

TRANSCENDENTAL CONFUSION

ŽIŽEKIAN CRITICISM AND LACANIAN THEORY

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Psychoanalysis, in both its Freudian and its Lacanian version, is one of the main theoretical frameworks – if not simply *the* main one – Slavoj Žižek does not stop to refer to. Needless to say that this is not exactly the reason of his worldwide reputation. If psychoanalytical theory were his single reference, if it were not combined with a never ending stream of jokes, film-analyses and comments on current political issues, Žižekian thought would certainly not have the fame it has today. It has become a cliché to say that psychoanalytical theory is no longer ‘in’, and that, if it still has some place in current critical thought at all, it is for a larger part thanks to the reputation of Žižekian thought. However, in spite of his explicit endorsement of Freudianism and Lacanism, Žižek’s reference to psychoanalysis is maybe not the strongest point in his thought. Or, to put it more cautiously: Žižek’s theory does not go without having some problems with psychoanalysis and precisely this is symptomatic for the problematic sides of Žižek’s own theory. This, at least, is the thesis I will defend in this essay. But let us first focus on psychoanalysis and its place within 20th century critical theories.

1. Psychoanalysis: a symptom of critical theory’s crisis

Psychoanalysis has been a dominant theory in 20th century critical thought. It was perceived as one of modernity’s ‘emancipating’ sciences, the one discovering and uncovering the last ‘dark continent’, the unconscious. It was one more step in the utopian élan of the Enlightenment that was supposed to bring freedom, autonomy and emancipation. This was the way it was looked at, for instance, by Norman O. Brown, Herbert Marcuse, and the generation of ’68.² It is not a coincidence that, with the fall of that utopian élan, psychoanalysis lost its interests. The utopia didn’t get realised, the ‘new’ did not arrive, and even where it did, it

¹ A first version of this essay was presented at the conference “Did somebody say Ideology? Slavoj Žižek in a post-ideological universe”, Cardiff University, School of European Studies, 15-16 September 2006.

² Norman O. Brown (1959) *Life against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Connecticut. Herbert Marcuse (1956), *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

turned out to be not so different from the old. And so did the unconscious: it remained unconscious, in spite of the dominance of psychoanalytically orientated criticism.

In fact, already Freud himself had realised that his new science was not so much the one *uncovering* the unconscious as the one admitting the very impossibility of such a project, i.e. affirming the unconscious as the very condition of human consciousness, including science itself. Psychoanalysis's most provocative side is its redefinition of consciousness and thought as being supported by the unconscious. Thought is primarily unconscious thought, a thought that thinks without any conscious subject, a thought that is by definition unable to ever become conscious and that, in this quality, forms the very ground of every thought, including modern science. So, psychoanalysis is not a science *of* the unconscious, it is science aware of being *built upon* the unconscious, built upon what, by definition, is immune to knowledge. The unknown psychoanalysis – and, according to that theory, every modern science – is not what we *still do not but once will know*; it is what for ever will remain unknown and what, in this very condition, is the ground of our knowledge.

Such view on knowledge has become unacceptable for current scientific ideology. Nowadays science presumes it has realised its utopia or will realise it in the near future. Scientific knowledge is seen again as what guarantees a firm ground beneath our feet. Certainly, we know that this kind of knowledge operates as an ideology and that, more than ever, we need ideology critique to counter it. But we are aware as well that our criticism is not able to offer any solid alternative. We know that the truth is not to be found in scientific ideology, but we do not know where it has to be found then. We can criticise the false pretensions of science, but we can not offer *true* pretensions. We can only show how those false pretensions are unavoidable and how it is, nonetheless, important not to come to terms with this unavoidability. But we cannot avoid or change them for new, non-false pretensions. We are situated *within* ideology, we can criticize that ideology, but we cannot exchange it for an non-ideology.

Here we meet the reason why Žižek takes psychoanalysis (to) as the main reference for his critical thought. Psychoanalysis criticises the unconscious without supposing to be ever able to overcome it. This is the exact situation of ideology critique nowadays: we have to criticize it, without being able to create a world without ideology. But here, too, we meet the problem Žižek has with psychoanalysis and with current ideology critique in general. Current criticism seems to be doomed to a mere *transcendental* nature: what it criticizes – and rightly

criticizes – is at the same time constitutive for the criticized object.³ The battle against the imaginary lures current politics is victim of might stop *these particular* lures, but it cannot stop lures *as such*, it cannot hinder that lures are a constitutive element in politics.

Such a political criticism must at the same time affirm – and thus accept – the tricky structure it lays bare, *and* it must fight against it, change its situation, counter its negative effect and give it a positive turn. It must affirm that transcendental structure as unchangeable and it must, on this very basis, try to introduce social or political changes. This contradiction – or must we call it its ‘double bind’ structure – is apparently inherent to modern ideology critique. And even if this is truly its intrinsic weakness, we have to take it for granted and turn it into its very strength. This is the only chance critical thought seems to have today.

2. Žižek’s criticism and Lacanian theory

In order to elaborate such kind of ideology critique, Žižek refers first and foremost to psychoanalytical – and particularly Lacanian – theory. It is a wonderful instrument to analyse current ideological strategies and to lay bare the tricks and ruses speaking through all kinds of social and political ‘symptoms’. But since symptoms are inherent to any ideology – just as ideology itself is inherent to social life – the question is what the analysis leads to. Is a Lacanian oriented theory able to do more than to *analyse*, can it also give a constructive *answer* to the analysed problems?

It is here that Lacan is not always Žižek’s clearest reference. Does, in his eyes, Lacan say that we can get beyond the symptom? Or does Lacan conclude we can only affirm the symptom as such? Regarding this point Žižekian theory is not without confusion. In his voluminous oeuvre, one can find elements in favour of both theses. In a recent essay, “Neighbours and other monsters”, in a passage discussing the end of psychoanalytical cure, he mentions a shift in Lacanian theory. “Psychoanalysis” (including the early Lacan), so he states, defines the aim of the cure as

to bring the subject to *fully assume castration*: to untie the knot [i.e. the symptom], to dissolve this stuckness [onto a symptom] and to liberate the subject’s desire. However, the late Lacan proposes an exactly inverted formula: the aim of psychoanalysis is to get the subject to come

³ After having praised *The sublime object of ideology* for being “still Žižek’s best book” because its “reading of Marx and Freud on commodities and dreams outlines an approach to ideological fantasy that is descriptively rich for those working in cultural studies or film theory”, Ian Parker immediately adds: “Whether it is politically useful is another matter, for there is no way out of the forms of ideology Žižek describes” (Ian Parker (2004), *Slavoj Žižek, A Critical Introduction*, London/Stirling, Virginia: Pluto Press, p. 83). The latter defines pointedly the ‘transcendental’ condition of current ideology critique.

to terms with the *sinthome*, with his specific ‘formula of enjoyment’. Lacan’s insight here is that of the full ontological weight of “stuckness”: when one dissolves the *sinthome* and gets fully unstuck, one loses the minimal consistency of one’s being – in short, what appears as obstacle is a positive condition of possibility.⁴

So, the effect of the psychoanalytical cure – and of a psychoanalytical analysis in general – is a “shift in perspective”. It makes us “look awry” (as the title of one of Žižek’s first books tells⁵), it allows a “parallax view” (as his most recent book says⁶). From a different perspective, an object looks differently. “What appears as obstacle is a positive condition of possibility”. So it is not a matter of getting rid of that obstacle (i.e. the symptom) but of dealing with it in a different way, i.e. to recognize in the obstruction the base which makes things possible. The “shift of perspective [inverts] the condition of impossibility into the condition of possibility”, so Žižek summarizes in the next sentence.

Does this mean that, now, the symptom is recognized as unavoidable, as a structural – ‘transcendental’ – element which makes things possible ? Certainly. But this is only one side of the coin, the view-side, so to say, the side of “looking awry”, of taking the position of a “parallax view”. Like innumerable other passages in his oeuvre, the quoted one mentions another, more active side. The symptom – the exception, the obstacle, the lost object, or, in Lacanese, *l’objet petit a* – does not only disturb things in what they pretend to be, on the most basic level, it makes things possible: it is the ‘object cause of desire, i.e. the ultimate element guaranteeing consistency to an identity (i.e. the subject of desire). This is what the “shift of perspective” can affirm.

