincidence of opposite or even contradictory

determinations is what defines the Lacanian real. We can thus differentiate between the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real status of couples of opposites. In the imaginary relation, the two poles of the opposition are complementary; together, they build a harmonious totality, each of them gives to the other what the other lacks, i.e., each fills out the lack of the other (the fantasy of the fully realized sexual relationship, for example, where Man and Woman are forming a harmonious whole). The symbolic relation is on the contrary differential. The identity of each of the moments consists in its difference from the opposite moment. A given element doesn't fill in the lack of the other. It isn't complementary to the other, but on the contrary takes the place of the lack of the other, embodies what is lacking to the other. Its positive presence is nothing but the positivation of a lack of its opposite element. The opposites, the poles of the symbolic relation, thus in a way return each to the other its own lack. They are united on the basis of their common lack. That would also be the definition of symbolic communication: what circulates between the subjects is above all a certain void; the subjects pass to each other a common lack. From this perspective, a woman is not complementary to a man but rather embodies his lack (that's why Lacan can say that a beautiful woman is a perfect incarnation of the man's castration). The real is defined as a point of the immediate coincidence of the opposite poles: each of the poles passes immediately into its opposite; each is already in itself its own opposite. The only philosophical counterpart here is Hegelian dialectics. Already at the very beginning of his *Logic*, Being and Nothingness are not complementary to each other. Nor is Hegel's point that each of them obtains its identity through its difference from the other. The point is that Being in itself, when we try to grasp it "as it is," in its pure abstraction and indeterminateness, without further specification, reveals itself to be Nothingness. Another example, perhaps closer to the Lacanian real, would be Hegel's criticism of Kant's Thing-in-itself (*das Ding-an-sich*). Hegel is trying to show how this famous Thing-in-itself, this pure surplus of objectivity which cannot be reached by thought, this transcending entity, is effectively a pure "Thing-of-the-Thought" (*Gedankending*), a pure form of thought: the transcendence of the Thing-in-itself coincides immediately with the pure immanence of a Thought. That is to say, how do we reach, how do we build the idea of a Thing-in-itself? By making an abstraction, by subtracting all the particular, concrete determinations of the objectivity which are supposed to depend upon our subjectivity. And what remains after this abstraction of all particular, determinate contents is precisely a pure, empty form of Thought!

The clue to this paradoxical coincidence of opposites is given by Lacan in *Encore* when he points out that "the real can be inscribed (*peut s'inscrire*) only through a deadlock of formalisation." [7] The real is of course in a first approach that which cannot be inscribed, which "doesn't cease not to inscribe itself" (*ne cesse pas de ne pas s'écrire*) - the rock upon which every formalization stumbles. But it is precisely through this failure that we can in a way encircle, locate the

empty place of the real. In other words, the real cannot be inscribed, but we can inscribe this impossibility itself. We can locate its place: a traumatic place which causes a series of failures. And the whole point of Lacan is that the real is nothing but this impossibility of its inscribing: the real is not a transcendent positive entity, persisting somewhere beyond the symbolic order like a hard kernel inaccessible to it, some kind of Kantian "Thing-in-itself." In itself, it is nothing at all, just a void, an emptiness in a symbolic structure, marking some central impossibility. It is in this sense that the enigmatic Lacanian phrase defining the subject as an "answer of the real" is to be understood: we can inscribe, encircle the void place of the subject through the failure of its symbolization, because the subject is nothing but the point of failure of the process of its symbolic representation.

a, Φ , S(A)

From a Lacanian perspective, the object as real is then, in the last resort, just a certain limit: we can overtake it, leave it behind us, but we cannot reach it. That's the Lacanian reading of the classic paradox of Achilles and the tortoise: Achilles can of course overtake it, but he cannot reach it, catch up with it. It's as with the old Brechtian paradox of happiness from *The Beggar's Opera*: you must not run to desperately after happiness, because it might happen that you will overtake it, and then happiness will remain behind you. That's the Lacanian real: a certain limit which is always missed - we always came too early or too late. And, as was pointed out by the late Michel Silvestre, the same thing goes also for so-called "free association" in psychoanalysis. [8] On the one hand, it is impossible to reach it. We cannot really spontaneously give ourselves to it. We always manipulate, have a certain intention, etc. But on the other hand, we cannot escape it: whatever we say during analysis already has the status of free association. For example, I cannot, in the middle of the analysis, turn to the analyst and say: "Now wait a minute, I want now to speak to you really seriously, person to person. ..." Even if we do this, its performative force is already suspended, i.e., it already has a status of "free association," of something that is to be interpreted, that is not to be taken at its face value.

