

Slavoj Žižek

The Real and Its Vicissitudes

Return of the Living Dead

Why is the Lacanian matheme for the drive $S \diamond D$? The first answer is of course clear. Drives are by definition "partial." They are always tied to some specific, separated parts of the body's surface: the so-called "erogenous zones." Contrary to superficial impression, they are not biologically determined, but result from the signifying parcelling of the body. Certain parts of the body's surface are privileged in functioning as a point towards which enjoyment converges, not because of their anatomical position, but because of the way the body is caught in the symbolic network. This symbolic dimension is designated in the matheme ($S \diamond D$) by the letter D; i.e., the symbolic demand. The final proof of it consists in a phenomenon often encountered in hysterical symptoms. A part of the body which usually has no erogenous value starts to function as an erogenous zone (neck, nose, etc.). The change in the symbolic structure causes a displacement of the erogenous zones.

However, this classic, standard explanation is insufficient. What escapes it is the intimate relationship between drive and demand. That is to say, one of the possible definitions of the drive is precisely a demand which is not caught in the dialectic of desire and which resists dialecticization. Demand almost always implies a certain dialectical mediation: we demand something, but what we are really aiming at through this demand is something else, sometimes even the very refusal of the demand in its literality - apropos of every demand, a question necessarily rises: "You demand this, but what do you really want from it?" Drive, on the contrary, persists in a certain demand. It is an agency of "mechanical" insistence which cannot be caught in dialectical trickery: I demand something and I persist in it to the end of the chapter.

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The interest of this distinction for us is that it immediately concerns the problem of the "second death." The apparitions which emerge in the domain "between the two deaths" as a rule, address us, common mortals, with some unconditional demand. And it is for this reason that they incarnate pure drive without desire. Let us begin with Antigone who, according to Lacan, irradiates just such a sublime beauty from the very moment she finds herself in the domain between the two deaths, "dead when still alive." What characterizes her innermost posture is her insistence on an unconditional demand on which she will not give way, a demand concerning the interment of her brother. It is the same with the ghost of Hamlet's father who returns from beyond with the demand addressed to Hamlet that his infamous death be avenged.

This connection between drive, seen as an unconditional demand, and the domain between the two deaths is also omnipresent in contemporary popular culture. In the movie *Terminator*, Arnold Schwarzenegger plays a cyborg who returns to contemporary Los Angeles from the future with a mission to kill the mother of a future leader. The horror of this figure consists precisely in the fact that it functions as a programmed automaton who still persists in his demand even when all that remains of him is a metallic legless skeleton. He still pursues his victim with no trace of compromise or hesitation, embodying the drive in its purest mechanical sense, without any trace of desire.¹ In two other interesting movies we encounter two versions of the same motive, a comical one and a pathetic-tragic one. In the first story of George Romero's omnibus *Creepshow* (screenplay by Stephen King), a family is gathered around the table for dinner to celebrate the anniversary of the father's death. Years ago, his sister had killed him at his birthday party by a blow to his head after he had endlessly annoyed all present with the demand "Daddy wants his cake!" Suddenly, a strange noise is heard from the family cemetery behind the house. The dead father climbs from his grave, kills his murderous sister, cuts off the head of his wife, puts it on the tray, smears it with cream, decorates it with candles and mumbles contentedly: "Daddy got his cake!" This demand persists beyond the grave, until satisfied.² The cult-movie *Robocop*, a futuristic story about a policeman shot to death and then revived after all parts of his body have been replaced by artificial substitutes, introduces a more tragic note. The hero finds himself literally "between the two deaths" clinically dead and at the same time provided with a new, mechanical body. He starts to remember fragments from his previous

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"human" life. He undergoes a process of re-subjectivation, and changes back gradually from incarnating pure drive to being a being of desire.³

This wealth of examples from popular culture should not come as a surprise. If there is a phenomenon which fully deserves the title of "fundamental fantasy of contemporary mass culture," then it is precisely the motif of the "living dead," of the return of the living dead: the motif of a person who does not want to stay dead, but returns again and again from beyond, posing a threat to those alive. The unsurpassed archetype of along series, from the psychotic killer in *Halloween* to Jason in *Friday the 13th*, is still George Romero's *The Night of the Living Dead* where the "undead" are not portrayed as embodiments of pure Evil, of a simple drive to kill or revenge, but as sufferers, pursuing their victims with an awkward persistence, colored by a kind of infinite sadness (as in Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu*, in which the vampire is not a simple machinery of Evil with a cynical smile on his lips, but a melancholic sufferer longing for salvation). Apropos of this phenomenon, let us ask a naive and elementary question: why do the dead return? The answer offered by Lacan is the same as that found in popular culture: *because they were not properly buried*, i.e. because there was something amiss with their obsequies. The return of the dead is a sign of a disturbance in the symbolic rite, in the process of symbolization. The dead return as collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt. This is the basic lesson, drawn by Lacan from *Antigone* and *Hamlet*: in both plays, the plot involves some unfulfilled obsequies (the prohibition to bury Polineikos's body properly; the "unsettled accounts" of Hamlet's father). In other words, the place occupied by the "living dead" is - as is already indicated by the paradox of the designation - the place "between the two deaths"; that is, between biological death and symbolic death, where symbolic accounts are settled. The return of the living dead materializes a certain symbolic debt that persists beyond physical expiry

It is already a commonplace to state that the symbolization as such equates symbolic murder: when we speak about a thing, its reality is suspended, parenthesized. Even if the thing is "still here," we, in a way, "treat it as if it were already dead." It is precisely for this reason that the

funeral rite exemplifies symbolization in its purest. Through it, the deceased is inscribed into the text of symbolic tradition. They are assured that, in spite of passing away, they will "continue to live" in the memory of the community. The "return of the living dead" is, on the other hand, the exact