But that shifting point is also the point from where an identity can be changed, so Žižek adds. The parallax view is not only an affirmation of an identity’s condition of possibility, it hides the possibility of change as well, of modifying things or creating new ones. According to Žižek, the point that allows a parallax view is at the same time the point of the “act”, or (which goes hand in hand) the point where “true love” is to be located.

So, does the “act”, or does “love” affirm the symptom, by leaving it intact? In many passages, Žižek suggests they do *not*. Then, with Lacan, he claims a possibility to go beyond the symptom and to be no longer limited by it or “stuck” onto it. To a passage in *Revolution at the gates*, where he had given a ‘transcendental analysis’ of love as based in unsatisfiable desire, he adds a note:

⁴ Slavoj Žižek (2005), “Neighbors and other monsters”, in: Slavoj Žižek, Erik Santner, Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor : Three Inquiries in Political Theology*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, p. 175.

⁵ Slavoj Žižek (1991), *Looking Awry. An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Cambridge (Mass.): The MIT Press.

⁶ Slavoj Žižek (2006), *The Parallax View*, Cambridge (Mass.): The MIT Press.

There is, of course, something deeply depressing about this insight. Is this all there is to it? Is there no “true” love? Is all we can do simply to learn to live with our symptoms, to accept the imbecilic contingency which rules our lives? Lacan’s ultimate wager is that this is not the case: there is love beyond symptomatic identification, love which directly touches the other in the Real of his or her being.⁷

Contrary to the previous quote, the ‘late Lacan’ is now appealed to support the thesis that, finally, there is a way out of the condition limiting us to our symptom. Although it is certainly not easy, it is nonetheless possible to be without symptom, without that supplement that constructs/deconstructs our identity. In “Neighbors and other monsters” we read the same about the “radical act”:

Of course, I cannot undo the substantial weight of the context into which I am thrown; of course I cannot penetrate the opaque background of my being [i.e. my symptom], but what I can do is an act of negativity, “cleanse the plate”, draw the line, exempt myself, step out of the symbolic in a “suicidal” gesture of a radical act – what Freud called the “death drive” and what German Idealism called “radical negativity”.⁸

This is no longer a ‘transcendental’ critique, affirming the unconscious structure of desire and its identity; it opens the way to a ‘real’ critique, a one that, instead of acknowledging the conditions of possibility, changes them, i.e. changes the ‘coordinates’ of the identity that forms the bearer (subject) of the given desire.

You can certainly ground this thesis with German Idealism and, for instance, refer to Hegel, the other main reference of Žižekian thought. But can you ground this thesis with Lacan? The question might seem ‘scholastic’, but let us give it a chance, for it might lead to the core problem of Žižekian theory as well as current ideology critique in general.

3. “True Love”

“Is there no ‘true’ love?”, Žižek asks in the note I quoted from *Revolution at the Gates*. When he calls upon Lacan’s authority to answer this question in a positive sense, it is not without problem. In a sense, the question itself is already non-Lacanian. To Lacan, the question I should consider is not if my love is a true one. I should ask for the *truth of my love*, which is quite different. For love’s truth does not lay in love itself, but in what is hidden by the very structure of love as such. According to Lacan, the truth of love is *desire*, and that truth cannot

⁷ Slavoj Žižek (2004 [2002]), *Revolution at the Gates: Žižek on Lenin, The 1917 Writings*, London / New York: Verso, p. 322.

⁸ Žižek, Santner, Reinhard 2005 : 140.

be approached nor appropriated *as such*; it can only be looked at awry or be seen in a moment of parallax view.

Lacan analyses love in his seminar on transference. Love is an unconscious imaginary strategy in which I am able to deny the impossibility (i.e. unsatisfiability) of my desire by loving another who desires me. This kind of imaginary relation, Lacan explains, is not limited to the one of identification (as Žižek suggests in the quote above). It is anchored in the ultimate object of desire, the *object a*. When someone is in love with me, it is my quality of subject that is at stake, for I am reduced to a mere object, the object of the other's phantasm (i.e. the object in which the other imagines the full satisfaction – *jouissance* – of his/her desire). I feel the inherent abject dimension of that object only when I do not want to respond to the other's demand for love. Then, when the other is attacking me with her desire, I am bothered, humiliated even. Love, however, emerges when, from the very position of being reduced to a mere object, I begin to long for the other. The confrontation with the fact that I am nothing but the object of the desire of the other is, then, neutralized or repressed by my own desire, i.e. my love for my beloved.⁹

This is to say that love has the same structure as transference, so Lacan explains. When I enter the analytical cure, from my analyst, I expect a healing response to my problems, which means that I position myself as the object of my analyst's desire (to help me). To counter this humiliation¹⁰, I spontaneously start to long for the analyst from this very object-position. First of all, so Lacan emphasizes, the analyst must be aware of this and acknowledge he is involved in a love-affaire, and that it makes no sense to hide himself behind some so-called professional position. But, secondly, he must realise that, step by step, this love-relation must be analysed, which in this case means dissolved. Love must be traced back to its basics, i.e. desire, for this what the analysant has to attain: to become again the subject of desire.

Does, in this context, the question ‘what is true love’ make sense? Not at all. It is a misleading question, obstructing the way to the analysant's real problem, which is desire. More generally spoken, it is a ‘moralising’ question, repressing the very truth love is about, namely desire.

Does love go beyond the “symptomatic identification”, as Žižek puts it? It goes beyond imaginary identification, that is for sure. It even goes beyond the symbolic

⁹ Lacan (2001), *Le Séminaire, Livre VIII, Le transfert*, Paris : Les éditions du Seuil, p. 69, 216, 369, 419, 455.

¹⁰ This is what psychoanalysis has discovered and which made it redefine mental health care: more than his symptom, it is asking for help itself which is the biggest problem for the analysant (or any other person asking for mental health care).

constitution of the subject (as being the subject/bearer of the desire of the Other). As Lacan puts it in his seminar on transference, it is anchored in the “agalma”, in the object a, in the object/support of the phantasm or, which amounts to the same thing, of the *sinthome*, the symptom as constitutive for the desire’s subject. Can we, then, go beyond the symptom, can we free ourselves from the fact that, in our quality of subject/bearer of desire, we leave our ultimate ground – the object supporting our phantasm, the object a – behind? Can we get rid of the supplement that, at the end of the day, supports the identity of someone’s desire?

We can, thus Žižek. This is what, for instance, the note I quote from *Revolution at the Gates* says: “there is love beyond symptomatic identification, love which directly touches the other in the Real of his or her being”. Here, a distinction is made between a love that is bound to “symptomatic identification”, and a love that goes beyond this, and “directly touches the other in the Real”; it is a distinction between ‘superficial’ and ‘real’ love.

But does this very distinction, however, not deny the Lacanian reference it makes use of? For what does this mean: a love which “directly touches the other in the Real”? Certainly not a ‘real love’, in the classical, for instance Aristotelian sense of the word: a love based in the real and which, therefore, has a solid ground and is to be qualified as true. The “real” which love touches – the real in the Lacanian sense – is a concept that precisely deconstructs the classical idea of ‘true love’: love has no solid base, and the truth of love is what deprives love of such a base. That loves touches the real means that I have no direct access to what gives this love of mine its ultimate consistency. If there is a consistency in love, it is a consistency that is not meant for ‘me’, that does not make ‘me’ consistent. On the contrary, confronted with the real my love touches, I cannot but be disturbed, traumatized, terrified. Confronted with its truth, love shakes to its foundations. In fact, love is by definition a “defence mechanism” to repress this truth, i.e. the unbearable ‘real’ it touches.

This is to say that any love, including the one based on “symptomatic identification”, “touches the other in the Real”. To ‘touch in the real’, to be ‘touched by the real’ is the ultimate ‘transcendental’, unconscious ‘truth’ of every love. What is misleading in the cited sentence in Žižek is the word “directly”. As if, in real, authentic love, I am in direct touch with the real, which I am not in unreal, inauthentic love. “I”, the Ego, not even the “subject” ever has a direct touch with the real. Its connection with the real is beyond the reach of both the imaginary Ego and the symbolic subject. Of course, there is such thing as a connection with the real, but it precisely *deconstructs* the grasp of Ego and subject. This implies that, indeed, my love can be true, but I can not claim the truth of my love, I cannot talk in the name of my love’s truth and appropriate the truth my love is dealing with. Truly dealing with love’s

truth on the level of consciousness at least implies admitting this: that we cannot fully appropriate love's very base, that we must allow love its deconstructive force.

