

THE SUBJECT OF IDEOLOGY: THE ONTOLOGICAL  
"IMPOSSIBILITY" OF SUBJECTIVITY

BY

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A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Department of Sociology  
University of Manitoba  
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**THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA**  
**FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES**  
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## Abstract

It is to the benefit of sociology as a discipline, in order for it to do its “ethical” duty, to develop methodological procedures whereby the social scientist’s position to another is “calculated” in order to approach social phenomena in an all-together objective way. However, what sociology tends to *overlook* is how its own symbolic position as a discipline, which acts with academic and social authority, determines its own findings, and therefore, undermines its own ethical validity and integrity. This is an elementary conclusion within discussions largely located in rhetoric or semantics, and would be of little consequence were it not for the fact that these conclusions (these “declarations”) permeate, distort, and effectively, make “real” the social life they purport to reveal. Far from being a prescriptive argument, this thesis, by adopting Slavoj Žižek’s reading of Jacques Lacan, works only to re-orient sociological insights in such a way as to force the reader to *recognize* ideological “reality” as being the natural, constitutive, condition for something like the possibility of subjectivity. In fact, as I demonstrate throughout the thesis, it is only on the basis of the ontological “impossibility” of subjectivity that the epistemological subject appears at all.

**For my grandfather**



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## Introduction

At the heart of this thesis is the assumption that what sociology deems as the epistemological problematic of the subject<sup>1</sup> (that the subject does not have immanent cognitive access to its social nature) is inherently problematic for the discipline itself. For example, if sociology's conception of ideology implies a basic constitutive naïveté in the subject's (mis)recognition of its own social conditions, then there is a gap between so called "true" social reality and our "false consciousness" of it.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Jacques Lacan (as I read him, through Slavoj Žižek) suggests that the ideological distortion of reality is written into the very essence of the construction of all reality. Therefore, any suggestion by sociology or psychoanalysis that the ideological illusion is located in the knowledge of the subject (i.e., in its beliefs) must be re-examined. Although this thesis speaks to the discipline of sociology, sociology itself is not my primary concern, but rather the subject of ideology. What Lacan introduces (along a psychoanalytical line) is that the essence of ideology is not an illusion masking the real state of things, but of an unconscious fantasy that structures reality itself. By addressing both the subject of ideology (through Karl Marx) and the epistemological subject (through Emile Descartes), Lacan/Žižek demonstrates how Descartes' *certainty* through *doubting* reveals (for the first time, according to Lacan) the ontological limits of what we can know.

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<sup>1</sup> As will be explored throughout this thesis, the term "subject" refers to that which "ex-sists only as nonsubstantial self-relating which maintains its distance from inner-worldly objects." Slavoj Žižek, Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out, (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1992), 137.

The structure of this thesis is based on the work of Slavoj Zizek, a contemporary philosopher who, having incorporated the psychoanalytical theories of Jacques Lacan into his own projects, has developed complex and wide reaching theories in the areas of film, art, politics, ideology, cultural studies, religion, etc. Through his work, I have been introduced to the language and structure of Lacanian psychoanalysis, which grounds this thesis as a whole. Consequently, let me be clear, that my secondary understanding of Lacan is the product of Zizek's reading of Lacan, unless otherwise specified.

This thesis is divided into four sections. The first section is devoted to the introduction of Lacan's conception of the human psyche. It is important for the reader to suspend any pre-conceived notions concerning the tradition of psychoanalysis. Although undeniably influenced by Freud, and the discipline as a whole, Lacan's conception of the psychic life of the subject is unavoidably tied to the social. As we shall see, his notions of the imaginary, symbolic, and Real are the structural components of the subject of psychoanalysis and social theory. Although each aspect can be addressed separately for analytical purposes, they are ultimately mutually implicated. This first section seeks to give the reader an elementary introduction to each of these three elements, followed by an illustration of how their inter-relationship structures even the most elementary of social interactions. Moreover, this first section is meant to familiarize the reader with Lacan's language, and to clarify how social and psychological interpretations are not mutually exclusive within Lacan's schema.

