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A Plea for a Return to *Différance* (with a Minor *Pro Domo Sua*)

Slavoj Žižek

Here is what a well-known Slovene Catholic intellectual, ex-minister of culture and ex-ambassador of Slovenia in France—in short, an ethically corrupted nobody posing as a high Christian ethical authority—wrote apropos Jacques Derrida’s untimely death, without the letters written turning red out of shame:

The only weapon is rebellion and destruction, as the recently deceased apostle Jacques Derrida taught us. Wherever you see a window, throw into it a brick. Where there is a building, there must be a mine. Where there is a high-rise building, a bin Laden should come. Where there is any kind of institution, law, or link, one should find a falsification, a “law” of the street or of the underground.¹

Are lines like these not an indication of the rise of a new barbarism in today’s intellectual life? Phenomena like the one quoted above are not limited to marginal countries like Slovenia. In the homeland of the empire itself, theories are emerging that, say, explain how the Frankfurt school appeared on the scene at a precise historical moment: when the failure of the socioeconomic Marxist revolutions became apparent. The conclusion drawn was that this failure was due to underestimating the depth of Western Christian spiritual foundations, so the accent of subversive activity shifted from politico-economic struggle to “cultural revolution,” to the pa-

1. Andrej Capuder, “Vino in most,” *Demokracija* (Ljubljana), 9 Dec. 2004, p. 9; trans. mine. Incidentally, does this “where there is a high-rise building, a bin Laden should come” not sound like a new politicized version of Freud’s “wo es war soll ich werden” (Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. [London, 1953–74], 22:80)?

tient intellectual-cultural work of undermining national pride, family, religion, and spiritual commitments, and the spirit of sacrifice for one's country was dismissed as involving the "authoritarian personality"; marital fidelity was supposed to express pathological sexual repression; following Benjamin's motto on how every document of culture is a document of barbarism, the highest achievements of Western culture were denounced for concealing the practices of racism and genocide, and so on. The main academic proponent of this new barbarism is Kevin MacDonald, who, in *The Culture of Critique*, argues that certain twentieth-century intellectual movements led by Jews have changed European societies in fundamental ways and destroyed the confidence of Western man; these movements were designed, consciously or unconsciously, to advance Jewish interests even though they were presented to non-Jews as universalistic and even utopian. One of the most consistent ways in which Jews have advanced their interests has been to promote pluralism and diversity—but only for others. Ever since the nineteenth century, they have led movements that tried to discredit the traditional foundations of gentile society: patriotism, racial loyalty, the Christian basis for morality, social homogeneity, and sexual restraint. MacDonald devotes many pages to *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), a collective project coordinated by Adorno, the purpose of which was, for MacDonald, to make every group affiliation sound as if it were a sign of mental disorder; everything, from patriotism to religion to family—and race—loyalty, is disqualified as a sign of a dangerous and defective "authoritarian personality." Because drawing distinctions between different groups is illegitimate, all group loyalties—even close family ties—are "prejudice." MacDonald quotes here approvingly Christopher Lasch's remark that *The Authoritarian Personality* leads to the conclusion that prejudice "could be eradicated only by subjecting the American people to what amounted to collective psychotherapy—by treating them as inmates of an insane asylum."² However, it is precisely the kind of group loyalty, respect for tradition, and consciousness of differences central to *Jewish* identity that, according to MacDonald, Horkheimer and Adorno described as mental illness in gentiles. These writers adopted what eventually became a favorite

2. Kevin B. MacDonald, *The Culture of Critique: An Evolutionary Analysis of Jewish Involvement in Twentieth-Century Intellectual and Political Movements* (Westport, Conn., 1998), p. 169; hereafter abbreviated CC.

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Soviet tactic against dissidents: anyone whose political views were different from theirs was insane. For these Jewish intellectuals, anti-Semitism was also a sign of mental illness: Christian self-denial and especially sexual repression caused hatred of Jews. The Frankfurt school was enthusiastic about psychoanalysis, according to which “oedipal ambivalence toward the father and anal-sadistic relations in early childhood are the anti-Semite’s irrevocable inheritance” (CC, p. 145). In addition to ridiculing patriotism and racial identity, the Frankfurt school glorified promiscuity and bohemian poverty: “Certainly many of the central attitudes of the largely successful 1960s countercultural revolution find expression in *The Authoritarian Personality*, including idealizing rebellion against parents, low-investment sexual relationships, and scorn for upward social mobility, social status, family pride, the Christian religion, and patriotism” (CC, p. 194). Although he came later, Derrida followed the same tradition when he wrote: “The idea behind deconstruction is to deconstruct the workings of strong nation-states with powerful immigration policies, to deconstruct the rhetoric of nationalism, the politics of place, the metaphysics of native land and native tongue. . . . The idea is to disarm the bombs . . . of identity that nation-states build to defend themselves against the stranger, against Jews and Arabs and immigrants” (CC, p. 201). As MacDonald puts it, “Viewed at its most abstract level, a fundamental agenda is thus to influence the European-derived peoples of the United States to view concern about their own demographic and cultural eclipse as irrational and as an indication of psychopathology” (CC, p. 195). This project has been successful; anyone opposed to the displacement of whites is routinely treated as a mentally unhinged hater, and whenever whites defend their group interests they are described as psychologically inadequate—with, of course, the silent exception of the Jews themselves: “the ideology that ethnocentrism was a form of psychopathology was promulgated by a group that over its long history had arguably been the most ethnocentric group among all the cultures of the world” (CC, p. 232). We should have no illusions here. Measured by the standards of the great Enlightenment tradition, we are effectively dealing with something for which the best designation is the old orthodox Marxist term for “bourgeois irrationalists”: *the self-destruction of reason*. The only thing to bear in mind is that this new barbarism is a strictly post-modern phenomenon, the obverse of the highly reflexive self-ironical attitude—no wonder that, reading authors like MacDonald, one often cannot decide if one is reading a satire or a “serious” line of argumentation.