4. “The Law at its purest”

“True love” is not the only example illustrating the confusion concerning the status of Lacanian concepts in Žižek. Something similar is at stake in what Žižek calls “the Law at its purest”. This is the way he defines “Judaism as the religion of the Law” in the same essay “Neighbors and Other Monsters”.¹¹ Žižek refers to the psychoanalytical insight that the law’s injunction is accompanied by “an obscene superego supplement”. Although commandments and rules limit desire, desire is supported by them and the law in general. By keeping ultimate satisfaction (*jouissance*) at distance, it keeps human desire – and, thus, human life (since, for Lacan, life is desire) – ongoing. *Jouissance*, however, remains the law’s very promise. So, obedience to the Law is unconsciously supported by “its obscene superego supplement” that secretly obliges us to transgress all obligations, i.e. to enjoy.

Is there a law regime which is not hindered by that obscene supplement at all? Unlike Lacan, Žižek replies that there is, namely Judaism. This religion “is the Law at its purest, deprived from its obscene superego supplement”. And, so he continues,

with regard to this point, Paul was wrong in his description of the Law as what solicits its own violation – wrong insofar as he attributed this notion of the Law to Jews: the miracle of the Jewish prohibition is that it effectively *is* just a prohibition, with no obscene message between the lines. It is precisely because of this that Jews can look for the ways to get what they want while literally obeying prohibition. Far from displaying their casuistry and external relation to the Law, this procedure rather bears witness to the direct and literal attachment to the Law. And it is in this sense that the position of the analyst is grounded in Judaism. Recall Henry James’s “The lesson of the Master” ...

This dense passage needs some explanation. First of all, the reference to Saint Paul has a Lacanian background. In his seventh seminar, Lacan evokes a chapter in Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*, in which he explains that it is the Law that stimulates human sin, for the law keeps desire longing for what lies beyond the Law.¹² In fact, in that famous chapter 7, Lacan reads the confirmation of his own analysis of the dialectical relation between law and *jouissance* as elaborated during his seminar on ethics.

¹¹ Žižek, Santner, Reinhard 2005: 151.

¹² Jacques Lacan (1986), *Le séminaire, Livre VII, L’éthique de la psychanalyse*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller, Paris : Seuil, p. 101 ; (1992), *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-60 – The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Edited by J.-A. Miller, Book VII, translated by Dennis Porter*, London : Routledge, p. 83.

Here, Lacan was wrong, so Žižek states. The Jewish Law knows about that dialectics and the logic of the “obscene supplement”, but has overcome it. This is the “miracle” of Judaism. By obeying the Law the Jews get what they want. With them, *jouissance* and law are no longer opposite to one another, so Žižek seems to suggest. It is indeed only a suggestion, if only because it is not based on any argumentation or textual reference. Does this mean that the Jew gets what he wants, namely the Law at its purest, the law without originary supplement, i.e. without *jouissance*? Or is it just the opposite: does he gets the very *jouissance* he (unconsciously) wants.

The latter thesis seems to be supported by Žižek’s argument, which, in this case, only consists of an analogy (an analogy with an aspect of the psychoanalytical cure, which is now interpreted in a non-Lacanian, non-Freudian, merely Žižekian way): the Jewish position is similar to the one of the analyst in the cure. This thesis is not argued either, but solely illustrated with a Henry James’s novel, *The Lesson of the Master*. An older writer, Henry St. Georges, says to his ambitious younger colleague, Paul Overt, that to become a great writer, he must give up women and love, including the relation with his beautiful fiancée. The young man takes the advice seriously, breaks off the engagement with his girlfriend, but must, at the end of the day, observe how she becomes the wife of the older writer.

After Paul accuses St. Georges of shameful conduct, the older man says that his advice was right: he will not write again, but Paul will achieve greatness. Far from displaying cynical wisdom, St. George acts as a true analyst, as the one who is not afraid to profit from his ethical choices, in other words as the one who is able to break the vicious cycle of ethics and sacrifice.¹³

Here, the argument seems to be definitely more Hegelian than Lacanian, since it supposes the difference between the law and its beyond – between law and *jouissance* – to be *sublated*. That is what both the Jew and the analyst do, so Žižek explains: they enjoy, but not *beyond* the law (as Lacanian definition of *jouissance* tells), but by *obeying* that very law. St. Georges is faithful to the idea that, to become a great writer, you must give up love and women: he obeys that law by giving up writing and taking Paul’s fiancée to his wife. This is what the Jew does: obeying the law *and* enjoying the ‘thing’ that law forbids. Or does he obey the law having renounced completely any *jouissance*? It doesn’t matter that much. In both cases the difference between the law and its beyond is neutralised, *sublated*. The same goes for the analyst: he is no longer hindered by the difference between the law and its beyond: either he

¹³ Žižek, Santner, Reinhard 2005: 152.

occupies simultaneously the place of the law and the one of its beyond, of *jouissance*; or he has renounced the entire dimension of *jouissance*.

This argument is indeed no longer sustainable by Lacanian theory. Throughout his entire oeuvre, again and again, Lacan warns that the main problem in the analytic cure is not so much the problematic desire of the *analysant* as the one of the *analyst*. The latter never is allowed to feel at ease with his desire, let alone he would be allowed to enjoy it. On the contrary, as analyst, he occupies the position of the ultimate object of desire of the Other – i.e. the locus hiding his patient’s *jouissance* – and he must be careful precisely *not* to enjoy that position, for this is what his desire unconsciously is after.¹⁴ That is why he may never forget that *his* desire – the desire of the *analyst* – is the cure’s main problem. Located on the place of *jouissance*, he must keep on desiring: this is the only way to bring his patient back to what he is after, i.e. to become again the subject/bearer of desire.

Here, again, Žižek ‘sublates’ the transcendental character of Lacanian analysis: the unconscious structure – the fact that we are the subject of a law obliging us to long for ourselves as if we were another, i.e. a law separating us from our ‘self’ as from a radical other – is neutralized and appropriated: at the end of the day, this structure has lost its tragic status and becomes the free chosen attitude of “one who is not afraid to profit from his ethical choices”. The analyst has made a choice in favour of what is beyond the Law. This makes his choice ethical, Žižek states here, and it is ethical as well to chose not to be afraid to profit from it, to enjoy it. Here, the violence of enjoyment is not what deconstructs the supposed ethical choice (i.e. what shows the ‘castrated’ character of the ethical good I am longing for); it is what makes a choice “ethical”.

In other contexts, however, the ethical dimension is told to lay in the exact opposite: not in profiting from what is beyond the law, but in renouncing it. This is for instance the case with the “act”, that other main concept in Žižekian theory.