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reverse of the proper funeral rite. This latter implies by definition a certain reconciliation, an acceptance of the loss, while the dead return when they cannot find their proper place in the text of Tradition. The two great traumatic events of the "holocaust" and the "gulag" are exemplary cases of how the dead return in the twentieth century. The shadows of their victims will continue to chase us as "living dead" until we give them a decent burial by integrating these traumatizations into our historical memory. The same goes for the crime par excellence, for the "primordial crime" which founded history itself, the murder of the "primal father" (re)constructed by Freud in his *Totem and Taboo*.⁴ The murder of the father is integrated into the symbolic universe insofar as the dead father begins to reign as the symbolic agency of the Name-of-the-Father. This transformation, this integration, however, never occurs without a remainder. There is always a certain left-over that returns in the form of the obscene and revengeful figure of the Father-Enjoyment, of this figure split between cruel revenge and crazy laughter, like, for example, the famous Freddie from *Nightmare on Elm Street*.

Beyond Pet Sematary

The Oedipus myth and the myth of the primal father from *Totem and Taboo* are usually apprehended as two versions of the same myth; i.e., the myth of the primal father is conceived as a philogenetic projection of the Oedipus myth (as the elementary articulation of the subject's ontogenesis) into the mythic, pre-historical past. However, a close look at these two myths shows clearly that they are deeply asymmetrical, even opposed.⁵ The Oedipus myth is based on the premise that the father is the agency of prohibition who denies us access to enjoyment (i.e. incest, sexual relationship with mother), with the underlying implication that parricide would remove this obstacle and enable us to enjoy by appropriating the privileged object (mother). The message sent by the myth of the primal father is almost its exact opposite. The result of the parricide is not that, once this obstacle is removed, the enjoyment is finally within our reach, but quite the contrary - that the dead father is stronger than the living father. After the parricide, he begins to reign as the Name-of-the-Father, as the agency of the symbolic Law which irrevocably precludes access to the forbidden fruit of enjoyment.

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But from where does the necessity of this redoubling come? In the Oedipus myth, the prohibition of enjoyment still functions as an ultimately external impediment, leaving the possibility open that without this obstacle we would be able to enjoy fully. Enjoyment is, however, already in itself impossible. This is one of the commonplaces of Lacanian theory: that access to enjoyment is blocked to the being-of-language as such. And the figure of the father only saves us from this deadlock by bestowing on this immanent *impossibility* the form of symbolic *interdiction*. Thus, the myth of the primal father in *Totem and Taboo* is complementary - or, more precisely, supplementary - to the Oedipus myth in that the primal father embodies this impossible enjoyment. The primal father myth "gives blood and flesh" to the Oedipus myth in the obscene figure of the Father-Enjoyment; i.e. in the very figure which assumes the role of the agency of prohibition, in the very place from which the prohibition is enunciated in the Oedipus myth. The illusion in the *Totem and Taboo* myth is that there was at least one subject (the primal father possessing all women) who was able to enjoy fully. As such, the figure of Father-Enjoyment is nothing but a neurotic fantasy overlooking the fact that the father has been dead from the very start; i.e. that he never was alive, that he lived only insofar as he did not know that he was already dead. The lesson to be drawn from this is that "getting rid of the superego pressure" in the psychoanalytic process is definitely not to be conceived of as replacing its supposedly "irrational," "counterproductive," "rigid" pressure by learning to rationally accept renunciations, laws and rules. The whole point of it is that we must experience how the lost part of enjoyment is lost from the very beginning because of its immanent impossibility. It is not concentrated "somewhere else," in the place from where the agency of prohibition speaks.

At the same time, we could clearly locate the weak point of the Deleuzian polemics against Lacan's "Oedipism."⁶ What Deleuze and Guattari fail to take into account is that the greatest anti-Oedipus is *Oedipus itself*, its obscene reverse: the Oedipal father a father reigning as his Name, as the agency of the symbolic Law is necessarily redoubled in itself. It can exert its authority only by relying on the super-ego figure of the Father-Enjoyment. It is precisely this dependence of the Oedipal father - the agency of symbolic Law guaranteeing order and reconciliation - on the perverse figure of Father-Enjoyment which explains why Lacan prefers to write "perversion" as "pere-version," i.e. the version of

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the father. Far from acting only as symbolic agency, restraining pre-Oedipal "polymorphous perversity," subjugating it to the genital Law, the most radical perversion is the "version of the father" itself.

In this respect, Stephen King's *Pet Sematary*, perhaps the definitive novel about the "return of the living dead," is of special interest to us insofar as it presents a kind of inversion of the motif of the dead father returning as the obscene ghost-figure. In this story, Louis Creed, a young physician, together with his wife Rachel, two small kids, six-year-old Ellie and two-year-old Gage, and the cat Church, move to a small town in Maine where he will manage the university infirmary. They rent a big, comfortable house near a highway, along which trucks continually rush. Soon after their arrival, Jud Crandall, their elderly neighbour, takes them to visit the "Pet Sematary" in the woods behind their house, a cemetery for the dogs and cats run over by the trucks on the highway. On Creed's first day at work, a student dies in his arms. Even though already dead, the student suddenly awakes, rises, and tells Louis in a clear voice: "Don't go beyond, no matter how much you feel you need to. The barrier was not made to be broken." The place designated by this warning is precisely the place "between the two deaths," the forbidden domain of the Thing.