But the saddest surprise of them all is to see some of the theoretical descendants of those who are amalgamated by MacDonald into the same Jewish plot with Derrida—some late representatives of the Frankfurt

school—propose a kind of symmetrical reversal of the same story, which ends up in no less atrocious slander. Instead of being castigated as an agent of the Jewish plot, Derrida is here, together with Baudrillard and others, thrown into the “postmodern” melting pot that, so the story goes, opens up the way for proto-Fascist irrationalism, if not directly providing the intellectual background for Holocaust denial. This brutal intolerance, which masks as high moral concern, found its latest exponent in Richard Wolin, whose *The Seduction of Unreason* is a worthy successor to Lukács’s most Stalinist work, the infamous *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* from the early 1950s. Wolin bombastically locates me, together with Baudrillard, among those who claimed that the U.S. got what it deserved on 9/11:

Traditionally, dystopian views of America have been the stock-in-trade of counterrevolutionary writers such as Maistre, Arthur de Gobineau, and Oswald Spengler. More recently, they have made inroads among champions of the postmodern left, such as Jean Baudrillard and Slavoj Žižek. In their theories, America represents the epitome of a postmodern, technological Moloch: a land devoid of history and tradition in which the seductions and illusions of a media-dominated mass culture have attained unchallenged hegemony. The postmodernists allege that the traditional orientations of family, community, and politics have ceded to the febrile delusions of “hyperreality.” Today, we experience the reign of “simulacra”: media-generated copies, shorn of originals, that circulate autonomously. This attitude helps explain the enthusiasm with which Baudrillard greeted the September 11 attacks: a “dream come true.”³

De Maistre, Gobineau, Spengler, Baudrillard, Žižek. Now I know where I belong: among the proto-Fascist irrationalists. At least I am here also in a good company, with people like Nietzsche and Adorno.⁴ Wolin is at his lowest when he “observes” how I report on the 9/11 events as if I am describing just another mediatic spectacle, with no moral judgments implied. As a

3. Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton, N.J., 2004), p. 23. See Georg Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* (Berlin, 1953); trans. under the title *The Destruction of Reason*, by Peter Palmer (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1980).

4. The same line of attack was brought to its extreme by Jörg Lau in Germany, who, after the weird claim that I celebrate the 9/11 attack as the proper Lacanian political act, as the intervention in the Real which breaks the spell of capitalist ideological hallucinations, ends up by directly characterizing me as a pathological person; there is, in me, “etwas Verkommenes, geistig Verwahrlostes” (Jörg Lau, “Auf der Suche nach dem guten Terror: Über Slavoj Žižek,” *Merkur* 2 [Feb. 2003]: 162). Is it necessary to add that I was not able to answer these defamations in any German printed medium?

“proof,” Wolin quotes a line from my 9/11 book: “‘America got what it fantasized about’ . . . which, Žižek insinuates, . . . is merely another way of saying that *America got what it had coming*.”⁵ This line of argumentation is a simple empirical lie if there ever was one. First, I do not claim that the U.S. got what it deserved, but what it “fantasized about,” making it clear that when one gets what one fantasizes about, one ends up in a nightmare; second, and much more important, a little bit later, I explicitly reject the leftist *Schadenfreude*:

The American patriotic narrative—the innocence under siege, the surge of patriotic pride—is, of course, vain; however, is the Leftist narrative (with its *Schadenfreude*: the USA got what it deserved, what it had been doing to others for decades) really any better? The predominant reaction of European—but also American—Leftists was nothing less than scandalous: all imaginable stupidities were said and written, up to the “feminist” point that the WTC towers were two phallic symbols, waiting to be destroyed (“castrated”). Was there not something petty and miserable in the mathematics reminding us of Holocaust revisionism (what are the 3,000 dead against millions in Rwanda, Kongo, etc.)? And what about the fact that the CIA (co-)created Taliban and Bin Laden, financing and helping them to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan? Why was this fact quoted as an argument against attacking them? Would it not be much more logical to claim that it is precisely America’s duty to rid us of the monster it created? The moment we think in the terms of “Yes, the WTC collapse was a tragedy, but we should not fully solidarize with the victims, since this would mean supporting US imperialism,” the ethical catastrophe is already here: the only appropriate stance is unconditional solidarity with *all* victims. The ethical stance proper is here replaced by the moralizing mathematics of guilt and horror, which misses the key point: the terrifying death of each individual is absolute and incomparable. In short, let us conduct a simple mental experiment: if you detect in yourself any reluctance to empathize fully with the victims of the WTC collapse, if you feel the urge to qualify your empathy with “Yes, but what about the millions who suffer in Africa . . .,” you are not demonstrating your Third World sympathies, but merely the *mauvaise foi* which bears witness to your implicit patronizing racist attitude towards Third World victims.⁶

Perhaps, after finding myself, together with Derrida, in the same boat with those slandered by the moralizing hypocrites who effectively manipulate the

5. Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason*, p. 307.

6. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London, 2002), pp. 51–52.

memory of the 9/11 victims in order to score cheap “theoretical” points, the time has come to draw the balance of my relations with Derrida, in a belated gesture of solidarity. Having written many pages in which I struggle with Derrida’s work, now—when the Derridean fashion is fading away—it is perhaps the moment to honor his memory by pointing out the proximity of the topic of my work to what Derrida called *différance*, this neologism whose very notoriety obfuscates its unheard-of materialist potential.

In the last two decades of his thought, Derrida emphasized that, the more radical a deconstruction is, the more it has to rely on its inherent “undeconstructible” condition of deconstruction, the messianic promise of justice. This promise is the true Derridean object of *belief*, and the ultimate ethical axiom of Derrida is that this belief is irreducible, “undeconstructible.” Derrida can thus indulge in all kinds of paradoxes, claiming, among other things, in his reflections on prayer, not only that atheists also do pray but that, today, it is perhaps *only atheists who truly pray*. Precisely by refusing to address God as a positive entity, they silently address the pure messianic Otherness.⁷ It is here that one should emphasize the gap that separates Derrida from the Hegelian tradition:

It would be too easy to show that, measured by the failure to establish liberal democracy, the gap between fact and ideal essence does not show up only in . . . so-called primitive forms of government, theocracy, and military dictatorship. . . . But this failure and this gap also characterize, *a priori* and by definition, *all* democracies, including the oldest and most stable of so-called Western democracies. At stake here is the very concept of democracy as concept of a promise that can only arise in such a *diastema* (failure, inadequation, disjunction, disadjustment, being “out of joint”). That is why we always propose to speak of a democracy *to come*, not of a *future* democracy in the future present, not even of a regulating idea, in the Kantian sense, or of a utopia—at least to the extent that their inaccessibility would still retain the temporal form of a *future present*, of a future modality of the *living present*.⁸

Here we get the difference between Hegel and Derrida at its purest. Derrida accepts Hegel’s fundamental lesson that one cannot assert the innocent ideal against its distorted realization. This holds not only for democracy but also for religion. The gap that separates the ideal concept from its actuali-

7. See Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, trans. Samuel Weber et al., ed. Gil Anidjar (New York, 2002).

8. Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York, 1994), pp. 64–65.

zation is already inherent to the concept itself. In the same way that Derrida claims that “God already contradicts himself,” that any positive conceptual determination of the divine as a pure messianic promise already betrays it, one should also say that democracy already contradicts itself. It is also against this background that Derrida elaborates the mutual implication of religion and radical evil. Radical evil (politically: “totalitarianism”) emerges when religious faith or reason (or democracy itself) is posited in the mode of future present. However, against Hegel, Derrida insists on the irreducible excess in the ideal concept that cannot be reduced to the dialectic between ideal and its actualization: the messianic structure of “to come,” the excess of an abyss that cannot ever be actualized in its determinate content. Hegel’s own position is here more intricate than it may appear: his point is not that, through gradual dialectical progress, one can master the gap between concept and its actualization and achieve the concept’s full self-transparency (“Absolute Knowledge”). Rather, to put it in speculative terms, his point is to assert a “pure” contradiction that is no longer the contradiction between the “undeconstructible” pure Otherness and its failed actualizations/determinations, but the thoroughly immanent “contradiction” that precedes any Otherness. Actualizations and/or conceptual determinations are not traces of the “undeconstructible” divine Otherness, but *just traces* marking their in-between. Or, to put it in yet another way, in a kind of inverted phenomenological *epoche*, Derrida reduces Otherness to the “to come” of a pure potentiality, thoroughly deontologizing it, bracketing its positive content, so that all that remains is the specter of a promise; and what if the next step is to drop this minimal specter of Otherness itself, so that all that remains is the rupture, the gap as such that prevents entities from reaching their self-identity?⁹ Recall the old reproach of the French Communist philosophers to Sartre’s existentialism: Sartre threw away the entire content of the bourgeois subject, maintaining only its pure form, and the next step is to throw away this form itself—is it not that, *mutatis mutandis*, Derrida threw away all positive ontological content of messianism, retaining nothing but the pure form of the messianic promise, and the next step is to throw away this form itself? And, again, is this not also the passage from Judaism to Christianity? Judaism reduces the promise of another life to a pure Otherness, a messianic promise that will never become fully present and actualized (the Messiah is always “to come”), while Christianity, far from claiming full realization of the promise, accomplishes something far more

9. See Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion,’” trans. Weber, in *Religion*, trans. David Webb and Weber, ed. Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford, Calif., 1998), pp. 1–78.

uncanny: the Messiah *is here*, he *has* arrived, the final Event already took place, *and yet the gap* (*the gap that sustained the messianic promise*) *remains*. One is almost tempted to propose here a return to the earlier Derrida of *différance*: what if (as, among others, Ernesto Laclau has already proposed)¹⁰ Derrida's turn to the "postsecular" messianism is not a necessary outcome of his initial "deconstructionist" impetus? What if the idea of infinite messianic justice that operates in an indefinite suspension, always to come, as the "undeconstructible" horizon of deconstruction, already obfuscates the "pure" *différance*, the pure gap that differs an entity from itself? Is it not possible to think this pure in-between prior to any notion of messianic justice? Derrida acts as if the choice is between the positive ontoethics, the gesture of transcending the existing order towards another higher positive Order, and the pure promise of spectral Otherness. However, what if we drop this reference to Otherness altogether?

Perhaps this brings us to the limits of the Derridean deconstruction of metaphysics. Three thinkers as different as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida all conceive their own age as that of the critical turning point of metaphysics. In their (our) time, metaphysics has exhausted its potentials, and the thinker's duty is to prepare the ground for a new, postmetaphysical thinking. More generally, the entire Judeo-Christian history, up to our postmodernity, is determined by what one is tempted to call the Hölderlin paradigm, which was first articulated by Augustine in his *City of God*: "Where the danger is grows also what can save us" ("Wo aber Gefahr ist weachst das Rettende auch"). The present moment appears as the lowest point in the long process of historical decadence (the flight of Gods, alienation, and so on), but the danger of the catastrophic loss of the essential dimension of being-human also opens up the possibility of a reversal (*Kehre*)—proletarian revolution, the arrival of new gods (which, according to the late Heidegger, can only save us), and so on. Are we able to imagine a "pagan" *nonhistorical* universe, a universe thoroughly outside this paradigm, a universe in which (historical) time just flows with no teleological curvature, in which the idea of a dangerous moment of decision (Benjamin's *Jetzt-Zeit*), out of which a "bright future" which will redeem the past itself can emerge, is simply meaningless?

Although this Hölderlin paradigm is usually identified with Christianity, Christianity, at its most radical, nonetheless seems to give a unique twist to it: everything that has to happen *already happened*; there is nothing to wait for; we do not have to wait for the Event, for the arrival of the Messiah; the Messiah has already arrived; the Event already took place; we live in its af-

10. See Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London, 1995).

termath. This basic attitude of historical closure is also the message of Hegel, of his dictum that the owl of Minerva takes off in the twilight—and what is difficult, but crucial, to grasp is how this stance, far from condemning us to passive reflection, opens up the space for active intervention. And does the same not go for Kierkegaard who, in spite of his standard rumblings against the mass society of the “present age,” also does not seem to rely on the Hölderlin paradigm of historicity (and on the *hubris* in the self-perception of the thinker that such a view involves)—there is nothing really exceptional about our age; if anything, we live in ordinary and noninteresting times?

What, then, would be this *différance* that precedes the ethical commitment to the abyss of Otherness? On the southern side of the demilitarized zone in Korea, there is a unique visitor’s site: a theater building with a large screenlike window in front, opening up onto the North. The spectacle people observe when they take seats and look through the window is reality itself (or, rather, a kind of “desert of the real”): the barren demilitarized zone with walls, and so on, and, beyond, a glimpse of North Korea. (As if to comply with the fiction, North Korea has built in front of this theater a fake, a model village with beautiful houses; in the evening, the lights in all the houses are turned on at the same time, although nobody lives in them.) Is this not a pure case of the symbolic efficiency of the frame as such? A barren zone is given a fantasmatic status, elevated into a spectacle, solely by being enframed. Nothing substantially changes here; it is merely that, viewed through the frame, reality turns into *its own appearance*. A supreme case of such an ontological comedy occurred in December 2001 in Buenos Aires, when Argentinians took to the streets to protest against their government and, especially, against Cavallo, the economy minister. When the crowd gathered around Cavallo’s building, threatening to storm it, he escaped wearing a mask of himself (sold in disguise shops so that people could mock him by wearing his mask). It thus seems that at least Cavallo did learn something from the widely spread Lacanian movement in Argentina—the fact that *a thing is its own best mask*. What one encounters in tautology is thus pure difference, not the difference between the element and other elements, but how the element is different from itself.

The fundamental lesson of Hegel is that the key ontological problem is not that of reality but that of appearance: not, Are we condemned to the interminable play of appearances, or can we penetrate through their veil to the underlying true reality? but, How could—in the middle of flat, stupid reality, which is *just there*—something like appearance emerge? The minimal ontology is therefore that of the Möbius strip, of the curved space that is bent onto itself; all that has to intervene into the Real is an empty frame

so that the same things we saw “directly” before are now seen through the frame. A certain surplus-effect is thus generated, which cannot simply be cancelled through demystification. It is not enough to display the mechanism behind the frame; the stage-effect within the frame becomes autonomous. How is this possible? There is only one conclusion that can account for this gap: there is no “neutral” reality within which gaps occur, within which frames isolate domains of appearances. Every field of “reality” (every “world”) is always already enframed, seen through an invisible frame. However, the parallax of the two frames is not symmetrical, composed of two incompatible perspectives on the same *x*: there is an irreducible asymmetry between the two perspectives, a minimal reflexive twist. We do not have two perspectives; we have a perspective and what eludes it, and the other perspective fills in this void of what we could not see from the first perspective.