But there are objects and objects. In Lacan's teaching, we have to distinguish at least three types of objects. To articulate these distinctions, let's return to the MacGuffin. We must not forget that in Hitchcock's films, too, the MacGuffin is just one of the three types of objects.

First, then, the MacGuffin itself, "nothing at all," an empty place, pure pretext for setting in motion the action: the formula of the aircraft-engines in *The 39 Steps*, the secret clause of the Naval treaty in *Foreign Correspondent*, the coded melody in *The Lady Vanishes*, the uranium-bottles in *Notorious*, etc. It's a pure semblance. In itself, it is totally indifferent and, by structural necessity, absent. Its signification is purely autoreflexive; it consists in

the fact that it has some signification for the others, for the principal characters of the story.

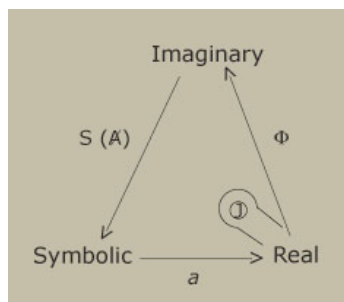
But in a series of Hitchcock's films, we find another type of object which is decidedly not indifferent, not pure absence. What matters here is precisely its presence, the material presence of a fragment of reality. It's a left-over, a remnant which cannot be reduced to a network of formal relations proper to the symbolic structure, but which is, paradoxically, at the same time the positive condition for the effectuation of the formal structure. This object can be defined as an object of exchange circulating between subjects, serving as a kind of guarantee, a pawn in their symbolic relationship. It is the role of the key in *Notorious* and in *Dial M for Murder*, the role of the wedding ring in *Shadow of a Doubt* and in *Rear Window*, the role of the lighter in *Strangers on a Train*, and even the role of the child circulating between the two couples in *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. It is unique (*unaire*), non-specularized. It hasn't a double; it escapes the dual mirror-relation. That's why it plays a crucial role precisely in the films which are built on a whole series of dual relations, each element having its mirror-counter-part (*Strangers on a Train*; *Shadow of a Doubt*, where already the name of the central character is doubled - uncle Charlie, niece Charlie). It is the one which hasn't got its counterpart, and that's why it must circulate between the opposite elements. The paradox of its role is that, although it is a left-over of the real, an "excrement," it functions as a positive condition of the restoring of a symbolic structure: the structure of symbolic exchanges between the subjects can exist only insofar as it is embodied in this pure material element which acts as its guarantee. For example, in *Strangers on a Train*, the murderous pact between Bruno and Guy holds only insofar as the object (the cigarette-lighter) is circulating between them.

That's the basic situation of a whole series of Hitchcock's films. At the beginning, we have a non-structured, pre-symbolic, imaginary homeostatic state of things, an indifferent balance where the relations between subjects are not yet structured in a strict sense, i.e., through the lack circulating between them. And the paradox is that this symbolic pact, this structural network of relations can only establish itself insofar as it is embodied in a totally contingent material element, a little-bit-of-real which, by its sudden irruption, disrupts the homeostatic indifference of the relations between subjects. In other words, the imaginary balance changes into a symbolically-structured network through a shock of the real. [9] That's why Hitchcock (and with him Lacan) is no longer a "structuralist": the basic gesture of "structuralism" is to reduce the imaginary richness to a formal network of symbolic relations. What escapes the structuralist perspective is that this formal structure itself is tied with an umbilical cord to some radically contingent material element which, in its pure particularity, "is" a structure, embodies it. Why? Because the great Other, the symbolic order, is always *barré*, blocked, failed, crossed, mutilated, and the contingent material element embodies this internal blockade, or limit, of the symbolic structure. The symbolic structure must include an element