The barrier not to be broken is none other than the barrier beyond which Antigone is drawn, the forbidden boundary-domain where "being insists in suffering" (like the living dead in Romero's film), the barrier which is designated, in the text of *Antigone*, by the Greek term *ate*, perdition, devastation: "Beyond *ate* we could stay only for a brief period of time, and it is there that Antigone strives to go."⁷ In *Pet Sematary* the sybillic

warning of the dead student soon acquires meaning. Creed himself is irresistibly drawn into this space beyond the barrier. A few days later, Church is killed by a passing truck. Aware of the pain that the cat's death will cause little Ellie, Jud initiates Creed into the secret that lies beyond the Pet Sematary, an ancient Indian burial ground inhabited by a malevolent spirit, Wendigo. When Creed buries the cat there, it returns the very next day, stinking, loathsome, but alive, a living dead; the same as usual, yet totally different, as if inhabited by an evil spirit. When two-year old Gage is killed by another passing truck, Creed repeats the same procedure. Gage returns as a monster-child, killing first old Jud and then his own mother, until he is finally put to death by his father. Yet Creed returns again to the burial ground with the body of his wife, convinced that this time things will turn

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out all right. As the novel ends, he sits alone in his kitchen, playing patience and waiting for her return.

Pet Sematary is, then, a kind of perverted *Antigone*. Creed represents the consequent logic of the modern, Faustian hero. Antigone sacrifices herself so that her brother will get a decent burial; i.e. so that his death will be accompanied by a proper funeral rite enabling him to enjoy peace after death. Creed, so to speak, deliberately sabotages normal burial, by intervening in a perverted burial rite which, instead of leaving the dead to their eternal rest, provokes their return as living dead. Creed's love for his son is so boundless that it extends even beyond the barrier of *ate*, into the domain of perdition. He is willing to risk eternal damnation. He is prepared to accept even the risk that his son will return as a murderous monster, just to have him back. It is as if only with this figure of Creed, with his monstrous act, do the famous lines from *Antigone* "There are a lot of dreadful-excessive things in the world, but none is more dreadful-excessive than man" acquire retroactively their final meaning. Apropos of *Antigone*, Lacan did not remark in vain that Sophocles gave us a kind of critique of humanism *avant la lettre*, outlining in advance, before its arrival, its self-destructive dimension.⁸

The Answer of the Real

The role of the Lacanian Real is, however, radically ambiguous; true, it erupts in the form of a traumatic return, derailing the balance of our daily lives, but at the same time it serves as a support of this very balance. What would our daily life be without some support in an *answer of the real*? The crucial point here is that the real which serves as a support of our symbolic reality must appear to be *found* and not *produced*. To clarify it, let us turn to a Ruth Rendell novel, *The Tree of Hands*. The French habit of changing the titles of translated novels as a rule produces catastrophic results; in the case of Ruth Rendell's *The Tree of Hands*, this rule has fortunately found its exception. *Un enfant pour l'autre*, (*One Child for Another*) designates accurately the peculiarity of this macabre story of a young mother whose little son dies suddenly because of a mortal disease. To compensate for the loss, her own crazy mother steals another child of the same age and offers him to her distressed daughter as a substitute. After a series of interlaced intrigues and coincidences, the novel comes to a rather morbid happy end: the young mother consents to the substitution and accepts "one child for another."

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At first sight, Ruth Rendell simply provides an elementary lesson on the Freudian notion of the drive here: its object is ultimately indifferent and arbitrary, even in the case of the very embodiment of a "natural" and "authentic" relationship such as that between a mother and her child. The object-child proves interchangeable. Rendell's crucial accent lies elsewhere, however. If an object is to take its place in the libidinal space, its arbitrary character must remain concealed. The subject cannot say to himself: "Since the object is arbitrary, I can choose whatever I want as the object of my drive." The object must appear *found* as a little piece of the real that offers itself as a support and point of reference of the drive's circular movement. In Rendell's novel, the mother only accepts the other child when she can say to herself: "I really cannot do anything. If I refuse him now, things will get even more complicated. The child has practically been imposed on me" Consequently, we could say that *The Tree of Hands* goes in the opposite direction of Brechtian drama. The novel's design is not to render a familiar situation strange and amazing, but to demonstrate how, step by step, we are prepared to accept a bizarre and morbid situation as familiar. This procedure seems far more subversive than the usual Brechtian one.

Herein, the fundamental lesson of Lacan consists. It is true that any object can occupy the empty place of the Thing, but it can do so only by means of the illusion that it was always already there, i.e., that it was not put there by us but *found there as an "answer of the real."* Although any object can function as the object-cause of desire, insofar as the power of fascination it exerts is not its immediate property but results from the place it occupies in the structure, we must by structural necessity fall prey to the illusion that the power of fascination belongs to the object as such. This structural necessity enables us to approach the classic Pascalian-Marxian description of the logic of "fetishistic inversion" in interpersonal relationships from a new perspective. The subjects think they treat a certain person as a king because he is already in himself a king, while in reality this person is king only insofar as the subjects treat him like one. Pascal and Marx stress the fact that the king's charisma is not an immediate property of the person-king, but a "reflexive determination" of the comportment of his subjects. To use the terms of speech-act-theory, the king is a performative effect of his subjects' symbolic ritual. The crucial point is, however, that a positive, necessary condition for this performative effect to take place is that the king's charisma be experienced precisely as an immediate property of the person-king. The moment the subjects take cogni-

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zance of the fact that the king's charisma is a performative effect of their symbolic ritual, this very effect is aborted. In other words, if we want to "subtract" the fetishistic inversion and produce the performative effect in its pure form, the performative power itself fades away.