One of the minimal definitions of a modernist painting concerns the function of its frame. The frame of the painting in front of us is not its true frame; there is another, invisible frame, the frame implied by the structure of the painting, the frame that enfames our perception of the painting, and these two frames by definition never overlap. There is an invisible gap separating them. The pivotal content of the painting is not rendered in its visible part but is located in this dis-location of the two frames, in the gap that separates them. This dimension in-between-the-two-frames is obvious in Kazimir Malevich (what is his *Black Square on White Surface* if not the minimal marking of the distance between the two frames?), in Edward Hopper (recall his lone figures in office buildings or diners at night, where it seems as if the picture’s frame has to be redoubled with another window frame, or, in the portraits of his wife close to an open window, exposed to sun rays—remember the opposite excess of the painted content itself with regard to what we effectively see, as if we see only the fragment of the whole picture, the shot with a missing countershot), and, again, in Edvard Munch’s *Madonna* (the droplets of semen and the small fetuslike figure from *The Scream* squeezed in between the two frames). The frame is always already redoubled; the frame within “reality” is always linked to another frame enfaming “reality” itself.¹¹ Once introduced, the gap between reality and appearance is thus immediately complicated, reflected-into-itself; once we get a glimpse, through the Frame, of the Other Dimension, *reality itself turns into appearance*. In other words, things do not simply appear, they *appear to appear*. This is why the negation of a negation does not bring us to a simple flat affirmation. Once things (start to) appear, they not only

11. Derrida, of course, developed this motif in great detail in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago, 1987).

appear as what they are not, creating an illusion; they can also appear to just appear, concealing the fact that they *are* what they appear.

This logic of the “minimal difference,” of the constitutive noncoincidence of a thing with itself, provides the key to the central Hegelian category of concrete universality. Let us take a “mute” abstract universality that encompasses a set of elements all of which somehow subvert, do not fit, this universal frame. Is, in this case, the “true” concrete universal not this distance itself, the universalized exception? And, vice versa, is the element that directly fits the universal not the true exception? Universality is not the neutral container of particular formations, their common measure, the passive (back)ground on which the particulars fight their battles, but *this battle itself*, the struggle leading from one to another particular formation. Recall Krzysztof Kieślowski’s passage from documentary to fiction cinema. We do not have simply two species of cinema, documentary and fiction; fiction emerges out of the inherent limitation of the documentary. Kieślowski’s starting point was the same as the one of all cineasts in the socialist countries: the conspicuous gap between the drab social reality and the optimistic, bright image that pervaded the heavily censored official media. The first reaction to the fact that, in Poland, social reality was “unrepresented,” as Kieślowski put it, was, of course, the move towards a more adequate representation of the real life in all its drabness and ambiguity—in short, an authentic documentary approach:

There was a necessity, a need—which was very exciting for us—to describe the world. The Communist world had described how it should be and not how it really was. . . . If something hasn’t been described, then it doesn’t officially exist. So that if we start describing it, we bring it to life.¹²

Suffice it to simply mention *Hospital*, Kieślowski’s documentary from 1976, in which the camera follows orthopedic surgeons on a thirty-two-hour shift. Instruments fall apart in their hands, the electrical current keeps breaking, there are shortages of the most basic materials, but the doctors persevere hour after hour, and with humor. Then, however, the obverse experience sets in, best captured by the slogan used recently to publicize a Hollywood movie: “It’s so real, it must be fiction!” At the most radical level, one can render the Real of subjective experience only in the guise of a fiction. Towards the end of the documentary *First Love* (1974), in which the camera follows a young unmarried couple during the girl’s pregnancy, through their

12. Krzysztof Kieślowski, “Workers ’71,” *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*, ed. Danusia Stok (London, 1993), pp. 54–55.

wedding, and ending with the delivery of the baby, the father is shown holding the newborn in his hands and crying. Kieślowski reacted to the obscenity of such unwarranted probing into the other's intimacy with the "fright of real tears." His decision to pass from documentaries to fiction films was thus, at its most radical, an ethical one:

Not everything can be described. That's the documentary's great problem. It catches itself as if in its own trap. . . . If I'm making a film about love, I can't go into a bedroom if real people are making love there. . . . I noticed, when making documentaries, that the closer I wanted to get to an individual, the more objects which interested me shut themselves off.

That's probably why I changed to features. There's no problem there. I need a couple to make love in bed, that's fine. Of course, it might be difficult to find an actress who's willing to take off her bra, but then you just find one who is. . . . I can even buy some glycerine, put some drops in her eyes and the actress will cry. I managed to photograph some real tears several times. It's something completely different. But now I've got glycerine. I'm frightened of those real tears. In fact, I don't know whether I've got the right to photograph them. At such times I feel like somebody who's found himself in a realm which is, in fact, out of bounds. That's the main reason why I escaped from documentaries.¹³

The crucial intermediary in this passage from documentary to fiction is *Camera Buff* (1979), the portrait of a man who, because of his passion for the camera, loses his wife, child, and job—a fiction film about a documentary filmmaker. So there is a domain of fantasmatic intimacy that is marked by a No Trespassing! sign and should be approached only via fiction, if one is to avoid pornographic obscenity. This is the reason why the French Véronique in *The Double Life of Véronique* rejects the puppeteer: he wants to penetrate her too much, which is why, towards the film's end, after he tells her the story of her double life, she is deeply hurt and escapes to her father.¹⁴ "Concrete universality" is a name for this process through which fiction explodes *from within* documentary, that is, for the way the emergence of fiction cinema resolves the inherent deadlock of the documentary cinema. (Or, in philosophy, the point is not to conceive eternity as opposed to temporality, but eternity as it emerges from within our temporal experience—

13. Kieślowski, "Station," *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*, p. 86.

14. For a more detailed account of this passage, see Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (London, 2001), chap. 1.

or, in an even more radical way, as Schelling did it, to conceive time itself as a subspecies of eternity, as the resolution of a deadlock of eternity.)