which embodies its “stain,” its own point of impossibility around which it is articulated: it is in a way the structuring of its own impossibility. The only philosophical counter-point to this logic is again the Hegelian dialectics: the greatest speculative mystery of the dialectical movement is not how a richness and diversity of reality can be reduced to a dialectical conceptual mediation, but the fact that this dialectical structuring itself, to take place, must be embodied in some totally contingent element. For example, that’s the point of the Hegelian deduction of the role of the King: the State as the rational totality exists effectively only insofar as it is embodied in the stupid presence of the King’s body. The King, in his non-rational, biologically determined presence, “is” the State, it is in his body that the State achieves its effectiveness. Here, we can use the distinction, developed by Laclau and Mouffe, between the accidental and the contingent: an ordinary element of a formal structure is accidental, indifferent, i.e. it can be interchanged. But there is always an element which, paradoxically, embodies this formal structure as such. It isn’t necessary, but it is, in its contingency itself, the positive condition of the restoring of the structural necessity; this necessity depends upon it, hangs on it.

Finally, we have a third kind of object: the birds in *The Birds*, for example (we could also add, in *Marnie*, the body of the giant ship at the end of the street where Mamie’s mother lives). This object has a massive, oppressive material presence. It is not an indifferent void like the MacGuffin, but at the same time it doesn’t circulate between the subjects; it’s not an object of exchange, it’s just a mute embodiment of an impossible *jouissance*.

How to explain the logic, the consistency of these three objects? In *Encore* Lacan proposes a schema for it: [10]



Here, we have to follow Jacques-Alain Miller and interpret the vector not as indicating a relation of determination (“the imaginary determines the symbolic,” etc.), but more in the sense of the “symbolization of the imaginary,” etc. So:

- the MacGuffin is clearly the *objet petit a*, a lack, the left-over of the real, setting in motion the symbolic order, a pure semblance of the “mystery” to be explained, interpreted.
- The birds are Φ , the impassive, imaginary making present of the

real, an image which embodies *jouissance*.

- And, finally, the circulating object of exchange is $S(\mathbf{A})$, the symbolic object which cannot be reduced to imaginary mirror-play and which at the same time embodies the lack in the Other, the impossibility around which the symbolic order is structured. It is the radically contingent element through which the symbolic necessity arises. That's the greatest mystery of the symbolic order: how its necessity arises from the shock of a totally contingent encounter with the real. It is like the well-known accident in the *Arabian Nights*: the hero, lost in the desert, enters a cave quite by chance; there, he finds three old wise men awakened by his entry who say to him, "Finally, you have arrived! We have been waiting for you for the last three hundred years."

The subject assumed to...

This mystery is in the last resort the mystery of the transference itself: to produce new meaning, it is necessary to presuppose its existence in the other. That's the logic of the "subject assumed to know" which was isolated by Lacan as the central axis, or stronghold, of the phenomenon of transference. The analyst is in advance assumed to know - what? The meaning of the analysand's symptoms. This knowledge is of course an illusion, but it is a necessary one: it is only through this supposition of knowledge that, at the end, some real knowledge can be produced. In the schema above, we have three versions of the object around the central nauseous protuberance of *Jouissance*, the Thing in its inaccessibility; one is tempted to construct, on the same matrix, three other concepts around the subject assumed to know.

Let us start with the subject assumed to believe. [11] Coming from Yugoslavia, i.e., from a real-socialist country, I'll take an example typical of real socialism where, as you all know, there is always something lacking in the stores. Our hypothetical starting-point is that there is an abundance of toilet-paper on the market. But, suddenly and unexpectedly, a rumor starts going around that there is a shortage of toilet-paper. Because of this rumor, people frantically begin to buy it and, of course, the result is that there is a real shortage of toilet-paper. At first sight, this seems to be the simple mechanism of what is called a self-fulfilling prophecy, but the effective way of how it functions is a little more complicated. The reasoning of each of the participants is the following: "I'm not naive and stupid. I know very well that there is more than enough toilet-paper in the stores; but there are probably some naive and stupid people who believe these rumors, who are taking them seriously and who will act accordingly. They will frantically start to buy toilet-paper, and so in the end there will be a real shortage of it. So even if I know very well that there is enough of it, it would be a good idea to go and buy a lot of it!" The crucial point is that this other who is assumed to believe naively doesn't have to exist in actuality. To produce his effects in the reality, it is enough that he is supposed by the others to exist. In a definite, closed multitude of subject,