The real enigma of the fetishistic inversion is not, then, the performative force of the ritual behind the surface-illusion of the king's charisma as something that persists independently of this ritual, but rather the reverse question: why can the performative effect take place only on condition that it be overlooked? Why does the disclosure of the performative mechanism necessarily ruin its effect? Why, to paraphrase Hamlet, is the king (also) a thing? Why must the symbolic mechanism be hooked on a "thing," on some little piece of the real? The Lacanian answer is, because of its

own inconsistency: i. e. because the symbolic field is in itself always already barred, crippled, porous, structured around some extimate kernel, around some impossibility. The function of the "little piece of the real" is precisely to fill out the place of this void that gaps in the very heart of the symbolic order.

The psychotic dimension of this "answer of the real" can be clearly grasped via its opposition to another kind of "answer of the real": the contingent coincidence which takes us by surprise and produces a vertiginous shock. The first associations that come to mind here are, of course, mythical cases, such as that of a politician whose platform breaks down exactly after he proclaims pathetically: "Let this platform break down if I have spoken a single lie!" Behind such cases is the idea that if we lie and deceive too much, at a certain point the real itself intervenes to stop it, like the statue of the Commendatore who comes to punish don Giovanni, this real which surprisingly responds to the insolent dinner-invitation from don Giovanni by nodding its assent. Indeed, the ethical posture of don Giovanni is confirmed by the very fact that, in spite of the terrifying shock, he perseveres in his attitude and firms up the invitation, in contrast to poor Leporello who is deadly frightened and just wants to run away from the stone guest. To analyse the logic of this kind of "answer of the real," let us evoke the amusing adventure of Casanova analysed in detail by Octave Mannoni in his classic article "Je sais bien, mais quand meme . . ." ⁹ By means of an elaborate deception, Casanova wants to seduce a naive country-girl. To make an appropriate impression on her, he plays the role of a master of occult knowledge. He knows very well that all this is just a deception, i.e., that he was just an impostor exploiting the poor

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girl's credulity. So, in the deep of the night, he puts on the dark magician's clothes, marks out a big circle on the ground with paper proclaiming it to be a magic circle, and starts to mumble magic formulae. Suddenly, something totally unexpected happens. A thunderstorm breaks out. Lightning flares all round and Casanova is alarmed, although he *knows* very well that this storm is a simple natural phenomenon and that it has occurred during his magical act only as a pure coincidence. Still, he is seized with panic because he *believes* that the thunderstorm is a punishment of the forces of Heaven for his blasphemous playing with magic. His quasiautomatic reaction is to quickly enter his own magic circle where he feels quite safe: "In the fear that apprehended me, I was convinced that thunder-bolts will [sic] not strike me because they cannot enter the circle. Without this false belief, I would not stay in this place not even for a minute." In short, even though Casanova was consciously manipulating, when a contingent eruption of the real appeared as an answer to his manipulation, confirming its efficacy, he reacted in panic and started to believe his own manipulation, i.e., he became a victim of his own deception. The answer of the real (the thunderstorm) functions here as a shock which makes the distinction between the mask of trickery, and what we take to be the reality behind it vacillate. Once we are seized by panic, the only way out appears to be to "take seriously" our own deceptive mask and to cling to it. The "answer of the real" which is the psychotic kernel serving as a support of (symbolic) reality functions in the perverse economy of Casanova as its very opposite: as a shock provoking a loss of reality

"Nature doesn't exist"

Is the ultimate form of the "answer of the real" not confronting all of us today in the *ecological crisis*? Is the disturbed, derailed course of nature not an "answer of the real" to human praxis? Is the human encroachment upon nature "mediated" and organized by the symbolic order? The radical character of the ecological crisis is not to be underestimated. It is not only radical in the sense of effective danger; i.e., it is not just what is at stake in it that is the very survival of human kind. At the same time, the most unquestionable presuppositions, the "horizon of meaning" of our everyday understanding of "nature" as a regular, rhythmic process of circulation that is to say, the very background of our existence - are called in

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question. To use the terms of the late Wittgenstein, the ecological crisis bites into the "objective certainty" - into the domain of self-evident certitudes about which, within our established "form of life," it is simply meaningless to have doubts. From here comes our unwillingness to take the ecological crisis seriously in all its consequences. From here the fact that the typical, predominant reaction to it still consists in a variation on the theme "je sais bien, mais quand meme . . .": I know very well (that things are deadly serious, that what is at stake is our very survival), but still . . . (I don't really believe it, I'm not really prepared to integrate it into my symbolic universe, and that is why I continue to act as if ecology, other than in a few minor annoyances, is of no consequence to my everyday life).

From here also comes the fact that the typical reaction of those who *do* take ecological crisis seriously is - on the level of the libidinous economy - obsessional. Where does the kernel of the obsessional's economy lie? The obsessional is caught in frenzied activity, he works feverishly all the time. Why? To avoid some uncommon catastrophe which would take place if his activity were to stop. In other words, his frenetic activity is based upon the alternative "if I don't do this (the compulsive ritual), some unspeakably horrible X will take place." In Lacanian terms, this X could be specified as *le grand Autre bane*: the barred big Other, i.e. the lack in the Other, the inconsistency of the symbolic order in this particular case, the disturbance of the established circular rhythm of nature. We must be active all the time so that it does not come to light that "the Other doesn't exist" (Lacan).¹⁰ The third version of the usual reaction to the ecological crisis would be to take it as an "answer of the real" in the sense of a sign, of a phenomenon bearing a certain message, like AIDS in the eyes of the "moral majority" which reads it as a divine punishment for sinful life. From this perspective, the ecological crisis appears as a "punishment" for our ruthless exploitation of nature, for the fact that we have treated nature as a stack of disposable objects and materials, not as a partner in dialogue and as the very foundation and roots of our being. The lesson to be drawn from it would be, of course, that we must stop our derailed, perverted lives and start to live as part of nature, accommodating ourselves to its rhythm, taking new roots in it.