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<sup>2</sup> This is Slavoj Zizek's account of Karl Marx's conception of ideology in Capital and is exemplified in the Marx's phrase "they do not know it, but they are doing it." Slavoj Zizek. The Sublime Object of Ideology.

The second section of this thesis attempts to articulate the structure of the psyche with regards to how it operates as a mechanism for the appearance of the ontological consistency of the subject's experience of the world. Lacan attributes Descartes' search for Truth through epistemological concerns (by means of the questions, "What can I know?" and "How do I know that reality is not a dream?") as the founding gesture of the "the subject." Through the methodological procedure of doubting/skepticism, Descartes arrives at the *certainty* that he thinks, and thus exists, without reference to any supplemental external evidence or support (most significantly, "without" God). Freud, by contrast, tells us that *doubt* is a mechanism of psychic resistance (as evidenced in dream interpretation) and therefore leads to *something* (the Real) necessarily being overlooked, rather than revealed. Understood from this perspective, Descartes "I am thinking, therefore I am" appears as both an indication of, and a means to, the subject's continued non-knowledge. The key to understanding the subject's epistemological limits will be illustrated through Descartes' "I think." Although Descartes is introduced at the start of section two, he is pushed to the background until the section's end in order to adequately demonstrate how Descartes, inadvertently, demonstrates the epistemological "impossibility" of an ontological *identity* due to the nature of Lacan's conception of the subject of the "forced choice."

Section three begins with a reconsideration of section two's conclusion in order to show, through Kant's critique of Descartes (which is really Žižek's interpretation), how the subject's (Descartes') epistemological limits can, bring about something like the appearance of an ontologically consistent reality because

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(London: Versa, 1989), p. 28.

of its grounding in the “I” of the “I think.” Therefore, in a very Real way, the subject now appears to be fundamentally ‘out of sync’ within the world, due to the fact that, in part, its internal subjective limits are materialized in the external objective world. The discussion of Hegel’s critique of Kant (again, based in Zizek’s study) acts as a bridge between Descartes and Lacan in that it shifts the discussion from an epistemological question of what the subject can know, to the Lacanian conception of the ontological inaccessibility of the subject’s own subjectivity. Or, to put more simply, the subject can never know the true nature of its own beliefs or thoughts. This leads the discussion back to the question of ideology, which allows me to address more explicitly what is at stake, not only between the subject’s *belief* and the subject’s *activity*, but in the *space* that this distinction can be located. What should be made clear by this section’s end is that our continued participation in a “false” reality, despite our knowledge of its artificiality, is due, not to some obstacle of self-consciousness that must be overcome, but by the fact that *reality resists dissolution*.

The final section begins with the paradoxical relationship between the social sciences, the subject of its study and how social theory can actually perpetuate the subject’s ‘problematic’ reality rather than facilitate the subject’s ‘escape.’ Soren Kierkegaard’s conception of the present age, and the religious subject, allows the social scientist and the social subject to be shown against the backdrop of the “temptation of the Ethical” and its “mythical” suspension.

## Section 1: Welcome to Lacan

Lacan understands the human psyche in terms of three exigencies: the *imaginary*, the *symbolic*, and the *Real*. Although crediting Sigmund Freud for mapping out the possibility of an understanding of the psyche, Lacan is adamant that his categories are not new names for the “ego,” “superego,” and the “unconscious.”<sup>3</sup> Lacan’s concepts are undeniably similar (and at times interchangeable), but their relationship to each other within the configuration of the psychic system is fundamentally different from what Freud theorized.<sup>4</sup> The imaginary, the symbolic, and the Real should be understood together as an undifferentiated “structure.” But in order to illustrate how this unitary phenomenon functions, it will be useful to approach each of its sub-systems in terms of how they constitute the subject as “subject.”