¹⁴ In the still unpublished *Séminarie XIII (L'objet de la psychanalyse, 1965/66)*, for instance, Lacan discusses the unsatisfiable condition of the “Demande” and links it to the concept of “sujet-supposé-savoir” (the “subject supposed to know”, this is the way the analysant perceives the analyst as the one who knows the answer to his – the analysant’s – problem). Together with ‘*jouissance*’, the ‘sujet-supposé-savoir’ belongs to the patient’s defence mechanisms protecting his “truth” against the desire of the analyst (namely the desire to appropriate this truth). And it is up to the analyst to support the analysant in this and, thus, to watch his desire from appropriating the analysant’s truth which is located in the domain of his *jouissance*. “est-ce que le patient qui s’offre à l’expérience analytique ne nous dit pas: ‘c’est vous qui subirez, si vous me demandez la vérité, cette loi que toute demande ne peut être que déçue. Vous ne jouirez pas de ma vérité et c’est pour cela que je vous suppose savoir. C’est parce que c’est cela qui vous oblige à être trompé. Ma pulsion épistémologique, c’est la vérité qui s’offre comme *jouissance* et qui sait, par là même être défendue car, qui pourrait jouir de la vérité ? » (Lesson of 2 Februari 1966)

5. The Act & the Constitution of the Lacanian Subject

As Lacanian, Žižek defines human being as the subject (support, bearer) of desire – a desire which is not so much his *own* desire as of the desire of the *Other*, i.e. the desire operating in the symbolic order, the realm of signifiers. That realm presents itself to us as an imperative: we ‘are’ our ‘having to be’ what the signifier signifies. For, since the signifier is the name for reality, the subject exists only in and through this signifying system. He is “what a signifier represents to another signifier”, so quote one of Lacan’s formulas.¹⁵

Is the subject, then, totally determined by the signifier and its law (i.e. by the symbolic order)? Žižek’s answer is no. The subject is able to act, this is to say that he is able to liberate himself from his restraint to the signifier. And since the subject is ultimately bound to the law by a supplement (i.e. by a phantasm anchoring in what is beyond the law, in *jouissance*), the act makes it also capable of freeing itself from that supplement, that *jouissance*. In *The Fragile Absolute*, describing the “act”, Žižek writes:

What this means is that in order effectively to liberate oneself from the grip of existing social reality, one should first renounce the transgressive fantasmatic supplement that attaches us to it. In what does that renunciation consist?¹⁶

As often, Žižek answers such questions by referring to a recent movie. In this case he names three films. As final, “supreme case”, he mentions Brian Singer’s *The Usual Suspects* (1995):

When, in the flashback scene [...], the mysterious Keyser Soeze returns home and finds his wife and small daughter held at gunpoint by the members of the rival mob, he restores to the radical gesture of shooting his wife and daughter themselves death – this act enables him mercilessly to pursue the members of the rival gang, their families, parents and friends, killing them all ...¹⁷

In the comment that follows, Žižek defines the act as what happens when,

in a situation of forced choice, the subject makes the ‘crazy’, impossible choice of, in a way, *striking at himself*, at what is most precious to himself. The act, far from amounting to a case of impotent aggressivity turned against oneself, rather changes the coordinates of the situation in which the subject finds himself: by cutting himself loose from the precious object through whose possession the enemy kept him in check, the subject gains the space of free action. Is not such a radical gesture of ‘striking at oneself’ constitutive of subjectivity as such?¹⁸

¹⁵ “The signifier is what represents the subject to another signifier”. Lacan introduces this definition of the signifier (which is in fact a renewed definition of the subject) in his 9th seminar (unpublished), the one on ‘identification’ (1961/62), the end of the session of 6 December 1962.

¹⁶ Slavoj Žižek (2000), *The Fragile Absolute, or Why is the Christian Legacy worth fighting for?*, London / New York: Verso, p. 149.

¹⁷ Žižek 2000: 149-150.

¹⁸ Žižek 2000: 150.

The act is a “forced choice”, a choice made in an unfree condition (man being determined by the situation he is in, i.e. the set of signifiers he is the subject of) but, nonetheless, conquering some “space of free action”. For that, however, he has to give up his ultimate “object” providing him consistency as being subjected to (i.e. being the subject of) the Other (i.e. the universe of signifiers). He has to lose his ultimate and ‘extimate’ self¹⁹ – i.e. that in him what is more than himself – in order to gain freedom. This strike at himself, at his most intimate self is what defines the ‘act’ in Žižekian theory.

And “is not such a radical gesture of ‘striking at oneself’ constitutive of subjectivity as such?”, Žižek asks a few lines further. If you read subjectivity in the Lacanian sense – and this is what Žižek pretends to do – this is far from being sure. Of course, the subject’s constitution is to be ‘stricken’, *but not by himself*. For there was simply no ‘self’ at the moment when the subject emerges as what was stricken, i.e. as what “a signifier represents for another signifier”.

According to Lacanian theory, the subject’s constitution is not the result of an act, but of a long and unconscious process. The pleasure principle, which is the very life principle of the libidinal beings we are (this is the basic axiom of Freudian and Lacanian theory) is incompatible with reality as such, a reality of which we have to gain pleasure. This is why, on the level of the real, the libidinal being we are, is a “lack-of-being”, “manque-à-être”.²⁰ But the trick of the unconscious consists in repressing²¹ and replacing this *real* lack by another one, the lack by which the signifier operates. An inoperative real lack is replaced by an operative ‘symbolic’ one. The libidinal being constitutes itself – which is to say it constitutes a ‘self’, for on the level of the real there is no ‘self’ at all – by supposing itself to be what the signifiers are about: it supposes itself to be the ‘raison d’être’, the ‘ground’, the ‘support’, the ‘bearer’ or, which amounts to the same thing, the ‘subject’ of those signifiers. ‘We’ – i.e. the identity or ‘self’ we suppose we are – is indeed a ‘supposition’, i.e. what is ‘posited’ underneath (*sub*) our representations of signifiers. And this is why that ‘we’, being the subject of signifiers, are at the same time the subject of desire, a desire longing for the real ‘we’ we *dream* we are. In fact, we are nothing but (the subject of) that dream, i.e. that desire that never will become real, a desire that originates in the signifiers coming from the others and, therefore, is to be defined as the “desire of the Other”. In short, the ‘self’ I am is, instead of

¹⁹ For the concept of “extimité”, “extimacy”, see Lacan 1986: 167 ; 1992: 139.

²⁰ Jacques Lacan (1966), *Ecrits*, Paris: Les éditions du Seuil, p. 665, 667.

²¹ This is the Lacanian interpretation of what Freud calls the ‘*Urverdrängung*’.

the real ground of my being, a result of unconscious imagination, a literal supposition: it is the subject of the desire of the Other.

When that self of mine is in trouble, i.e. when I have to knock on the door of mental health care, I will find at the end my self back, not in the real authentic identity I suppose I am, but in the fact that this is precisely a supposition, i.e. in the fact that I am alienated in a desire originating in the Other and that I am nothing but unfulfillable desire.

And what, then, is the “act”. It is a term Lacan introduces in his 15th seminar (*L'acte psychanalytique*, 1967/68) to indicate a turning point in the end of the analytical cure. The cure's end consists, first of all, in the analysant realising that he is the subject of the desire of the Other, or, more precisely and even worse, that he is the abject object – ‘*objet petit a*’ – of the Other's desire: not only the lack in which the Other finds its bearer/subject, but also that which is so ‘nothing’ that it has even no place in this order based on – and operating by – the signifier's nothingness. This abject ‘thing of nothing’ is where, at the end of an analytical cure, the analysant finds ‘him or herself’.

Arrived at that point, however, the analysant can take one more step: he can become him- or herself an analyst. The “psychoanalytical act” is the name Lacan reserves for this step. To take upon me that I am the abject object of the desire of the Other is the way that I, as analysant, find my ‘true self’.²² But at that point, I can decide to specifically locate myself in this position in order to function as the *object a* of the desire of others, in this case of my patients asking me for help and, thus, projecting on me the ultimate, impossible object of their desire.²³

²² See for instance the lesson of 10 January 1968: “Le terme de l'analyse [i.e. the ‘act’] consiste dans la chute du *sujet suppose savoir* et sa réduction à l'avènement de cet objet *a*, comme cause de la division du sujet qui vient à sa place. Celui qui, fantasmatiquement, avec le psychanalysant, joue la partie au regard du *sujet supposé savoir*, à savoir : l'analyste, c'est celui-là, l'analyste, qui vient au terme de l'analyse à supporter de n'être plus rien que ce qui reste Ce reste de la chose chue, qui s'appelle l'objet *a*. C'est là autour de quoi doit porter notre question [i.e. the question of the psychoanalytical act] ” (Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire. Livre XV. L'acte psychanalytique*, inédit).