This brings us to the very heart of the concept of concrete universality. It is not merely the universal core that animates a series of its particular forms of appearance; it persists in the very irreducible tension, noncoincidence, between these different levels. Hegel is usually perceived as an “essentialist historicist,” positing the spiritual “essence” of an epoch as a universal principle that expresses itself in a specific way in each domain of social life; say, the modern principle of subjectivity expresses itself in religion as Protestantism, in ethics as the subject’s moral autonomy, in politics as democratic equality, and so on. What such a view misses is what one is tempted to call temporal parallax. In the complex dialectic of historical phenomena, we encounter events or processes that, although they are the actualization of the same underlying “principle” at different levels, cannot occur at the same historical moment. Recall the old topic of the relationship between Protestantism, Kantian philosophical revolution, and the French political revolution. Rebecca Comay recently refuted the myth that Hegel’s critique of the French Revolution can be reduced to a variation of the “German” idea of how the Catholic French had to perform the violent “real” political revolution because they missed the historical moment of Reformation that already accomplished in the spiritual sphere the reconciliation between the spiritual Substance and the infinite subjectivity sought after in social reality by the revolutionaries. In this standard view, the German ethico-aesthetic attitude “sublates” revolutionary violence in the inner ethical order, thus enabling the replacement of the abstract “terrorist” revolutionary freedom by the concrete freedom of the state as an aesthetic organic whole. However, already the temporality of this relationship between the French political revolution and the German spiritual reformation is ambiguous. Three possible relations seem to overlap here. First, the idea of sublation points towards a succession; the French “immediate” unity of the Universal and the Subject is followed by its sublation, the German ethico-aesthetic mediation. Then, there is the idea of a simultaneous choice (or lack thereof), which made the two nations follow different paths: the Germans opted for Reformation, while the French remained within the Catholic universe and had thus to take the tortuous route of violent revolution. However, the empirical fact that Kant’s philosophical revolution precedes the French Revolution is also not just an insignificant accident; in the spectacle of revolutionary Terror, Kantian ethics itself encounters the ultimate consequence of its own “abstract” character, so that Kant’s philosophy should be read retroactively, through the prism of the French Revolution which enables us to perceive its limitations:

If [the Kantian moral view] presents itself as the narrative successor to the revolution, this is not because it logically fulfils or supersedes it: Kant's critical venture *phenomenologically* succeeds the revolution that it *chronologically*, of course, anticipates only insofar as his text becomes legible only retroactively through the event that in institutionalizing the incessant short circuit of freedom and cruelty puts the project of modernity to its most extreme trial. . . . The revolution itself inflicts on Kant's own text a kind of retroactive trauma.¹⁵

What this means is that the revolutionary Terror is a kind of obscene double of Kant's ethical thought: its destructive violence merely "externalizes" the terrorist potential of Kant's thought. This is why—and therein resides Hegel's central insight—it is hypocritical to reject the "excesses" of the French Revolution from the standpoint of the "German" moral view. All its terrifying features found their counterparts in, are contained and *repeated* within, the Kantian spiritual edifice (and the term *repetition* has to be given here the entire weight of Freud's *Wiederholungszwang*):

the purity of the moral will can be no antidote to the terrifying purity of revolutionary virtue. All the logical problems of absolute freedom are essentially carried over into Hegel's analysis of Kantian morality: the obsessiveness, the paranoia, the suspicion, the evaporation of objectivity, within the violent hyperbole of a subjectivity bent on reproducing itself within a world it must disavow.¹⁶

So, insofar as we are dealing here with a historical choice (between the "French" way of remaining within Catholicism, and thus being obliged to engage in the self-destructive revolutionary Terror, and the "German" way of Reformation), this choice involves exactly the same elementary dialectical paradox as the one, also from *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, between the two readings of "the Spirit is a bone," which Hegel illustrates by the phallic metaphor—the phallus as the organ of insemination or phallus as the organ of urination. Hegel's point is *not* that, in contrast to the vulgar empiricist mind that sees only urination, the proper speculative attitude has to choose insemination. The paradox is that the direct choice of insemination is the infallible way to miss it; it is not possible to choose directly the "true meaning." That is, one *has* to begin by making the "wrong" choice (of urination); the true speculative meaning emerges only through the repeated reading, as the aftereffect (or by-product) of the first, "wrong," reading. And the

15. Rebecca Comay, "Dead Right: Hegel and the Terror," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103 (Spring–Summer 2004): 392.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 393.

same goes for social life in which the direct choice of the concrete universality of a particular ethical life-world can only end in a regression to pre-modern organic society that denies the infinite right of subjectivity as the fundamental feature of modernity. Because the subject-citizen of a modern state can no longer accept his immersion in some particular social role that confers on him a determinate place within the organic social whole, the only way to the rational totality of the modern state leads through revolutionary Terror. One should ruthlessly tear up the constraints of premodern, organic, concrete universality, and fully assert the infinite right of subjectivity in its abstract negativity. In other words, the point of Hegel's analysis of the revolutionary Terror is not the rather obvious insight into how the revolutionary project involved the unilateral direct assertion of abstract Universal Reason and was as such doomed to perish in self-destructive fury, since it was unable to organize the transposition of its revolutionary energy into a concrete, stable, and differentiated social order. Hegel's point is rather the enigma of why, in spite of the fact that revolutionary Terror was a historical deadlock, we have to pass through it in order to arrive at the modern rational state. So, given again the choice between the Protestant "inner revolution" and the French violent political revolution, we see that Hegel is far from endorsing the German self-complacent superiority ("we made the right choice and can thus avoid revolutionary madness"); precisely because Germans *made the right choice at a wrong time* (*too early*: in the age of Reformation), they cannot gain access to the rational state that would be at the level of true political modernity. One should take another step here: it is not only that the universal Essence articulates itself in the discord between its particular forms of appearance; this discord is propelled by a gap that pertains to the very core of the universal Essence itself. In his book on modernity, Fredric Jameson refers to the Hegelian concrete universality in his concise critique of the recently fashionable theories of "alternate modernities":

How then can the ideologues of "modernity" in its current sense manage to distinguish their product—the information revolution, and globalized, free-market modernity—from the detestable older kind, without getting themselves involved in asking the kinds of serious political and economic, systemic questions that the concept of a postmodernity makes unavoidable? The answer is simple: you talk about "alternate" or "alternative" modernities. Everyone knows the formula by now: this means that there can be a modernity for everybody which is different from the standard or hegemonic Anglo-Saxon model. Whatever you dislike about the latter, including the subaltern position it leaves you in,

can be effaced by the reassuring and “cultural” notion that you can fashion your own modernity differently, so that there can be a Latin-American kind, or an Indian kind or an African kind, and so on. . . . But this is to overlook the other fundamental meaning of modernity which is that of a worldwide capitalism itself.¹⁷

The significance of this critique reaches far beyond the case of modernity; it concerns the fundamental limitation of the nominalist historicizing. The recourse to multitude (there is not one modernity with a fixed essence, there are multiple modernities, each of them irreducible to others) is false not because it does not recognize a unique fixed “essence” of modernity but because multiplication functions as the disavowal of the antagonism that inheres to the notion of modernity as such; the falsity of multiplication resides in the fact that it frees the universal notion of modernity from its antagonism, from the way it is embedded in the capitalist system, by relegating this aspect to just one of its historical subspecies. (One should not forget that the first half of the twentieth century already was marked by two big projects that perfectly fit this notion of alternate modernity: Fascism and Communism. Was not the basic idea of Fascism that of a modernity which provides an alternative to standard, Anglo-Saxon, liberal-capitalist modernity, of saving the core of capitalist modernity by casting away its “contingent,” Jewish-individualist-profiteering distortion? And was not the rapid industrialization of the USSR in the late 1920s and 1930s also an attempt at modernization different from the Western-capitalist one?) And, insofar as this inherent antagonism could be designated as a “castrative” dimension and, furthermore, insofar as, according to Freud, the disavowal of castration is represented as the multiplication of the phallus-representatives (a multitude of phalluses signals castration, the lack of the one), it is easy to conceive such a multiplication of modernities as a form of fetishist disavowal.