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<sup>3</sup> Leupin, Alexandre, ed. Lacan & the Human Sciences. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Zizek insists that a critical difference between Freud and Lacan’s theories is manifest in their conception of repression. The process of repression is arguably the conceptual cornerstone of psychoanalysis and generally denotes the structural necessity of the individual’s psyche to distort or disguise that, which is “unthinkable.” This allows the individual’s “reality” to appear cohesive and total. However, the nature of the something that is repressed (and subsequently the structure of its repression) is understood differently in Lacan’s schema of the psyche than in Freud’s. Zizek (1989), The Sublime Object of Ideology, op. cit., p. 45. Although this will be further addressed throughout the paper, let me offer the following example as an introduction to what I (Lacan/Zizek) mean: A man is expecting an urgent, but dreaded phone call. While he is asleep and dreaming, the phone rings and the sound is incorporated into the dream’s manifest-text as a threatening fire alarm. The anxiety produced by the ‘alarm’ in the dream wakes the man up. A Freudian interpretation of the dream might suggest that the ringing was incorporated into the dream ‘reality’ in order to keep the man asleep, thereby allowing him to avoid the reality of the phone call. A Lacanian interpretation, on the other hand, might suggest that, as we are closest to confronting the Real of our unconscious thoughts through our dreams, only by waking (i.e., escaping) into the illusions of ‘reality’ did the man escape the (Real)ity within his dream.



## The Imaginary

At the level of the *imaginary*, the subject's sense of self is "caught up" in the binary system of "myself and the Other."<sup>5</sup> The nature of this relationship is illusionary. Because the imaginary is, essentially, a closed circle of the subject's preconcepts, the subject finds only what it is looking for<sup>6</sup>. At the level of the imaginary, the subject is "pathological" in the sense that it is caught up in itself, it is compelled to respond to psychological/biological impulses and/or desires without being able to access the Real meaning of these responses/behaviors or their relationship to anOther. This is best explicated through an extrapolation of Lacan's "mirror-stage": when I look into a mirror, I see, and thereby appear to myself, as a cohesive unit. That is, I understand that the consistent image before me is a complete empirical representation of myself. Because this external image, my reflection, simultaneously constitutes my identity as it creates the condition for its appearance, I necessarily overlook the point in the image that looks back at me - the Gaze<sup>7</sup> itself. It is this invisible Gaze,<sup>8</sup> which determines how I see myself. Unknowingly, through my desire to know/find myself as a complete entity, I associate my identification with the Gaze as being that of the

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<sup>5</sup> Although the Other, or "big Other" (in Lacan's terms), is not explicitly addressed here, the "O" is capitalized to illustrate the fact that we are not speaking of an individual (small other) endowed with positive characteristics, but rather the Other of the symbolic order, which is an abstraction. For example, my relationship to another citizen, as citizen, speaks to my relationship to the big Other.

<sup>6</sup> Žižek (1992), op. cit., p.19.

<sup>7</sup> Again, "G" is capitalized here in order to distinguish between the gaze of another individual and the Gaze of the symbolic order. This too will be addressed later.

<sup>8</sup> The Gaze is "invisible" in that it is not objectively represented in the reflection though its presence is the condition for the subject's connection with its image.

image. It is this “objective”<sup>9</sup> representation that acts in my place (i.e., that signifies me) within the symbolic field.

### **The Symbolic:**

At the level of the imaginary, the subject (mis)recognizes or overlooks the *symbolic* support for its relationship to the world. Continuing with the above example, by associating myself with some external representation of myself (my reflection) I alienate myself in that Other image. I associate who I am as *always already*<sup>10</sup> being equal to the empirical representation looking back at me. My identity is effectively divided, in that I have posited into this cohesive image the “property of ‘being-an-equivalent’ [which] appears to belong to [me] even outside its relation to (my bearing witness to it).”<sup>11</sup> What I cannot see in my reflection, what I cannot recognize, is that the image before me is not the objective “me,” but rather is an effect of a network of social relations which dictates the relationship between image and identity.<sup>12</sup> The uncanny Gaze that looks back at me is possible only because of my inclusion into a symbolic network of signifiers, which, due to its nature (as a closed system of signification) *always already* directs my desire/interpretation. By doing so, I *find* myself filling the void in the symbolic

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<sup>9</sup> So called, “objective” reality, is given its “material” weight, not by its substantiality, but through effective social (i.e., symbolic) relations. This will be addressed in the sections to follow.