²³ Once analyst, in what consists his “analytical act”? In prevent the analysant from acting, and in acting himself only by means of signifiers. In the next lesson (17 January), he says: “Quand il se met là, après avoir lui-même parcouru le chemin psychanalytique, il sait déjà où le conduira alors comme psychanalyste le chemin à parcourir, au désêtre du *sujet supposé savoir*, à n'être que le support de cet objet qui s'appelle l'objet petit *a*. Qu'est-ce que nous dessine cet acte psychanalytique, dont il faut bien rappeler qu'une des coordonnées, c'est précisément d'exclure de l'expérience psychanalytique tout acte, toute injonction d'acte ? Il est recommandé à ce qu'on appelle le patient, le psychanalysant pour le nommer, autant que possible il lui est recommandé d'attendre pour agir, et si quelque chose caractérise la position du psychanalyste, c'est très précisément qu'il n'agit que dans le champ d'intervention significante que j'ai délimité à l'instant [i.e. the analyst's intervention operating only in the domain of the signifiers]”. At the end of this lesson, Lacan extends this concept to the domain of the « act politique », and there, too, he restricts the act to the domain of the signifier: “[...] ce sont des actes au sens où ces actes étaient un dire [...]” (Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire. Livre XV. L'acte psychanalytique*, inédit). It is needless to say that we are far from the definition of the act as ‘jumping into the real’.

Assuming that I am the subject/bearer of the desire of the Other (i.e. to assume I am definitely alienated from any real self) is one thing. Assuming the ultimate support of my being to be eluded even from the Other is something else. The latter is the “act”. But the act does not *constitute* my subjectivity, as Žižek states, it only assumes the most unbearable truth of that subject-constitution. It actively affirms the transcendental truth of my subjectivity or identity.

So, in Žižek’s adaptation of the Lacanian act-concept, one can notice the same confusion concerning the transcendental status of that concept. In Žižek, it is not so much the assumption of a transcendental condition, but its *appropriation*: it is a principle of fundamental change. The act re-establishes the identity in its radical negativity and therefore open new channels for drastic changes. That is why the concept of the “act” comes close to the one of radical freedom. In the act, the Lacanian subject Žižek has in mind deliberates itself even from its most fundamental base, i.e. from the object around which its “phantasm” is constructed. A “phantasm”, so Lacan explains²⁴, is a small set of signifiers imaginarily representing the subject’s castration, i.e. its being slashed away under the signifier (or, which amounts to the same thing, its being as coinciding with ‘being represented by signifiers to other signifiers’). In the phantasm, the support of the libidinal economy is no longer guaranteed by its central ‘supposition’, i.e. its subject; now it is ultimately sustained by the unreachable object of desire/*jouissance* (an object around which the signifiers of the phantasm-scenario are centred). Contrary to Lacan, Žižek’s points out that, in the violence of the act, even this phantasm and its object can be given up and left behind. That gives the Žižekian act a dimension of freedom which is absent in the Lacanian act.

So, it is only by omitting any explicit reference to the Lacanian text that Žižek can define the ‘Lacanian’ act as “the ‘crazy’ impossible choice of “*striking at [one]self*, at what is the most precious of [one]self”. Only under this condition, he can reed Keyser Soeze shooting his own wife and daughter as a excellent illustration of what an act does: to liberate the libidinal subject from his ‘*raison d’être*’, from his ‘*objet-cause du désir*’, from the object that makes his life more worth living than himself and renders back the freedom of radically reorganising the coordinates of his life and his world.

6. Acting « as *une vraie femme* »

²⁴ Lacan introduces the concept of ‘fantasme’ in his 5th seminar (see, among other passages: J. Lacan [1998], *Le séminaire, Livre V, Les formations de l’inconscient* (1957/58), texte établi par J.A. Miller, Paris : Seuil, p. 407-410). The next seminar, *Le désir et son interprétation*, (1958/59) (unpublished) is in fact a long elaboration of this concept of phantasm.

Is, therefore, Keyser Soeze to be considered as a ‘true man’? In the passage the quote from *The Fragile Absolute* referred to, Žižek does not draw this conclusion. At least not with regard to Soeze and, more generally, to *men*. But he does with regard to *women*, so we read on the next page when he presents one of Lacan’s definition of “a true woman”:

Lacan proposed as (one of) the definition(s) of ‘a true woman’ a certain radical *act*: the act of taking from man, her partner, of obliterating – even destroying – that which is ‘in him more than himself’, that which ‘means everything to him and which is more important to him than his own life, the precious *agalma* around which his life revolves.²⁵

According to Lacanian theory, woman’s truth (just like man’s truth) lays in being the object of the desire of the Other (or, so the say, being the ‘*raison d’être*’ of the Other), in this case her partner. And, as Žižek states, in the act, one is able to free him- or herself from this. In the act described here, however, the woman frees herself from her ‘*raison d’être*’ by freeing herself from the ‘*raison d’être*’ of her partner.²⁶ This is not only her unconscious truth (i.e. the secret wish that structures her desire by remaining unfulfilled), this is what, in an “act”, defines her actual truth, her possibility of being “a true woman”. Dixit Lacan, thus Žižek.

As the exemplary figure of such an act in literature, of course, Lacan cites Medea who, upon learning that Jason, her husband, plans to abandon her for a younger woman, kills her two young children, her husband’s most precious possession – it is in this horrible act of destroying that which matters most to her husband that she acts as *une vraie femme*, as Lacan puts it.²⁷

Self-assuredly, Žižek writes: “of course, Lacan cites Medea”, as the one “who acts as *une vraie femme*”. Does Lacan do so? Does he cite Medea? As far as my reading reaches, Medea is one of the few main figures in classic tragedy who is not cited at all in Lacan’s oeuvre.²⁸ And where does Lacan ever speak about “*une vraie femme*” or even deal with such an issue? Again, as far as I know, that topic and expression is absent in Lacan. As it was the case with

²⁵ Žižek 2000: 151.

²⁶ From a Lacanian perspective, the distinction Žižek makes here is to be relativized. It is not so sure that her children are to be considered exclusively as the ‘*agalma*’ of her husband. Why not as her *agalma*? Furthermore, the *agalma* – the object a – is to be located with the Other (it is the abject object abandoned the Other in which I have to realise myself as being the subject/bearer of his desire), which is this case means that Medea’s *agalma* are to be situated with her husband. It is no surprise that, further on in *The Fragile Absolute*, the distinction Žižek makes here, is no where mentioned any more.

²⁷ Žižek 2000: 151.

²⁸ Except in his article on Gide, where he quotes Euripides’ *Medea*, and where he compares Gide’s Madeleine with Medea (Jacques Lacan [1966], *Écrits*, Paris: Seuil, p. 739, 761). Actually Zizek is referring to an article by Miller, "On Semblances in the Relation Between the Sexes" (in: Slavoj Žižek [ed.] [2000], *Sic 3: Sexuation*, Durham: Duke University Press), who mentions “*la vraie femme*” and refers (without quotation) to Lacan’s article on Gide. (With thanks to Aaron Shuster who draw my attention to this article.)

“true love”, the issue of “true woman” is not a Lacanian topic but a topic which is to be Lacanianly analysed, criticized and deconstructed.

Surely, there is a truth in woman, as there is a truth in man and in sexual difference in general. But it is a truth that necessarily has to remain repressed and that only can be looked at awry. The truth of sexual difference is that it has no ground in the human biological constitution. It is a truth organised by the signifier, more precisely the one phallic signifier operative within sexual differentiation and defining the sexual identity in relation to what one has not. This is why the truth of woman is, in a sense, that she is a man, or at least, that her femininity is characterized by the same phallic signifier as with man. The libidinal investment of man’s – *and* woman’s – genital zone is due to the fact that this zone are lived as signifier, i.e. as an element referring to what remains for ever absent. It is because man imagines his penis to be able to be absent, it is because he imagines it not to be the phallus he dreams about, that his penis is invested with libido. And it is because the same absence marks the woman, that her genital zone gets sexualized. Both sexes are constituted by the same ‘phallic’ signifier. It is in that sense that man is the truth of women.

In another sense, however, woman is the truth of man. For one of man’s truths is that men are ‘not all’, i.e. that the signifier, although it delivers the very key and grammar of the universe, does not coincide with the latter’s totality. The realm of the *object a* (i.e. the real) escapes the one of the signifier and its phallic absence. So, if there is something different from ‘man’, i.e. from phallic sexuation, in other words, if there is proper femininity, it is to be defined as by that which is ‘not all’, by the *object a*. Yet, if such femininity exists, no one can claim it, since the very act of claiming operates in the domain of signifiers. It is in this sense that Lacan states that ‘**The** woman does not exist’.²⁹

So, of course, according to Lacan, there is truth in woman, but contrary to what Žižek claims, this truth cannot be appropriated neither in its ‘phallic’ nor in its ‘objectal’ dimension, and it surely cannot give access to such thing as “a true woman”.