everybody can play this role for all the others. The effect will be exactly the same, i.e., the real shortage of toilet-paper. The one who will at the end remain without it will be precisely the one who will persist in the truth: the one who will say to himself, "I know that this is only a rumor and that there is enough toilet-paper," and act upon it.

This concept of the subject supposed to believe has also its clinical use: it serves to mark the difference between the real Freudian analysis and the revisionist cure. While in the Freudian analysis the analyst plays the role of the subject assumed to know, in the revisionist tradition, his role is closest to that of the subject assumed to believe; that is to say, in this case, the reasoning of the patient goes as follows: "I have some psychic problem. I'm neurotic, so I need an analyst to cure me. The problem is that I don't believe in the maternal phallus, symbolic castration, and all this shit. This is to me plain nonsense. But happily for me, here is the analyst who believes in it and, why not, perhaps he can cure me with his belief!" No wonder that various neo-Freudian schools are trying to incorporate some elements of shamanism!

The second concept in this series would be the subject supposed to *jouir*. [12] His role is fundamental in obsessive neurosis. For the obsessive neurotic, the traumatic point is the supposed existence, in the other, of an insupportable, limitless, horrifying *jouissance*. What is at stake of all his frantic activity is to protect, to save the other from his *jouissance*, even at the price of destroying him or her (saving the woman from her corruption, for example). And, again, this subject doesn't have to exist in actuality to produce his effects, it is enough that he is supposed by the others to exist. This supposed *jouissance* is one of the key components of racism: the other (Jew, Arab, Black) is always supposed to have an access to some specific *jouissance*, and that is what really bothers us.

The last concept would be, of course, that of the subject assumed to desire. If the subject assumed to enjoy plays a central role in obsessive neurosis, the subject assumed to desire plays such a role in hysteria. One only has to remind oneself of Freud's analysis of Dora. It is quite dear that Madame K. is playing for Dora the role not of her object of desire, as was mistakenly supposed by Freud, but of the subject supposed to desire, supposed to know how to organize her desire, how to avoid its deadlock. That's why, when we are confronted with a hysteric, the question to ask is not, "What is her object of desire?" but, "Where does she desire from? Who is the other person through whom she is organizing his desire?" The problem with hysterical subject is that she always needs to have recourse to another subject to organize her desire. That's the meaning of the Lacanian formula that hysterical desire is the desire of the other.

Needless to say, this conceptual quartet is useful in an analysis of ideological mechanisms. In oriental despotism, the whole system turns around the central point, the figure of the despot supposed to

jour. In classical Stalinism, the leadership is supposed to know, etc. But the thing not to forget is that the four subjects supposed to... are not on the same level: the subject assumed to know is their basis, their matrix, and the function of the remaining three is precisely to disguise its troubling paradox.

Two doors of the Law

Why is this supposed knowledge impossible/real? The Lacanian answer is that there is an object hidden in it, embodying obscene jouissance. To exemplify it, let's take as a starting point the famous apologue concerning the door of the Law in *The Trial* [13] the little story told to K. by the priest to explain to him his situation vis-a-vis the Law. The patent failure of all the major interpretations of this apologue seems only to confirm the priest's thesis that "the comments often enough merely express the commentator's bewilderment"(p.240). But there is another way to penetrate the mystery of this apologue: Instead of seeking its meaning directly, it might be preferable to treat it the way Claude Lévi-Strauss treats a given myth: to establish its relations to a series of other myths and to elaborate the rule of their transformation. Where can we find, then, in *The Trial* another "myth" which functions as a variation, as an inversion, of the apologue concerning the door of the Law?