What, then, can a Lacanian approach tell us about the ecological crisis? It seems as if the old Freudian maxim that psychoanalysis teaches us to confront and accept reality acquires a new dimension

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with the ecological crisis. We must learn to accept the real of the ecological crisis in its senseless factuality, without charging it with some message or meaning. In this sense, we could read the three reactions to the ecological crisis described above ("je sais bien, mais quand meme"; obsessive activity; grasping it as a sign bearing some hidden meaning) as three forms of avoiding the encounter with the real: a fetishistic split, i.e., by acknowledgement of the fact of the crisis by neutralization of its symbolic efficacy; neurotic transformation of the crisis into a traumatic kernel; psychotic projection of meaning into the real itself. The fact that the first reaction to it presents a fetishistic disavowal of the real of the crisis is self-evident. What is not so obvious is that the other two reactions also hinder an adequate response to the crisis. If we grasp the ecological crisis as a traumatic kernel to be kept at a distance by obsessive activity, or as a bearer of a message, a call to find new roots in nature, in both cases we blind ourselves to the irreducible gap separating the real from the modes of its symbolization. The only proper attitude is that which fully assumes this gap as something that defines the very *condition humaine*, without endeavouring to suspend it through fetishistic disavowal, to keep it concealed through obsessive activity, or to reduce the gap between the real and the symbolic by projecting a (symbolic) message into the real itself. The fact that man is a "being-of-language" means precisely that he is, so to speak, constitutively "derailed," marked by an irreducible fissure, by a structural lack of balance which the symbolic edifice attempts in vain to repair subsequently. From time to time, this fissure erupts in some spectacular form, reminding us of the frailty of this symbolic edifice. The last went by the name of Chernobyl.

The radiation from Chernobyl presented the intrusion of a radical contingency as if the "normal" enchainment of cause and effect was for a moment suspended, put in parenthesis. Nobody knew what its exact consequences would be. The experts themselves admitted that a determination of the "threshold of danger" is ultimately arbitrary. Public opinion oscillated between panicked anticipation of future catastrophes and acceptance that there was no cause for alarm. It is precisely this indifference as to its mode of symbolization that locates the radiation in the dimension of the real. Whatever we say about it, it continues to expand. We are reduced to the role of impotent witnesses. The rays are thoroughly *irrepresentable* (unrepresentable). No image suits them. It is hereupon that their status of the real as the "hard kernel" around which every symbolization

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fails rejoins that of pure semblance. We don't see radioactive rays. We don't feel them. They are an entirely chimeric object, a pure effect of the incidence of the discourse of science upon our lifeworld. After all, it would be quite possible to persist in our commonsense attitude and maintain that all the panic provoked by Chernobyl resulted from the confusion and exaggeration of a few scientists. All the fuss in the media was much ado about nothing, while our everyday life simply followed its course. The very fact that such an effect of panic was triggered by a series of public communications, supported by the authority of the discourse of science, demonstrates the degree to which our everyday life-world is already penetrated by science.

Chernobyl confronted us with the threat of what Lacan calls "the second death." The result of the reign of the discourse of science is that what was at the time of de Sade a literary fantasy (a radical destruction which interrupts the very circular movement of the life-process) has today become a menace that casts its shadow on our everyday life-world. Lacan himself observed that today the explosion of the atomic bomb exemplifies the "second death." In radioactive death, it is as if matter itself, the foundation, the permanent support of the eternal circular movement of generation and corruption, dissolves itself, vanishes. Radioactive disintegration is the "open wound of the world," a cut which derails and disturbs the circulation of what we call "reality." To "live with radiation" means to live with the knowledge that somewhere down there, in Chernobyl, a Thing erupted which shook the very ground of our life-world. Our relation to Chernobyl could then be written down as $S \diamond a$: that is to say, in that irrepresentable point where the very foundation of our world seems to dissolve itself, there the subject has to recognize the kernel of his most intimate being. What is this "open wound of the world," this point at which the regular circular movement of nature seems interrupted, if not, in the last resort, *man himself*? Does not Man, insofar as he is dominated by the death-drive and insofar as his fixation on the empty place of the Thing derails him, deprive himself of support in the regularity of the circular movement of the life-process? The very appearance of man entails an indelible loss of natural balance, of the homeostasis proper to the life-process.

As a possible definition of man, the young Hegel proposed a formula which today, in the midst of the ecological crisis, acquires a new dimension: "nature sick unto death." All attempts to regain a new balance between man and nature, to deprive human activity of

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its excessive character, and to include it in the regular circular movement of life, are nothing but a series of subsequent endeavours to suture an original and irredeemable gap. It is in this sense that the classic Freudian thesis on the ultimate discord between reality and the drive-potential of man is to be conceived: Freud's paradoxical gesture consists in surpassing biologism in the very form of biologism. That is to say, this original, constitutive discord cannot be accounted for by biology. It can take place only insofar as this "drive-potential of man" consists of drives which are already radically denaturalized, derailed by their traumatic attachment to a Thing, to this empty place, which excludes man forever from the circular movement of life and opens thus an immanent possibility of a radical catastrophe, of the "second death."