7. The “Ethical Act” structured as “Feminine Subjectivity”

²⁹ See Jacques Lacan (1975), *Le séminaire. Livre XX. Encore, 1972-73*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller, p. 75 ff. The crossed « the » is a way to indicate that there is no universal category other than the universal category defined by difference (and, thus, by signifiers).

Yet, let us go a step further and find out what it is that makes Žižek think that “*une vraie femme*” is a genuine Lacanian topic. It might be helpful to gain a better insight into his confusing use of other Lacanian ‘transcendental’ concepts.

Not unlike Lévi-Strauss, who is one of his basic references, Lacan notes that, in most traditional societies – and even, to a certain extent, still in modern society – the woman’s position is that of an object: matrimonial object, object of love, of fashion, of commercial seduction et cetera. If, in literature, that kind of object-role is given voice by female characters, it is no surprise, then, that this voice is an eminently critical one, since the object – as *object a* – is to be located in the radical outside zone of the symbolic order. And it is no wonder either that Lacan, in his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959/60), zooms in on a feminine figure occupying the place of the object par excellence, namely the main character in Sophocles *Antigone*. Put in the position of abject object punished by Creon’s official law, she performs a sharp criticism on that very law. In the play, she occupies the position of *das Ding* (i.e. the ultimate – and therefore abject – object of desire), and from this very point she is able to shed some light on the limits of the law by reminding its very basis, i.e. desire. There, the law is shown to be borne – and thus limited – by the signifier, which is to say that it has no dominion over the real. Entered the domain of the real, the antique heroine Antigone shows the limits of human (symbolic) law.

In modern tragedies, the critical voice preformed by the woman-object has become even nastier, so Lacan explains in the next seminar, on *Transference* (1960/61).³⁰ He refers to Paul Claudel’s theatre trilogy of the Coûfontaines, and more specifically its first play: *L’ôtage*. This tells the tragic story of Sygne who, in order to save her ruined house, has no other option than to sacrifice herself and to marry the one who has been responsible for the ruining of her family.³¹ Contrary to Antigone who positions herself on the place of the *Thing*

³⁰ In that seminar, Lacan states that modernity has brought a fundamental change concerning tragedy. The tragic condition is no longer the fact that the law humans live by is limited (in Lacanian terms: that law and desire need one another without being really being compatible with one another), but that this tragic finitude can only be denied. This is the result of Christianity still working through modernity. It is a genuine Judeo-Christian idea that the world is a Word product, a creation by *Logos* and made out of *Logos*, or, in Lacanian terms, signifiers. Contrary to monotheism, pagan Antiquity recognized ‘symbolically’ a domain outside the symbolic: the one of the Gods. These were referred to as being real (in the Lacanian sense), and thus untouchable by the signifier (Jacques Lacan (2001), *Le Séminaire. Livre VIII. Le Transfert*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller, Paris : Seuil : p. 58ff, 68). But since the World became Word (*Logos*) – i.e. with the success of Christianity’s incarnation-ideology in the West – there was no longer place for an affirmation of the limits or the beyond of the *Logos*. The place of the gods – i.e. the real – was “swept out”, as Lacan puts it (Lacan 1986: 302: “Ce champ des dieux, nous chrétiens, nous l’avons balayé ...”). All had become word, symbolic, signifier.

³¹ Sygne de Coûfontaine, together with her cousin Georges the only survivor after the family’s debacle caused by the French Revolution, swear an oath that they will do whatever they can in order to save and restore what is left from the greatness of the Coûfontaine House as well as from the Catholic Church and the Ancient Regime. However, things turn out the way that she can only give this project a chance by marrying the murderer of her

outside the Law, Sygne has to sacrifice that very ‘Thing’ and to remain without escape with respect to the Law. This is typical for modern drama and for modernity in general: there, the Thing (i.e. the Real beyond the limits of the universal Law) is shown as being *denied*, whereas in antique drama, it is shown as still having a place within the world (be it a marginal one), which, so Lacan explains, is the domain of the gods. In modernity, there is no longer place for the *real* dimension of desire, i.e. for the specific incompatibility of desire and law, which confronts man with the most basic level of his being: “pure desire”, desire incompatible with the element it is living of. The modern ‘heroine’ has to sacrifice this purity and singularity – or the “exceptional” status – of her desire.

The ethical condition of modernity can be formulated with respect to this, so Žižek claims in the context of the above quotations:

In the modern ethical constellation, [...] one suspends this exception of the Thing: one bears witness to one’s fidelity to the Thing by sacrificing (also) the Thing itself. [...] Without this suspension, there is no ethical act proper. So when we claim that the ethical act ‘as such’ has the structure of feminine subjectivity, ...³²

Here, Žižek’s claim is not to be missed. The act Sygne performs by marrying her family’s killer, i.e. the act giving up “what is in her more than herself”, her very ‘raison d’être’ – in Lacanese, her *object a* – is defined as being a genuine “ethical act”³³, and, in this quality, it has “the structure of feminine subjectivity”. So, if one sacrifices his object of desire, one realises what modern ethics is about. And, what is more, one realises what “feminine subjectivity” is about, which is the same as what the “act” is about: to sacrifice desire’s ultimate object. And for Žižek, this means: to be no longer determined by the ultimate ‘thing’ in which our identity and its subject are based. Sacrificing this ‘thing’ is sacrificing the ultimate constitutive element in our constitution as being ‘subject of desire’, and only this sacrifice makes a true subject of us, a “true woman”. Which is to say a new subject, a subject no longer determined by desire, phantasm and their settled symbolic order.

Do I need to say that, in this passage in Žižek, references to the Lacanian text are lacking? In his seminar on ethics, Lacan is telling quite different things. There, his point is that ethics should allow some place to the radical singularity of the ‘thing’, although this ‘thing’ lies definitely beyond the reach of ethical law. The aim of ethics is to support human

family, Toussaint de Turelure. For, so the play tells, he was aware that Sygne’s cousin, who came along that night, hid the pope in his company – the pope captured by the Napoleonic regime but, a few days before, delivered by Sygne’s cousin. So, Turelure proposes to Sygne, if you want the pope to be saved, it is up to you now; for if you will become my wife, I will save the pope, as well as the Coûfontaine house; but if you don’t, I will arrest his holiness and you and your cousin will be officially accused of high treason (Lacan 2001: 315-331).

³² Žižek 2000: 154.

³³ Žižek 2000: 152.

desire, i.e. a desire which, although supported by the law, cannot entirely be included and appropriated by it. The law cannot give desire the ‘good’ – i.e. the satisfaction – it promises, for what it ultimately promises lies beyond any good(s) and is to be defined as the radical singularity of *jouissance*. Antigone, so Lacan explains, renders desire the “dignity of the Thing”. She shows the real as the ethical law’s extimate point of reference.³⁴ But she does not offer us an example of an “authentic ethical act”. What she does, does not fit with the format of examples to follow. And the same goes for Sygne who illustrates the modern denial of the singular ‘thing’ human desire is oriented towards.

But, again, Žižek tries to overcome the merely transcendental nature of Lacan’s analysis. For according to him, such a denial or sacrifice of the Thing allows the “authentic act” to have access to the object. And since woman is the object per excellence, he must conclude that it gives women access to what makes each of them “a true woman”, “une vraie femme”. This, however, is to say that it gives access both to the subject’s unbearable truth (the object a, the ‘thing’) *and* to a subject having sacrificed that object, this is to say to a new subject, a new subjectivation. The act of sacrificing the ‘thing’ – which is a genuinely “ethical act” – both makes the subject true *and* makes it free from that very truth. Confronted with its unbearable truth, the subject frees itself from it and regains the condition to create itself anew.³⁵

8. “Drive”: ...

Is the latter not defendable with Lacan? Is Lacanian theory *simply* a transcendental theory showing us the finite nature of the desire we are? Does it *only* tell us that desire is based upon its own limits beyond which the ‘thing’ reigns as an unreachable emptiness constructing *and* deconstructing our life and identity?