<sup>10</sup> “Always already” is how Žižek recognizes that there is no subject outside of its inclusion in the symbolic, i.e., the subject is *always already* constituted by its entrance into the symbolic order.

<sup>11</sup> Slavoj Žižek (1989), op. cit., p.21.

<sup>12</sup> In Milan Kundera’s novel *Immortality*, the female narrator suggests that if people did not have mirrors, they would create fantasies of how they looked to those around them; fantasies that would be shattered when at forty years of age they are finally shown their reflection and are faced with the “reality” that they are not who they thought they were. This is interesting for two reasons: first, it offers the possibility of non-recognition in relation to our objective appearance, and secondly, it re-asserts the authority of the image in that it *corrects* our conception of who we think we are after so many years of self-deception.

system, that my inclusion created.<sup>13</sup> Because I am not substantially this signifier, this reflection/representation, I assume this empty space in the symbolic by *formally* filling it with *nothing*. My “objective” identity, which looks back at me is but a proposition (an abstraction) that will fit only in so far that it continues to make sense in the economy of relationships within which it/“I”<sup>14</sup> circulate. In other words, “I” am not “false-consciousness” as a social (being); rather, I am a social being in so far as my ontological consistency is supported by my “false consciousness.”<sup>15</sup> The Lacanian subject is:

[I]reducibly split into the “pathological” subject made of “flesh and blood” and the ethical [social] subject, a kind of symbolic fiction, an abstract participant of the “original situation” in which the social contract was made. The status of this social contract... is also that of a symbolic fiction.<sup>16</sup>

Just as Marx’s labourer continues to “freely” sell his/her labour at market as if it were an expression of the free market, I continue to re-affirm that my ever changing reflection is an uncanny and absolute expression of me, blind to the reality that what I see has been forced on me the moment I found myself outside

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<sup>13</sup> In the 1999 film, *Being John Malkovich*, a portal is discovered behind a filing cabinet within a strange office located between the seventh and eight floor. Upon entering the portal, an individual’s consciousness is temporarily transplanted into the unconscious subjectivity of the actor, John Malkovich. The transported individual consciousness can see through the actor’s eyes and experience the actor’s conscious physical and mental sensations. That John Malkovich is initially unaware of the presence of visiting consciousnesses can be explained from one of two positions: either the foreign consciousness finds him/herself within the blind spot of Malkovich consciousness (i.e., manifesting the Gaze which looks back at him though from where he cannot see) or alternatively, part of Malkovich understanding of himself includes the knowledge of the “big Other” (i.e., he can look at himself as an object from the perspective of the general public). Subsequently, when the transported consciousness drops in and recognizes the reflection in the mirror, Malkovich’s consciousness is not interrupted (i.e., his “celebrity” identity is compatible with the visitor’s identification of John Malkovich, celebrity). As I have alluded to, the first example illustrates an explanation at the level of the imaginary, and the second at the level of the symbolic.

<sup>14</sup> As will become clearer in the discussion of the Cartesian subject, Lacan/Zizek illustrate that the subject’s use of “I” as in “I am,” “I will,” etc., is inherently problematic in that what the subject means by “I” at the level of the imaginary, has a completely different meaning at the level of the symbolic.

<sup>15</sup> Zizek (1989), op. cit., p21.

<sup>16</sup> Zizek (1992), op. cit., p.71.

myself (for example, in my reflection, or in the commodity-form, etc.). The subject's inability to confront that, which bars it's understanding (the thing which blinds it to the "radical discontinuity between the organic immediacy of 'life' and the symbolic universe"),<sup>17</sup> is the very Thing<sup>18</sup> that permits the ontological consistency of the subject's existence. The consistency of "reality" is maintained by a certain, "So be it!" within the psyche of the subject that allows the subject to overlook the symbolic order's contradictions. But from where within the individual's psyche does this authority reside? "The status of the voice uttering this command [So be it!] is neither imaginary nor symbolic, it is *Real*."<sup>19</sup>

### **The Real:**

The Real is comparable to Freud's notion of the unconscious in that it is impossible, unthinkable, unspeakable, and traumatic, but unlike Freud's conception, the Real has no positive existence and its repression is not of the past, but from the future. The Real is not a "thing" that is repressed only to emerge again in some distorted form; rather it is *nothing*, taking a positive form only when it returns. " '(I)n every symbolic formation, there is a psychotic ["impossible"] kernel at work by means of which the real is immediately rendered...."<sup>20</sup> (This "kernel" will later be referred to as *objet petit a*.)