Jameson’s critique of the notion of alternate modernities thus provides a model of the properly *dialectical* relationship between the Universal and the Particular; the difference is not on the side of particular content (as the traditional *differentia specifica*) but on the side of the Universal. The Universal is not the encompassing container of the particular content, the peaceful medium background of the conflict of particularities; the Universal as such is the site of an unbearable antagonism, self-contradiction, and (the multitude of) its particular species are ultimately nothing but so many attempts to obfuscate, reconcile, master this antagonism. In other words, the Universal names the site of a problem-deadlock, of a burning question, and

17. Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essays on the Ontology of the Present* (London, 2002), p. 12.

the particulars are the attempted but failed answers to this problem. Say that the concept of state names a certain problem: how to contain the class antagonism of a society? All particular forms of state are so many (failed) attempts to propose a solution for this problem.

This is how one should answer the standard critique of Christian universalism: what this all-inclusive attitude (recall St. Paul's famous statement, "Where there is neither Greek nor Jew" [Col. 3:11]) involves is a thorough exclusion of those who do not accept Christianity. In other "particularistic" religions (and even in Islam, in spite of its global expansionism), there is a place for others, they are tolerated, even if they are condescendingly looked upon. The Christian motto, All Men Are Brothers, however, means also that those who are not my brothers *are not (even) men*. Christians usually praise themselves for overcoming the Jewish exclusivist notion of the Chosen People and encompassing the entirety of humanity—the catch here is that, in their very insistence that they are the Chosen People with the privileged direct link to God, Jews accept the humanity of the other people who celebrate their false gods, while Christian universalism tendentially excludes nonbelievers from the very universality of humankind.

Thus Christian universality is not the all-encompassing global medium where there is a place for all and everyone. It is rather the *struggling* universality, the site of a constant battle. Which battle, which division? To follow Paul: *not* the division between Law and sin, but between, on the one side, the *totality* of Law and sin as its supplement and, on the other side, the way of Love. Christian universality emerges at the symptomal point of those who are "part of no-part" of the global order. This is where the reproach of exclusion gets it wrong: Christian universality, far from excluding some subjects, *is formulated from the position of those excluded*, of those for whom there is no specific place within the existing order, although they belong to it; universality is strictly codependent with this lack of specific place/determination.

Or, to put it in a different way, the reproach to Paul's universalism misses the true site of universality. The universal dimension he opened up is not the "neither Greeks nor Jews but all Christians," which implicitly excludes non-Christians; *it is rather the difference Christians/non-Christians itself which, as a difference, is universal*; that is, it cuts across the entire social body, splitting, dividing from within every kind of ethnic identity: Greeks are cut into Christians and non-Christians, as well as Jews. The standard reproach thus in a way knocks on an open door. The whole point of the Paulinian notion of struggling universality *is* that true universality and partiality do not exclude each other and also that *universal Truth is only accessible from a partial, engaged, subjective position*.

For strategic reasons, my master signifier for the “minimal difference” is not *différance*, but *parallax*. The common definition of parallax is the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background) caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight. The philosophical twist to be added, of course, is that the observed difference is not simply subjective, because the same object is seen from two different stations or points of view. It is rather that, as Hegel would have put it, subject and object are inherently “mediated,” so that an “epistemological” shift in the subject’s point of view always reflects an “ontological” shift in the object itself. Or, to put it in Lacanese, the subject’s gaze is always already inscribed into the perceived object itself, in the guise of its “blind spot,” that which is in the object more than object itself, the point from which the object itself returns the gaze. Sure, the picture is in my eye, but me, I am also in the picture.¹⁸ The first part of this Lacanian statement designates subjectivization, the dependence of reality on its subjective constitution, while its second part provides a materialist supplement, reinscribing the subject into its own image in the guise of a stain (the objectivized splinter in its eye). Materialism is not the direct assertion of my inclusion into the objective reality (such an assertion presupposes that my position of enunciation is that of an external observer who can grasp the whole of reality); it rather resides in the reflexive twist by means of which I myself am included into the picture constituted by me. It is this reflexive short circuit, this necessary *redoubling* of myself as standing outside *and* inside my picture, that bears witness to my material existence. Materialism means that the reality I see is never whole—not because a large part of it eludes me but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which signals my inclusion in it.

Nowhere is this structure clearer than in the case of Lacan’s *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire. The same object can all of a sudden be “transubstantiated” into the object of my desire. What is to you just an ordinary object is for me the focus of my libidinal investment, and this shift is caused by some unfathomable *x*, a *je ne sais quoi* in the object that cannot ever be pinned down to any of its particular properties. *Objet a* is therefore close to the Kantian transcendental object because it stands for the unknown *x*, the noumenal core of the object beyond appearances, for what is “in you more than yourself.” *L’objet petit a* can thus be defined as a pure parallax object: not only do its contours change with the shift of the subject; *it only exists—its presence can only be discerned—when the landscape is viewed from a certain*

18. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York, 1979), p. 63.

perspective. More precisely, the object *a* is the very *cause* of the parallax gap, that unfathomable *x* which forever eludes the symbolic grasp and thus causes the multiplicity of symbolic perspectives. The paradox here is a very precise one: it is at the very point at which a pure difference emerges—a difference that is no longer a difference between two positively existing objects, but a minimal difference that divides one and the same object from itself—that this difference as such immediately coincides with an unfathomable object. In contrast to a mere difference between objects, *the pure difference is itself an object*. The parallax gap, the minimal difference, is a pure difference that cannot be grounded in positive substantial properties. In Henry James's "The Real Thing," the painter-narrator agrees to hire the impoverished "true" aristocrats Major and Mrs. Monarch as models for his illustrations of a deluxe book. However, although they are the "real thing," their drawings appear fake, so the painter must rely more and more on a vulgar couple, Miss Churm and the lithe Italian Oronte, whose imitation of high-class poses works much better. Is this not the unfathomable "minimal difference" at its purest?