It is here that we should perhaps look for the basic premise of a Freudian theory of culture. All culture is ultimately nothing but a defense-formation, a reaction to some terrifying, radically inhuman dimension proper to the very human condition. This is also what probably explains Freud's obsession with Michelangelo's Moses. In him he recognized (wrongly, of course, but this doesn't really matter) a man who was on the brink of giving way to the destructive fury of the death-drive, but who nonetheless found strength to master his fury and not to smash the tablets with God's commandments." Today, when we are confronted with catastrophes rendered possible by the incidence of the discourse of science upon reality, such a Mosesian gesture is perhaps our only chance.

The basic weakness of the usual ecological approach is thus its obsessive libidinal economy. We must do everything in order that the equilibrium of the natural circuit be maintained, in order that some horrifying turbulence not derail the established regularity of Nature's ways. So to get rid of this predominant obsessive economy, we must accomplish a further step and *renounce the very idea of a "natural balance" supposedly deranged owing to the intervention of man as "nature sick unto death."* Homologous to the Lacanian proposition "Woman doesn't exist," we should perhaps assert that *Nature also "doesn't exist."* It does not exist as a periodic, balanced circuit, thrown off its tracks by man's inadvertence. This very idea that man is somehow an "excess" with reference to Nature's balanced circuit has to be abandoned. The image of Nature as a balanced circuit is

nothing but a retroactive projection of man like, on another scale, the idyllic image of medieval society as an organic whole. This latter image is simply a retroactive projection produced from the perspective of the capitalist's frenetic, excessive, disruptive activity dissolv-

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ing all "organic" ties, i.e. in just the way capitalism perceives the preceding epoch. Perhaps the lesson of the recent theories of chaos lie herein. "Nature" is already in itself turbulent, imbalanced, its "rule" not a well-balanced oscillation around some constant point of attraction, but a chaotic dispersion oscillating within the limits of what the theory of chaos calls the "strange attractor," a regularity directing chaos itself. In opposition to "traditional" science centered around the idea of a uniform law (regular connection of causes and effects, etc.), these theories offer first drafts of a future "science of the real," i. e., of a science elaborating rules that generate contingency, *tuche*, as opposed to symbolic *automaton*. It is here, rather than in the obscurantist essays of "synthesis" between particle physics and Eastern mysticism, both aiming at the assertion of a new holistic, organic approach alleged to replace the old "mechanistic" world-view, that the real "break of paradigm" in contemporary science is to be sought.¹²

Knowledge in the Real

Now, we are obliged to take the final step further. If there is a psychotic kernel at work in every symbolic formation by means of which the real "answers," and if this form is ultimately that of a signifying chain - i. e. of a chain of knowledge (S_2) - then there must be, at least at a certain level, a kind of knowledge operating in the real itself. The Lacanian notion of the "knowledge in the real" must appear at first sight a purely speculative, shallow extravaganza, far from our everyday experience. The very idea that nature knows its laws in a way and behaves accordingly (that, for example, Newton's famous apple falls because it knows the law of gravity) seems preposterous. But even if this idea were to be just a hollow sally of wit, precisely for this reason, the question of why it repeats itself with such regularity in cartoons would impose itself with even greater urgency. The cat wildly pursues the mouse. It does not notice that there is a precipice ahead. But even after the ground fails, it does not fall. It continues to run. It falls only when it looks down and *takes cognizance* of the fact that it is floating in mid air, as if the real has forgotten for a moment which laws it has to obey. When the cat looks down, the real "remembers" its laws and acts accordingly.

The very persistence of such scenes indicates that they must be supported by a certain elementary fantasy-scenario. A further

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argument in favor of this conjecture is that we find the same paradox in the famous dream reported by Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, the dream about the father who did not know he was dead.¹³ He lived because he did not know that he was dead, like the cat in cartoons who continues to walk because it does not know that there is no ground under its feet. And, to take our third example from so-called "real life," the position of such scenes is actually that of Napoleon at Elba. Historically he was already dead (i.e. his time was over; his role was finished). The only thing keeping Napoleon alive (present on the scene of history) was the fact that he himself did not know his role was finished, which is why he had to "die twice," to lose for the second time at Waterloo. In other words, Napoleon at Elba was like the cat over the precipice. Napoleon did not fall down insofar as he did not know that he was already floating in mid air. With certain state or ideological apparatuses we often encounter the same feeling. Although such apparatuses are clearly "out of time," they persist only because *they do not know it*. And so somebody simply has to take upon himself the impolite duty of reminding such states of this unpleasant fact.

We are now in a position to specify a bit more closely the contours of the fantasy-scenario which serves as a support to the kind of phenomena pertaining to knowledge in the real. In so-called "psychic reality," we encounter a series of entities which literally exist only on the basis of a certain misrecognition - that is to say, insofar as the subject does not know something, insofar as something is left unspoken and is not integrated into the symbolic universe. As soon as the subject comes to "know too much," he pays for this excessive, surplus-knowledge "in flesh," by the very substance of his being. The *ego* is above all an entity of this order, i.e., the series of imaginary identifications upon which the consistency of a subject's being depends. As soon as the subject "knows too much" and gets too close to unconscious truth, his ego dissolves itself. The paradigmatic case of such a drama is ultimately Oedipus. When he finally learns the truth, he existentially "loses the ground under his feet" and finds himself in an unbearable void.