We don't have to look far already at the beginning of the second chapter ("First interrogation"), Josef K. finds himself in front of another door of the Law (the entrance to the interrogation chamber). Here also, the door-keeper lets him know that this door is intended only for him. The washer-woman says to him: "I must shut this door after you; nobody else must come in." This is clearly a variation of the last words of the door-keeper to the man from the country in the priest's apologue: "No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended only for you. I am now going to shut it." At the same time, the apologue concerning the door of the Law (let's call it, in the style of Lévi-Strauss, m1) and the first interrogation m2) can be opposed through a whole series of distinctive features: in m1, we are in front of the entrance to a magnificent court of justice, in m2, we are in a block of worker's flats, full of filth and obscene crawling; in m1, the door-keeper is an employee of the court, in m2, it is an ordinary woman washing children's clothes; in m1 it's a man, in m2 a woman; in m1, the door-keeper prevents the man from the country from passing through the door and entering the court, in m2, the washer-woman pushes him into the interrogation chamber half against his will. That is, the frontier separating everyday life from the sacred place of the Law cannot be transgressed in m1, but in m2, it is easy to transgress.

The crucial feature of m2 is indicated already with its localization: the Court is located in the middle of the vital promiscuity of workers' lodgings. Reiner Stach is quite justified in recognizing in this detail a distinctive trait of Kafka's universe, "the trespass of the frontier which separates the vital domain from the judicial domain." [14] The

structure here is of course that of the band of Moebius: if we progress far enough in our descent to the social underground, we find ourselves suddenly on the other side, i.e., in the middle of the sublime and noble Law. The place of transition from one domain to the other is a door guarded by an ordinary washer-woman of provocative sensuality. In ml, the door-keeper doesn't know anything, whereas here, the woman possesses a kind of advance knowledge: she simply ignores the naive cunning of K., his excuse that he is looking for a joiner called Lanz, and gives him to understand that they have been waiting for him for a long time, although K. chose to enter her room quite by chance, as a last desperate attempt after long and useless rambling:

The first thing he saw in the little room was a great pendulum clock which already pointed to ten. "Does a joiner called Lanz live here?" he asked. "Please go through," said a young woman with sparkling black eyes, who was washing children's clothes in a tub, and she pointed her damp hand to the open door of the next room... "I asked for a joiner, a man called Lanz." "I know," said the woman, "just go right in." K. might not have obeyed if she had not come up to him, grasped the handle of the door, and said "I must shut this door after you; nobody else must come in." (pp.45-6)

The situation here is exactly the same as in the above-mentioned accident from the *Arabian Nights*: one enters a place quite by chance and one learns that one's arrival has been long expected. The paradoxical advance knowledge of the washer-woman has nothing whatsoever to do with a so-called "feminine intuition." It is based on a simple fact that she is connected with the Law. Her position regarding the Law is far more crucial than that of a small functionary; K. finds it out by experience soon afterwards when his passionate argumentation before the tribunal is interrupted by an obscene intrusion:

Here K. was interrupted by a shriek from the end of the hall; he peered from beneath his hand to see what was happening, for the reek of the room and the dim light together made a whitish dazzle of fog. It was the washer-woman, whom K. had recognized as a potential cause of disturbance from the moment of her entrance. Whether she was at fault now or not, one could not tell. All K could see was that a man had drawn her into a corner by the door and was clasping her in his arms. Yet it was not she who had uttered the shriek but the man; his mouth was wide open and he was gazing up at the ceiling, (p. 55)

What then is the relation between the woman and the Court of Law? In Kafka's work, the woman as a "psychological type" is wholly consistent with the antifeminist ideology of an Otto Weininger; the woman is a being without a proper Self, incapable of assuming an ethical attitude (even when she appears to act on ethical grounds, there is a hidden calculation of *jouissance* behind it), a being who hasn't got access to the dimension of Truth (even when what she is saying is literally true, she is lying with her subjective position), a

being about whom it is not sufficient to say that she is feigning feelings to seduce a man - the problem is that there is nothing behind this mask of simulation, nothing but a certain glutinous, filthy *jouissance* which is her only substance. Confronted with such an image of woman, Kafka doesn't succumb to the usual critical-feminist temptation (of demonstrating how this figure is the ideological product of certain social conditions; of opposing to it the outlines of another type of femininity, etc.). His gesture is much more subversive: he wholly accepts this Weiningerian portrait of woman as a "psychological type," but he makes it occupy an unheard of, unprecedented place, the place of the Law. This is perhaps, as was already pointed out by Stach, the elementary operation of Kafka: this short-circuit between the feminine "substance" ("psychological type") and the place of the Law. Smearred over by an obscene vitality, the Law itself - in traditional perspective a pure, neutral universality - assumes the features of a heterogeneous, inconsistent *bricolage* penetrated with *jouissance*.