Jacques-Alain Miller recently proposed a Benjaminian distinction between "constituted anxiety" and "constituent anxiety," which is crucial with regard to the shift from desire to drive. While the first one designated the standard notion of the terrifying and fascinating abyss of anxiety that haunts us, its infernal circle that threatens to draw us in, the second one stands for the "pure" confrontation with *objet petit a* as constituted in its very loss.¹⁹ Miller is right to emphasize here two features: the difference that separates constituted from constituent anxiety concerns the status of the object with regard to fantasy. In a case of constituted anxiety, the object dwells within the confines of a fantasy, while we only get the constituent anxiety when the subject "traverses the fantasy" and confronts the void, the gap, filled up by the fantasmatic object. As Mallarmé put it in the famous parenthetical lines of his so-called sonnet *en -yx*, *objet a* is "ce seul objet dont le Neant s'honore" ("this sole object with which Nothing is honored").

Clear and convincing as it is, Miller's formula misses the true paradox or, rather, ambiguity of *objet a*. When he defines *objet a* as the object that overlaps with its loss, which emerges at the very moment of its loss (so that all its fantasmatic incarnations, from breasts to voice and gaze, are metonymic figurations of the void, of nothing), he remains within the horizon of *desire*. The true object-cause of desire is the void filled in by its fantasmatic incarnations. While, as Lacan emphasizes, *objet a* is also the object of drive, the relationship is here thoroughly different: although, in both cases, the link between object and loss is crucial, in the case of *objet a* as the object-

19. See Miller, "Angoisse constituée, angoisse constituante," www.lacan.com/jamsem2.html

cause of *desire*, we have an object that is originally lost, that coincides with its own loss, that emerges as lost; in the case of *objet a* as the object of drive, the “object” is *directly the loss itself*. In the shift from desire to drive, we pass from the *lost object* to *loss itself as an object*. That is to say, the weird movement called drive is not driven by the “impossible” quest for the lost object; it is a *push to directly enact the “loss”—the gap, cut, distance—itsself*. There is thus a *double* distinction to be drawn here: not only between *objet a* in its fantasmatic and postfantasmatic status but also, within this postfantasmatic domain itself, between the lost object-cause of desire and the object-loss of drive.

This is why one should not confuse the death drive with the so-called nirvana principle, the thrust towards destruction or self-obliteration; the Freudian death drive has nothing whatsoever to do with the craving for self-annihilation, for the return to the inorganic absence of any life tension. It is, on the contrary, the very opposite of dying—a name for the “undead” eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain. The paradox of the Freudian death drive is therefore that it is Freud’s name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis, for an uncanny *excess* of life, for an “undead” urge that persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption. The ultimate lesson of psychoanalysis is that human life is never just life. Humans are not simply alive; they are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus that sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things.

What this means is that it is wrong to claim that the “pure” death drive would have been the impossible “total” will to (self)-destruction, the ecstatic self-annihilation in which the subject would have rejoined the fullness of the maternal Thing but that this will is not realizable, that it gets blocked, stuck to a “partial object.” Such a notion retranslates death drive into the terms of desire and its lost object. It is in desire that the positive object is a metonymic stand-in for the void of the impossible Thing; it is in desire that the aspiration to fullness is transferred to partial objects. This is what Lacan called the metonymy of desire. One has to be very precise here if we are not to miss Lacan’s point (and thereby confuse desire and drive): drive is not an infinite longing for the Thing that gets fixated onto a partial object; a drive *is* this fixation itself in which resides the “death” dimension of every drive. A drive is not a universal thrust (towards the incestuous Thing) braked and broken up. It *is* this brake itself, a brake on instinct, its “stuckness,” as Eric Santner would have put it.²⁰ The elementary matrix of drive

20. See Eric Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago, 2001).

is *not* that of transcending all particular objects towards the void of the Thing (which is then accessible only in its metonymic stand-in) but that of our libido getting “stuck” onto a particular object, condemned to circulate around it forever.

The basic paradox here is that the specifically human dimension—drive as opposed to instinct—emerges precisely when what was originally a mere by-product is elevated into an autonomous aim. Man is not more “reflexive”; on the contrary, man perceives as a direct goal what, for an animal, has no intrinsic value. In short, the zero-degree of being human is not a further “mediation” of animal activity, its reinscription as a subordinated moment of a higher totality (say, we eat and procreate in order to develop higher spiritual potentials), but the radical narrowing of focus, the elevation of a minor activity into an end in itself. We become humans when we get caught in a closed, self-propelling loop of repeating the same gesture and finding satisfaction in it. We all recall one of the archetypal scenes from cartoons: while dancing, the cat jumps up into the air and turns around its own axis; however, instead of falling back down towards the earth’s surface in accordance with the normal laws of gravity, it remains for some time suspended in the air, turning around in the levitated position as if caught in a loop of time, repeating the same circular movement on and on. (One also finds the same image in some musical comedies that make use of the elements of slapstick; when a dancer turns around in the air, he or she remains up there a little bit too long, as if, for a short period of time, he or she had succeeded in suspending the law of gravity. And, in essence, is such an effect not the ultimate goal of the art of dancing?) In such moments, the “normal” run of things, the “normal” process of being caught in the imbecilic inertia of material reality, is for a brief moment suspended; we enter the magical domain of suspended animation, of a kind of ethereal rotation that, as it were, sustains itself, hanging in the air like Baron Munchhausen who raised himself from the swamp by grabbing his own hair and pulling himself up. This rotary movement, in which the liberal progress of time is suspended in a repetitive loop, is *drive* at its most elementary. This, again, is “humanization” at its zero-level: this self-propelling loop that suspends or disrupts linear temporal enchainment.

Consequently, the concept of drive makes the alternatives “either burned by the Thing or maintaining a distance” false. In a drive, the thing itself is a circulation around the void (or, rather, hole, not void). To put it even more pointedly, the object of drive is not related to the Thing as a filler of its void; drive is literally a countermovement to desire. It does not strive towards impossible fullness and, being forced to renounce it, get stuck onto a partial object as its remainder. Drive is quite literally *the very “drive” to break the*

all of the continuity in which we are embedded, to introduce a radical imbalance into it, and the difference between drive and desire is precisely that, in desire, this cut, this fixation onto a partial object, is as it were “transcendentalized,” transposed into a stand-in for the void of the Thing.