This paradox deserves our attention because it enables us to rectify a certain misconception. As a rule, the psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious is conceived in an opposite way. The unconscious is supposed to be an entity, a (psychic) reality about which - because of the defense mechanism of repression - the subject does not (want to) know anything (his perverse, illicit desires, for example). This current notion of the unconscious

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obscures the crucial role of the inverted case: that of a positive entity which, paradoxically, retains its consistency only on the basis of a certain non-knowledge. Its positive ontological condition is that something must remain non-symbolized, that something must not be put into words. This would also be the most elementary definition of the symptom as a certain formation which exists only insofar as the subject ignores some fundamental truth about himself. As soon as its meaning is integrated into the symbolic universe of the subject, the symptom dissolves itself. This, at least, was the stake of the early Freud, of his belief in the omnipotence of the interpretive procedure.

In his short story "Nine billion names of God," Arthur C. Clarke extrapolates this logic of the symptom onto the universe itself, thereby confirming Lacan's thesis from the last years of his teaching that the "world" as such, what we call "reality," is already a symptom. Lacan's idea of "reality" as symptom is based upon the foreclosure of a certain key-signifier: its material, positive presence is nothing but an embodiment of a certain blockage in the process of symbolization. To put it in a simple way, for the reality to exist, something must be left unspoken. Monks from a monastery in the Himalayas hire a computer along with two American experts. Once the Americans have arrived at the monastery, the Monks explain to them that according to their religious beliefs, God has a limited number of names that consist in all possible combinations of nine

letters, with the exclusion of nonsensical series (more than three letters in a row, for example). The world was created in order that all these names should be pronounced or written down. Once this happens, the creation will have served its purpose and will annihilate itself. The "end of the world" will occur. The task of the experts is, of course, to program the computer so that the printer will write down all nine billion possible names of God. After the two experts have done their job and the printer starts to throw out endless sheets of paper, they return to the Indian valley by mule, following the narrow path on the edge of precipice, commenting ironically on the eccentric demand of their customers. One of them looks at his watch and remarks with laughter that just around that time, the computer should finish its work. Then he looks up at the night sky and stiffens with an astonished gaze. The stars begin to expire, the universe starts to vanish. Once all the names of God have been written down, once symbolization is accomplished, the world as symptom dissolves itself.

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The first reproach that offers itself here is, of course, that this motif of the "knowledge in the real" has only metaphorical value, that it is to be taken only as a means of illustrating a certain feature of psychic reality. Here, however, contemporary science lies in wait for us with unpleasant surprises. Subatomic particle physics - i.e. the scientific discipline supposed to embody an exact approach, free from "psychological" overtones - has in recent decades been beset by the problem of "knowledge in the real." That is to say, it repeatedly encounters phenomena which seem to suspend the principle of local causes, i.e., phenomena which seem to imply transport of information faster than the maximum admissible according to the theory of relativity (the speed of light) or as in the so-called Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen effect where what we did in area A affects what happens in area B without this being possible along the normal causal link limited by the speed of light. Let us take a two-particle system of zero spin. If one of the particles in such a system has a spin up, the other particle has a spin *down*. Now suppose that we separate two particles in some way that does not affect their spin. One particle goes off in one direction and the other in the opposite direction. After we separate them, we send one of the particles through a magnetic field that gives it a spin up. What happens is that the other particle has a spin *down* (and vice versa, of course), but there was no possibility of communication or of normal causal link between them because the other particle had a spin *down* immediately after we gave the first particle a spin up; i.e. *before* the spin up of the first particle could cause the spin *down* of the other particle in the fastest way possible (giving the signal by the speed of light). The question arises, of course: How *did the other particle "know" that we had given the first particle a spin up?* We must presuppose a kind of "knowledge in the real," as if a spin somehow "knows" what happens in another place and acts accordingly. Contemporary particle-physics is beset by the problem of creating experimental conditions to test this hypothesis (although the famous Alain-Aspect-experiment from the early eighties confirmed it!), and of articulating an explanation for this paradox.

This case is not the only one. A whole series of notions formulated by Lacan in his "logic of the signifier," notions which, in light of scientific commonsense, seem mere intellectual trifling, playing with paradoxes without any scientific value, correspond surprisingly with some key-notions of subatomic particle physics, such as the paradoxical notion of a particle which "does not exist," although it has properties and produces a series of effects, etc.

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There is nothing strange about that, if we only consider that subatomic physics is a realm of pure differentiability in which every particle is defined, not as a positive entity, but as one of the possible combinations of other particles (just as with the signifier whose identity consists in the bundle of its differences from other signifiers). We should not be surprised, then, to find in recent physics precisely the Lacanian logic of the "not-all/pas-tout," Lacan's conception of the sexual difference where the "masculine" side is a universal function constituted through the phallic exception and the "feminine" side is a set which is "not all," non-universal, but nonetheless without exception. What is meant here is, of course, the consequences of the limits of the universe drawn by Stephen Hawking¹⁴ from the hypothesis of "imaginary time" ("imaginary" not in the psychological sense of "existing only in our imagination" but in a purely mathematical sense where "imaginary time" is a time for which, to calculate its dimensions, we must use imaginary numbers).

That is to say, Hawking attempts to construct an alternative to the standard Big-Bang theory, according to which we can only explain the evolution of the universe by presupposing as its starting point the point of "singularity" at which universal laws of physics are suspended. The Big-Bang theory would thus correspond to the "masculine" side of the logic of the signifier: the universal function (the laws of physics) are based upon a certain exception (the point of singularity). What Hawking attempts to demonstrate, however, is that if we accept the hypothesis of "imaginary time," we do not need to postulate the necessary existence of the "singularity." By introducing "imaginary time," the difference between time and space disappears totally, time beginning to function in the same way as space in the theory of relativity. Although it is finite, it has no limit. Even if it is "bent," circular, finite, there need be no external point which would limit it. In other words, time is "notall," "feminine" in the Lacanian sense. Apropos of this distinction between "real" and "imaginary" time, Hawking points out clearly that we are concerned with two parallel ways of conceptualizing the universe. Although, in the case of the Big-Bang theory, we speak of "real" time, and in the second case of "imaginary" time, it does not follow that either of these versions possesses an ontological priority, i.e., that either offers us a "more adequate" picture of reality. Their duplicity (in all meanings of the word) is irreducible.