The obscene Law

In Kafka's universe, the Court is above all lawless in a formal sense: as if the chain of "normal" connections between causes and effects is suspended, put in parentheses. Every attempt to establish the mode of functioning of the Court by means of logical reasoning is in advance doomed to fail: all the oppositions noted by K. (between the anger of the judges and the laughter of the public on the benches; between the merry right side and the severe left side of the public) prove themselves false as soon as he tries to base his tactics on them; after an ordinary answer by K., the public bursts into laughter:

"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.

The other, positive side of this inconsistency is of course *jouissance*: it erupts openly when the argument of K. is disturbed by a public act of sexual intercourse. This act, difficult to perceive because of its over-exposure itself (K. has to "peer beneath his hands to see what was happening"), marks the moment of the eruption of the traumatic real, and the error of K. consists in overlooking the solidarity between this obscene disturbance and the Court. He thinks that everybody would be anxious to have order restored and the offending couple at least ejected from the meeting, but when he tries to rush across the room, the crowd obstructs him, and someone seizes him from behind by the collar. At this point, the game is over: puzzled and confused, K. loses the thread of his argument; filled with impotent rage, he soon leaves the room.

The fatal error of K. was to address the Court, the Other of the Law, as a homogeneous entity, attainable by means of consistent

argument, whereas the Court could only return him an obscene smile mixed with signs of perplexity. In short, K. awaits from the Court acts (legal deeds, decisions), but what he gets is an act (a public copulation). Kafka's sensitiveness as to this "trespass of the frontier which separates the vital domain from the judicial domain" depends upon his Judaism: the Jewish religion marks the moment of their most radical separation. In all previous religions, we always run into a place, a domain of sacred *jouissance* (in the form of ritual orgies, for example), whereas Judaism evacuates from the sacred domain all traces of vitality and subordinates the living substance to the dead letter of the Father's Law. With Kafka, on the contrary, the judicial domain is again flooded with *jouissance*. We have a short-circuit between the Other of the Law and the Thing, the substance of *jouissance*.

That's why his universe is eminently that of superego: the Other as the Other of the symbolic Law is not only dead, it doesn't even know that it is dead (like the terrible figure from Freud's dream). It couldn't know it insofar as it is totally insensible to the living substance of *jouissance*. The superego on the contrary makes me present paradox of a Law which "proceeds from the time when the Other wasn't yet dead. The superego is a surviving remainder" (Jacques-Alain Miller). The superego-imperative "Enjoy!", the turning round of the dead Law into the obscene figure of superego, implies a disquieting experience: suddenly, we become aware of the fact that what a minute ago appeared to us a dead letter is really alive, breathing, palpitating. Let's remind ourselves of a small scene from the movie *Alien II*. The group of heroes is advancing in a long tunnel whose stone walls are twisted like interlaced plaits of hair, suddenly, the plaits start to move and to secrete a glutinous mucus, and the petrified corpse comes to life again.

We should then reverse the usual metaphors of "alienation" where the dead, formal letter sucks out, like a kind of parasite or vampire, the living present force, i.e., where the living subjects are prisoners of a dead cobweb. This dead, formal character of the Law is a *sine qua non* of our freedom: the real totalitarian danger arises when the Law doesn't want to stay dead anymore.

The two lacks

The result of m1 is then that there isn't any Truth about Truth. Every Warrant of the Law has the status of a semblance. The Law doesn't have any support in the Truth: it is necessary without being true. "It is not necessary to accept everything as true; one must only accept it as necessary," to quote the words of the priest's commentary on m1. The meeting of K. with the washer-woman adds to this the reverse side usually passed by in silence: insofar as the Law isn't grounded in Truth, it is impregnated with *jouissance*.