Such a view on Lacan, Žižek replies, misses a shift made by Lacan himself, a shift from desire to drive, and this is why Lacan is not just the author of a transcendental theory. In a reply to a collection of critical readings of his oeuvre, he mentions this

³⁴ In other words, Antigone is first of all an *aesthetic* figure, part of an aesthetic act of *sublimation*. In sublimation, an object is “raised into the dignity of the Thing”, as Lacan puts in his ethics seminar (Lacan 1986: 133; 1992: 112). And it is only in this *aesthetic* quality, that her figure is of ethical value. It shows the limits of the law, the law’s incapacity to appropriate the ‘stuff’ it is made of (i.e. signifiers), a stuff that makes desire possible, even outside the law. See 8th chapter of: Marc De Kesel, *Eros & Ethics – Reading Jacques Lacan’s Séminarie VII*, Albany: SUNY Press (to appear in 2007).

³⁵ This is why Žižek goes as far as to say that “the true act is precisely, as Lacan puts it, that which changes the Real itself” (Beaumont M. & Jenkins M. [2000], “An Interview with Slavoj Žižek”, *Historical Materialism* 7, p. 181-97, p. 192). Needless to say that “as Lacan puts it” is not sustained by any reference to the Lacanian text.

shift in late Lacan from “transcendental” logic (symbolic castration as the ultimate horizon of our experience, emptying the place of the Thing and thus opening the space of desire) to the dimension “beyond castration” (i.e. to a position which claims that, “beyond castration”, there is more than the abyss of the Night of the Thing which swallows us) [...].³⁶

‘Desire’ goes in the direction of a void and meets ‘itself’ in meeting the limits separating it from that void. ‘Drive’ refers to the same void, but not in a negative way, as something lacking, but in a positive one, as an excess. Libidinal life is not to be considered as limited by a lack, but as driven by it as by an inherent excess. It is not so much characterized by finitude as by unbridled abundance.

[T]he concept of drive makes the alternative “either burned by the Thing or maintaining a distance” false: in a drive, the “thing itself” is a circulation around a void [...]. To put it even more pointedly, the object of drive is not related to a filler of its void: drive is literally a counter-movement to desire, it does not strive towards impossible fullness and, being forced to renounce it, gets stuck onto a partial object as its remainder – drive is quite literally the very “drive” to *break* the *all of* 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 “transcendentalised”, transposed into a stand-in for the void of the Thing.³⁷

Desire “transcendentalises” a void inherent to libidinal life as such. More precisely, on the level of the real, the “drive” makes a “rotary movement in which the linear progress of time is suspended in a repetitive loop”.³⁸ This is to say that the void is not the ‘beyond’ of libidinal life: it belongs to it; it is an inner element of its ‘drive’. It is this drive, including its void, which is transcendalised in the concept of desire. There, the void is defined as an outside, a beyond in regard to what is locked up in its own limitations: desire. This is why Lacanian “theory is *not* part of the ‘postmodern’ paradigm of ‘weak thought’”, Žižek writes two pages further. It is not a ‘theory of human finitude’ making us “accept the contingency of our existence”.³⁹

All this comes down to Žižek’s well known – in fact Hegelian – scheme: the negative is not the beyond of the positive, it is its very kernel – albeit an ‘extimite’ kernel, as he corrects Hegel with Lacan. Well known, too, is the difference he despises in Lacan between drive and desire, drive overcoming the transcendental character of desire. Space is lacking here to examine if this distinction can really be found in the Lacanian text, but even if Žižek is right, even if indeed the Lacanian concept of drive names something more radical and fundamental than the one of desire does, the question nonetheless raises if such a drive-based

³⁶ Slavoj Žižek, “Concesso non dato”, in : Geoff Boucher, Jason Glynos and Matthew Sharpe (eds.) (2005), *Traversing the Fantasy. Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek*, Aldershot: Ashgate, p. 220.

³⁷ Žižek 2005 : 248.

³⁸ Žižek 2005 : 248.

³⁹ Žižek 2005 : 250.

analysis is able to overcome its *transcendental* character. Is it able to avoid the conclusion that what it discovers in a phenomenon is at the end meant to remain ‘covered up’? Does it preclude that the masks it lifts up are meant to remain on their place? Let us have a look to Žižek’s analysis of capitalism, as referred to in the same passage:

Following Jacques-Alain Miller, a distinction has to be introduced here between lack and hole : lack is spatial, designating a void *within* a space, while hole is more radical, it designates the point at which this spatial order itself breaks down (as in the ‘black hole’ in physics”). Therein resides the difference between the difference between drive and desire: desire is grounded in its constitutive lack, while drive 1)circulates around a hole, a gap in the order of being. [...] Drive inheres to capitalism at a more fundamental, *systematic*, level: drive is that which propels the entire capitalistic machinery, it is an impersonal compulsion to engage in the endless circular movement of expanded self-reproduction. We enter the mode of drive the moment the circulation of money as capital becomes “an end in itself, for the expansion of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The circulation of capital has therefore no limits”.⁴⁰

What is the reason, according to Žižek, why capitalism has no limits? It is because it is driven by drive, not by desire. However, does desire not render capitalism limitless as well? Is it not because human desire is unsatisfiable, because it is not able to ever reaching what it is reaching for, that capitalism can feed it again and again with new commodities? Žižek does not deny this, but according to him, it does not go far enough. What bothers him is the fact that desire’s limitlessness still rests upon an absolute limit, a limit behind which the ultimate object for ever withdraws. It is in this perspective that desire’s infinity is still a form of human finitude, causing a quasi-religious acknowledgment of the Infinite. Against this idea, Žižek attempts to think capitalism’s – and, in general, libidinal life’s – *real* infinity. What seems to be beyond, is inside, it a “black hole” pushing the system forwards: not a gap *at its limits*, but a gap *inside*, a “gap in the order of being”.

9. ... a “gap in the order of being”

This expression, as used in Žižek, is not without ambiguity. The “gap in the order of being” is a typical Lacanian phrase, but it names precisely what it is not taken for by Žižek. The “gap in the order of being” is the effect of the signifier’s introduction into the real, so Lacan again and again repeats through his entire oeuvre. The signifier is based upon a break (“*coupure*”) with the real, and in this very break ‘grounds’ the ‘element’ within which desire operates (i.e. the element of the ‘symbolic’, in distinction with the one of the ‘real’). Capitalist commodity-fetishes – i.e. signifiers par excellence – form a perfect example of such an symbolic

⁴⁰ Žižek 2005 : 249-250. See also Žižek 2004: 275. For the distinction Jacques-Alain Miller makes between “lack and hole”, see his article “Lacan’s Later Teaching”, in: *Lacanian Ink*, no. 21, 2003, pp. 4-41. (With thanks to Dominiek Hoens who draw my attention to this article.)

‘element’. However, what Žižek states here is ‘exactly the opposite’ (using one of Žižek’s rhetorical tropes). As he explains, capitalism does not rest on its break *with* the real, but on a *real break*, i.e. on a break or gap *belonging to* the real. It is pushed forward by a real hole, as real and ‘physical’ as a “black hole”.

What does such imply? What else than that capitalism is real, more real than most ‘ordinary’ Lacanians would admit (i.e. those who are stuck to the ‘first Lacan’), so Žižek seems to suggest). The lack or hole the current economic system lives by belongs to the “order of being”. Capitalism does not drive upon human desire, it drives upon its own “black hole”, its own real.

However, is this not a *transcendental* analysis result par excellence, ‘transcendental’ in the sense that this kind of criticism admits it has no alternative for what it has discovered? Once the hole by which capitalism is driven is defined as real, what else is there to say than that this reality is real, that it is what it is, and will always be there since it gives things an ontological base? An ideology critique, having laid bare the real kernel in capitalism, what else, then, can it do than abandoning all plans for any radical alternative for capitalism, since it has affirmed capitalism’s ontologically based truth?

We know this is *not* Žižek’s conclusion. On the contrary, when he defines the hole in the heart of capitalism as real, it is precisely the changeability of capitalism he intends to emphasise, i.e. its inner possibility to be thrown down and to be changed into a radical new economical system. It is because this ‘hole’ is real that we can change all the things built upon that hole, including capitalism. The act, defined as jump into the real, is a jump into that hole, and allows, proceeding from this very point, to reorganize and ‘revolutionize’ the entire system. Radical – i.e. revolutionary – change is real, is based in the real, and, in this quality, brings down the symbolic order.