What conclusion should we draw, then, from this unexpected accordance between the most recent speculations of physics and the

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paradoxes of the Lacanian logic of the signifier? One solution - the first that impresses itself - would be Jungian obscurantism: "male" and "female" do not concern only anthropology. They are cosmic principles, a polarity which determines the very structure of the universe, and the human sexual difference is just a special form of appearance of this universal cosmic antagonism between "masculine" and "feminine" principles, Yin and Yang. It is almost superfluous to add that Lacanian theory compels us to the opposite conclusion, to a radically "anthropocentric" or, more precisely, symbolo-centric version. Our knowledge of the universe, the way we symbolize the real, is ultimately always found, determined by the paradoxes proper to language as such; the split into a "masculine" and "feminine" side (the impossibility of a "neutral" language not marked by the difference) imposes itself because symbolization as such is by definition structured around a certain central impossibility, a deadlock. In a way, the deadlock is nothing more than a structuring of this impossibility. And even the purest subatomic physics cannot escape this fundamental impasse of symbolization.

Notes

1. With regard to this relation between drive and desire, we could perhaps risk a small rectification of the Lacanian maxim of the psychoanalytic ethic "not to give way on one's desire." Is not desire as such already a certain yielding, a kind of compromise-formation, a metonymic displacement, retreat, a defence against intractable drive? "To desire" *means* to give way on the drive. Insofar as we follow Antigone and "do not give way on our desire," do we not precisely step out of the domain of desire, do we not shift from the modality of desire into the modality of pure drive?

2. As a rule, these embodiments of pure drive *wear a mask* - why? We **could perhaps obtain the** answer via one of Lacan's somewhat enigmatic definitions of the real: in his "Television" he speaks of the "grimace of the real" (Jacques Lacan, "Television," in *October 40*, Cambridge: MIT Press 1987, p. 10). The **real is thus not** an inaccessible kernel hidden beneath layers of symbolizations. It is *on the surface*. It is just a kind of excessive disfiguration of reality, like the fixed grimace of a smile on Joker's face in *Batman*. Joker is, so to speak, a slave of his own mask, condemned to obey its **blind compulsion**. Death-drive resides in this surface deformation, not in what is beneath it. The real horror is a **stupid laughing mask, not the distorted, suffering** face it conceals. An everyday experience with a child confirms it. If we put on a mask in his very presence, he is horrified

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although he knows that beneath it, there is just our familiar face - as if some unspeakable evil pertains to the mask itself. The status of a mask is thus neither imaginary nor symbolic (denoting a symbolic role we are supposed to play). It is strictly *real* if, of course, we conceive the Real as a "grimace" of reality.

3. We encounter the same motif of "subjectivization" of a cyborg in Ridley Scott's *Bladerunner*, where the hero's android girl-friend "becomes subject" by (re)inventing her personal history. Here, the Lacanian thesis that woman is "a symptom of man" acquires an unexpected *literal* value. She is effectively the hero's *sinthome*, "synthetic complement"; i.e., the sexual difference coincides with the difference human/android.

4. Cf. Sigmund Freud, "Totem and Taboo", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XIII*, London: The Hogarth Press, 1953.

5. Cf. Catherine Millot, *Nobodaddy*, Paris: Le Point Hors-Ligne, 1988.

6. Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, New York: The Viking Press, 1977.

7. Jacques Lacan, *Le seminaire, livre VII: L'ethique de la psychanalyse*. Texte établi par Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1986, p. 305.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 319.

9. Octave Mannoni, "Je sais bien, mais quand meme . . .", in *Clefs pour l'imaginaire*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968.

10. In other words, the falsity of the subjective position of the obsessive ecologist consists in the fact that in warning us constantly against the impending Catastrophe, in accusing us of indifference, etc., what he is really worried about is that the Catastrophe will *not* arrive. So the proper answer to him is a simple reassuring tap on the shoulder: "Calm yourself, you don't have to worry about it, the catastrophe will certainly arrive for you!"

11. Cf. Sigmund Freud, "The Moses of Michelangelo," in *The Standard Edition, Vol. XIII* (1953).

12. One is even tempted to risk a homology between the opposition of "normal attractor (a state of balance or of regular oscillation towards which a perturbed system is supposed to tend) and of "strange" attractor in the theory of chaos, and that of the balance towards which the pleasure principle strives and of the drive's erratic deviation from the pleasure principle in psychoanalytic theory. The Freudian *Ding*, the Thing embodying enjoyment, does it not function in the libidinal economy as a kind of "strange attractor," derailing the "natural" tendency of the organism towards the pleasure-equilibrium, propelling it into a chaotic zigzag that escapes the regularity of a symbolic law? And the very form of the "strange attractor," the pattern that emerges when we cut through a chaotic interlacement of lines (the famous Henon's attractor, for example), is this not a kind of physical metaphor for the Lacanian *objet petit a*? (Cf. Chapter V of James Gleick, *Chaos: Making of a New Science*, New York: The Viking Press,

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1987, and Chapter XIII of Ian Stewart, *Does God Play Dice? The Mathematics of Chaos*, Cambridge/Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1989.)

13. Sigmund Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams," in *The Standard Edition, Vol. IV - V* (1953), p. 430.

14. Cf. Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, New York: Bantam Press, 1988.

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