M1 and m2 are thus complementary, representing the two modes of the lack: the lack of incompleteness, and the lack of inconsistency (I'm referring here to a distinction elaborated by J.-A. Miller). In m1,

the Other of the Law appears as incomplete: in its very heart, there is a certain gap. We cannot ever penetrate to the last door of the Law. And it is the reference to m1 which supports the interpretation of Kafka as a "writer of absence," i.e., the negative-theological reading of his universe as a crazy bureaucratic machine turning blindly around a central void of the absent God. In m2, the Other of the Law appears on the contrary as inconsistent: nothing is wanting in it, there is no lack. But for all that, it still isn't "whole/all"; it remains an inconsistent bricolage, a collection following a kind of aleatory logic of *jouissance*. This gives us a figure of Kafka as a "writer of presence." The presence of what? Of a blind machinery where nothing is lacking insofar as it is soaked in the manure of its own *jouissance*.

That's why Kafka occupies the opposite pole in relation to the "unreadable" character of modern literature as exemplified by Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. In an immediate approach, *Finnegan's Wake* is of course an "unreadable" book; we cannot read it the way we read an ordinary "realistic" novel. To follow the thread of the text, we need a kind of "reader's guide," a commentary enabling us to see our way in the inexhaustible network of the ciphered allusions. But, on the other hand, this "unreadability" functions precisely as an invitation to an unending process of reading. It drives us to an incessant work of interpretation (one knows Joyce's joke that with *Finnegan's Wake*, he hopes to keep the literary scientists occupied at least for the next four hundred years). With Kafka, the situation is rather reversed: on the level of an immediate approach, *The Trial* is quite "readable": the main outlines of the story are clear enough, and Kafka's style is concise and of a proverbial pureness. But it is this "readability" itself which, because of its over-exposed character, entails a radical opacity and blocks every attempt at interpretation. It is as if Kafka's text were a coagulated, stigmatized S1 which we are trying in vain to articulate in a chain with an S2 and thus provide retroactively for its signification. The Kafkian S1 repels this articulation because it is too much impregnated with *jouissance*: it is the inert presence of a which prevents its articulation with S2 - instead of the usual S1 → S2, we have a S1-a.

Colloquium "Jacques Lacan: Television," New York, April 10, 1987

[1] Jacques Lacan, *L'éthique de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), p.295.

[2] For this distinction between the two deaths, J. Lacan, *L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, chapter XXI ("Antigone dans l'entre-deux-morts"), and also my analysis of Hitchcock's "The Trouble with Harry" in *October* 38 (Fall 1986), 99-102.

[3] The classic text by Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*. In "Das Dinghafte der Geldware" (*Wo es war* 1, Ljubljana, 1986), Rado Riha has applied this notion of the sublime body to the Marxian theory of commodity-fetishism.

- [4] Claude Lefort, *L'invention démocratique* (Paris: Fayard 1981).
- [5] This whole periodization of Lacan's teaching is indebted to Jacques-Alain Miller's seminar.
- [6] Ernesto Laclau/Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1986).
- [7] Jacques Lacan, *Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p.85.
- [8] Michel Silvestre, *Demain la psychanalyse* (Paris: Navarin, 1986).
- [9] Mladen Dolar. "Hitchcocks Objekt," in *Wo es war 2*, Ljubljana. 1986.
- [10] Jacques Lacan, *Encore*, p. 83.
- [11] Tasto Mocnik, "Ueber die Bedeutung der Chimären für die condido humana," in *Wo es war 1*, Ljubljana, 1986.
- [12] Mladen Dolar, "Die Einführung in das Serail," *Wo es war 3-4*. Ljubljana, 1987.
- [13] I am quoting *The Trial* from the Penguin Modern Classics edition, translated by Wills and Edwin Muir.
- [14] Reiner Stach, *Kafkas erotischer Mythos* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1987), p. 38.

Art: Gillian Wearing, *Self Portrait as my Mother Jean Gregory, Self Portrait as my Father Brian Wearing*, 2003.

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