In fact, there is a strange confusion at work here in the way Lacanian concepts as ‘real’ and ‘symbolic’ are used. The question raises how the real – reality’s ontological ground – can be considered as a better guarantee for reality’s changeability than ‘the symbolic’, i.e. than the domain of signifiers which lacks any ontological ground, i.e. any *real* grounding. For indeed, considering reality as symbolic – as Lacan, with Lévi-Strauss, states – implies a radical criticism of the ontological pretensions in Western thought. It tells that no cultural, political or other system is built on a firm “order of being” or any other unchangeable ground. On the contrary, it acknowledges their essential changeability. It is the signifier which makes reality a realm of differences, endlessly sliding and, thus, by definition changing and changeable. For reality is considered to be a differential system of sliding signifiers which, at any time, can be

re-ordered, rearranged, changed. Being founded in its break with the real, a symbolic system is found and totalised, not by its foundation in the real (as classical philosophy thinks) but by one of its signifiers which, being itself without meaning, is used to express the meaning of the signifying totality. This “quilting point”, holding together a symbolic system, can in principle be replaced by any other signifier, which is able to immediately change the meaning of the entire (i.e. precisely the ‘totality’ of the) system.⁴¹

And what, then, is the concept of ‘the real’ meant for, as it is emphasised in late Lacan? Is it to even more underline the changeability of the libidinal identity? In fact, it is quite the contrary. The most basic level of the libidinal identity – more basic than even the ‘subject’ (bearer) – is the “phantasm”, a “scenario” of signifiers organised around (and kept at distance from) the ultimate object of desire, the *objet petit a*.⁴² This *object a* is not only to be located at the very place where the desiring apparatus is cut off from the real, its ‘*topos*’ is at the same time the locus where the apparatus remains anchored in the real, or, more precisely, where a ‘remainder’ of that real functions as an obstinate, recalcitrant element within the symbolic, slippery system. Within Lacanian subject theory, this *real* side of the (imaginary and symbolic) object stands for the fact that the subject’s desire machinery is not as slippery and flexible as a signifier based theory might think. That machinery has a ‘singular’ non-analysable kernel – in the late Lacan, a “*sinthome*”⁴³ – which resists the slipping capacity of the subject’s as well as the analyst’s desire.

Žižek’s idea of the real is based on the interpretation of a hapax legomenon in Lacan, which lies on the basis of a particular interpretation of the entire Lacanian theory. That hapax legomenon is ‘*la traversée du fantasme*’ (‘traversing the fantasy’)⁴⁴, and it has become a core concept in Jacques Alain Miller’s reading of his father-in-law’s oeuvre. The idea is that the libidinal subject is able to traverse the phantasm, and that, from the point of its *object a*, it is able to rebuild a new phantasm and a new identity. So, it is from the object a – by an “act” defined as being a jump into the real – that the subject is able to reorganize its totality and

⁴¹ For the « point de capiton », see Lacan 1966: 503, 855 ff.; Jacques Lacan (1981), *Le séminaire. Livre III. Les Psychoses*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller, Paris : Seuil, p. 303 ff.

⁴² Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire. Livre VI. Le désir et son interprétation* (inédit), lesson of 15 April 1959. See also : Jacques Lacan (1998), *Le séminaire. Livre V. Les formations de l’inconscient*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller, Paris : Seuil, p. 408-412.

⁴³ Jacques Lacan (2005), *Le séminaire. Livre XXIII. Le sinthome*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller, Paris: Seuil.

⁴⁴ « Comment le sujet qui a traversé le fantasme radical peut-il vivre la pulsion ? Cela est l’au-delà de l’analyse, en n’a jamais été abordé. Il n’est jusqu’au présent abordable qu’au niveau de l’analyste, pour autant qu’il serait exigé de lui d’avoir précisément traversé dans la totalité le cycle de l’expérience analytique ». Jacques Lacan (1973), *Le séminaire. Livre XI. Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller, p. 246. It is Jean Allouch who for the first time noticed that the expression of “traversing the fantasy” only appears once in all of Lacan’s seminars; see Jean Allouch (1998), *La psychanalyse: une érotologie de passage*, Paris: EPEL, p. 124 ff.

make a revolutionary change, even of the most basic level of its phantasm. It is only from the ‘real’ outside – an outside which is its extimate inside – that the entire symbolic system can be changed.

This basic theoretical scheme of Žižekian theory, thus, relies on a crucial confusion of some central notions in Lacan. The object Lacan defines as being the most reluctant to any change (precisely because it is real), is in Žižek (as well as in Miller) supposed to be the very point where *radical* and ‘real’ change is possible. The ‘Lacanian’ concept of the real is ascribed a position opposite to the one it has in Lacan’s own theory.

Why, then, in Žižekian theory, the Lacanian concept of the symbolic has lost its changeable and revolutionary character? One of the reasons is that Žižek considers the symbolic first of all as a *law*. Being a subject of desire and, thus, a subject/bearer of signifiers, one is *subjected* to those signifiers. One literally exists only insofar ‘a signifier represents him to another signifier’, to quote Lacan’s important definition of the signifier (which, in fact, is a definition of the subject).⁴⁵ This is to say that one is – and will always be – obliged to long for himself as for another, or in ‘Lacanese’, that the subject is alienated in the Other, and in this sense, ‘determined’ by the Other’s law. But, unlike Žižek suggests, this alienation is not to be defined as *determination*.⁴⁶ Certainly not at the level of content. This is to say that, formally and ‘transcendentally’, the subject only exists as being represented by signifiers to other signifiers. But these signifiers do not mean anything as such, which is to say that the content of their system and the meaning the subject ascribes to itself within that system depends of the dialectical relation between the libidinal apparatus (desire) and the signifier’s apparatus. This is why the symbolic order is thoroughly historical. Changes and – even – revolutions are inherent to it. The idea that symbolic systems are haunted by a remainder of the real means that the grip of their supposed subject on that their own historical dimension is not as easy as that subject is inclined to believe.

In other words, the symbolic, being this to which the subject is indeed *subjected*, is inherently inconsistent. This is why the libidinal apparatus has to suppose to find its ‘self’ on the very place where the symbolic order *lack*, where the supposed Other fails in ‘lying’ He exists. And it is precisely this (unconscious) desire to find its ‘self’ which makes the subject change the symbolic system.

⁴⁵ Lacan introduces this definition at the end of his lesson of 6 December 1961: “Le signifiant [...] est ce qui représente [...] le sujet pour un autre signifiant”, Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire. Livre IX, L’identification*, (inédit).

⁴⁶ And Žižek knows this, for it is *his* argument against Judith Butler. See Parker (2004: 124).

In fact more relying on Miller than on Lacan, Žižek supposes a symbolic system – or, more simply spoken, reality – to be radically changeable only by proceeding from the real, where as in Lacanian theory, the real marks the limits of the changeability we ascribe reality. All this is due to what I have called a ‘transcendental confusion’ with regard to the Lacanian concepts. And this confusion is due to Žižek’s discontent with the ‘transcendental’ character of the Lacanian and psychoanalytical concept. This kind of discontent is not only Žižek’s, it typifies the situation all current ideology critique is in: discovering the truth hidden by today’s ideology, they at the same time are to admit that truth will always remain hidden and that ideology names the very horizon within which we have tell lie from truth.

It is far from being a foregone conclusion that Žižek’s ‘Lacanian’ theory proposes the right solution to this problem. Circling around this problem, however, his oeuvre not only puts that problem on the agenda of today’s thinking, it also raises it to a really philosophical question. For not unlike his ‘hero’ Hegel, Žižek too seems to be a “most sublime hysterical”.⁴⁷ And this is what philosophy is for: to give a time to its ‘authentic’ hysterical questions. And if there is one thing current philosophy has learned from psychoanalysis, it is to be grateful with regard to this kind of questions.

⁴⁷ Slavoj Žižek (1988), *Le plus sublime des hystériques – Hegel passe*, Paris : Point Hors Ligne.