This is also how one should read Lacan’s thesis on the satisfaction of drives. A drive does not bring satisfaction because its object is a stand-in for the Thing but because a drive as it were turns failure into triumph. In it, the very failure to reach its goal, the repetition of this failure, the endless circulation around the object, generates a satisfaction of its own. As Lacan put it, the true aim of a drive is not to reach its goal but to circulate endlessly around it. In the well-known vulgar joke about a fool having intercourse for the first time, the girl has to tell him exactly what to do: “See this hole between my legs? Put it in here. Now push it deep. Now pull it out. Push it in, pull it out, push it in, pull it out . . .” “Now wait a minute,” the fool interrupts her, “make up your mind! In or out?” What the fool misses is precisely the structure of a drive that gets its satisfaction from the indecision itself, from repeated oscillation.

And, because we end with a dirty joke, we should perhaps conclude in a lighter mode. In the documentary *Derrida*, in answer to the question what he would ask some great classic philosopher if he were to meet him, Derrida immediately snaps back: “About his sex life.” Here, perhaps, one should supplement Derrida. In directly asking this question, one would probably get a common answer; the thing to look for would be rather the *theory* about sexuality at the level of their respective philosophies. Perhaps the ultimate philosophical fantasy would be here the discovery of a manuscript in which Hegel, the systematician *par excellence*, develops a system of sexuality, of sexual practices contradicting, inverting, sublating each other, deducing all (straight and “perverse”) forms from the basic deadlock.²¹ As in Hegel’s

21. Along the same lines, one can imagine how newly discovered notes on sexuality by Heidegger might look. The essence of woman is *sich anzustellen*, to ex-pose oneself, *sich Anzubieten*, to propose/offer oneself: here I am, pick me up, catch me, take me. In contrast to this stance of provocative exposure, *Herausforderung*, a man is boastfully putting himself up, parading before woman’s eyes: his stance is that of *Sichaufstellen*, in the sense of *Sichaufspielen*, *Sichbruesten*. A man *stellt sich auf*, a woman *stellt sich an*. And, from here, one can imagine a Heideggerian erotic of disclosure/withdrawal: Being provokes us in its very disclosure, it provokes us through the withdrawal in the heart of its disclosure. The essence of *Sichanstellen* is the *Sichanstellen* of the essence itself, and the destiny of man is to screw things up, to fail in his attempt to respond properly to this provocative exposure. So why not take the risk of enacting Heidegger’s rhetorics of reversal (“the essence of truth is the truth of the essence itself,” and so on) also apropos the notion of *Abort* (toilet). The essence of abort is the *Ab-Ort* (dis-placing) of the essence itself. Along the same lines, the *Er-Örterung* (explaining, literally, locating at its proper place) of a poem is simultaneously its *Ab-Örterung* (flushing it down the toilet). And what about abortion itself? What if the essence of abortion (*Ab-Treibung*, *Fehl-Geburt*) is nothing ontic, but the abortiveness of the essence itself?

Encyclopedia, we would first get the deduction of the main “subjective attitudes towards sex” (animal coupling, pure excessive lust, expression of human love, metaphysical passion), followed by the proper “system of sexuality,” organized, as one would expect it from Hegel, into a sequence of triads. The starting point is here copulation *a tergo*, sexual act in its animal, presubjective immediacy; we then pass to its immediate (abstract) negation—masturbation—in which lone self-excitation is supplemented by fantasizing. (Jean Laplanche has shown how masturbation-with-fantasy is the elementary, zero-level form of the properly human drive as opposed to the animal instinct.) What follows is the synthesis of the two: sexual act proper in a missionary position, in which the face-to-face contact guarantees that the full bodily contact (penetration) remains supplemented by fantasizing. What this means is that the “normal” human sexual act has the structure of double masturbation; each participant is masturbating with a real partner. However, the gap between the raw reality of copulation and its fantastic supplement can no longer be closed; all variations and displacements of sexual practices that follow are so many desperate attempts to restore the balance of the two. The dialectical “progress” thus first goes through a series of variations with regard to the relationship between face, sexual organs, and other bodily parts and the modes of their respective uses; the organ remains phallus, but the opening to be penetrated changes (anus, mouth). Then, in a kind of “negation of negation,” not only the object to be penetrated changes but the totality of the person who is the partner passes into its opposite (homosexuality). In a further development, the goal itself is no longer orgasm (fetishism). Fist-fucking introduces into this series an impossible synthesis of the hand (the organ of instrumental activity, of hard work) and vagina (the organ of “spontaneous” passive generation). The fist (focus of purposeful work, the hand as the most tightly controlled and trained part of our body) replaces phallus (the organ out of our conscious control par excellence, since its erection comes and goes independently of our will) in a kind of correlate to somebody who approaches a state that should emerge “spontaneously” in a well-planned, instrumental way (say, a poet who constructs his poems in a “rational” way is a poetic fist-fucker). There are, of course, further variations here that call for their speculative deduction: in masculine masturbation, vagina, the ultimate passive organ, is substituted by hand, the ultimate active organ making the phallus itself passive. Furthermore, when the phallus penetrates the anus, we obtain the correct insight into the speculative identity of excretion and insemination, the highest and the lowest. There is no time to explore here further variations to be deduced: doing it with an animal, with a machine or doll; doing it with many partners; sadism and masochism, and so on. The main point

is that the very “progress” from one to another form is motivated by the structural imbalance of sexual relationship (Lacan’s *il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel*), which condemns any sexual practice to eternal oscillation between the “spontaneous” pathos of self-obliteration and the logic of external ritual (following the rules). The final outcome is thus that sexuality is *the* domain of “spurious infinity” whose logic, brought to an extreme, cannot but engender tasteless excesses like those of “spermathon” contests: how many men can a woman bring to orgasm in an hour, and so on. For a true philosopher, there are more interesting things in the world than sex.

What accounts for the weird (if not, for some at least, tasteless) character of this exercise is not the reference to sexual practices as such but the short circuit between two spheres that are usually perceived as incompatible, as moving at ontologically different levels, that of sublime philosophical speculation and that of the details of sexual practices. Even if there is nothing that, a priori, prohibits the application of the Hegelian conceptual machinery to sexual practices, it nonetheless appears that the entire exercise is somehow meaningless, a (rather bad) joke. The unpleasant, weird effect of such short circuits signals that they play a symptomatic role in our symbolic universes. They render palpable the implicit, tacit prohibitions on which these universes rely. One practices concrete universality by way of confronting a universality with its “unbearable” example. Of course, Hegelian dialectics can be used to analyze anything; nonetheless, one is tacitly summoned not to practice it on sexuality, as if this move would make ridiculous the very notion of dialectical analysis. Of course, all people are equal, but, nonetheless, one is tacitly summoned to treat some of them as “less equal,” as if asserting their full equality would undermine the very notion of equality.

This, then, is the nontrivial sense in which all of us are slandered, by neoconservatives as well as by the newly appointed guardians of universal reason, as those who undermine the very ethical fundamentals of our societies. And this slandered group, including some who are not even on speaking terms, from Gilles Deleuze to Alain Badiou, are engaged in the same task of *practicing concrete universality*.