The Real will be discussed at greater length in the second and third sections of the paper, but a brief example here will serve as a means of accessing

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<sup>17</sup> Zizek (1992), op. cit., p.53.

<sup>18</sup> Capital "T", Thing, refers to the void (gap, hole, etc.) in the symbolic, which is at once, evidence for the symbolic order's inconsistency, and the possibility of its appearing as a cohesive whole.

<sup>19</sup> Slavoj Zizek, Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture, (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991), p.130.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p.43

its structure. A man is dating a woman but does not wish to see her any longer. After their break up, she is hit by a car, and dies. The man is devastated (for life), realizing that it was 'wrong' to leave her, because he loves her above all else. Now the Real is not manifest in the old adage, "you don't know what you've got until its gone." But rather in the idea that, "only when someThing is gone forever, is it desired." In other words, the subject is constituted in and for its desire for the Thing, the forever "lost object," that, though it can never be found, forever envelops the subject's notion of reality. The Real of the man's desire is not for the woman, but for that someThing within her that remains forever unattainable.

### **The Turn of the Screw: The Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real**

In light of this overview, of the three psychic exigencies, it may be helpful to offer an example of how the three relate to each other. The following example will stage how *fantasy* (the product of desire) can unwittingly structure the meeting of two individuals and how this single meeting can direct/distort all other perceptions.

Henry James' The Turn of the Screw is the story of a young governess who is hired to care for two children at an isolated estate, Bly House. Miss Jenny is hired by the children's uncle under the condition that she never contact him under any circumstances. Taking upon herself this extraordinary responsibility, Miss. Jenny takes it upon herself to care for the children completely, even to the extent of taking over their education when the boy, Miles, is mysteriously sent home from boarding school. But, it is not long before the young governess finds

her sovereignty over the children threatened, when the ghosts of the previous governess and her lover appear. From a Lacanian perspective, the traces of the tragedy that would follow can be found as early as Miss. Jenny's first meeting with the children's uncle.

Having seen the advertisement, Miss. Jenny travels to the city in order to answer the *call* of a man who is in desperate need of a governess. The uncle has recently inherited his orphaned niece (Laura, a girl of six) and nephew (Miles, a boy of eight ) and has no interest in raising them himself. The man is young and attractive, a mythical man with whom Miss. Jenny cannot immediately relate: "(S)uch a figure as had never risen, save in a dream or an old novel, before a fluttered, anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage."<sup>21</sup>

Before she (the subject) can identify with, (i.e., symbolically (mis)recognize), the uncle (the Other) as object, she is trapped by the Uncle through a paradoxical *object-cause* of desire<sup>22</sup> (through the secret *kernel* supposed to be hidden by/in the Other). Before Miss. Jenny can "objectively" determine the uncle's condition (i.e., that of a young bachelor using his exorbitant wealth to unburden himself of the responsibility of caring for the children entrusted to him - a man whose selfishness she would normally find impenetrable), she is caught up in the distortions of desire. Essentially, Miss Jenny identifies with "that which is in him more than himself,"<sup>23</sup> i.e., *what she interprets to be his particular need off for her*. This hidden, secret, "call for help"

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<sup>21</sup> Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1991), p.4.

<sup>22</sup> Lacan's notion of the "object-cause of desire" (also called *objet petit a*, *objet a*, secret, little piece of the real, or hard kernel) refers to the subject's most external point ("ex-timate point") of its subjectivity. This too will be made clearer in section two.

within the uncle, is Miss. Jenny's *objet petit a*.<sup>24</sup> It is the hard kernel of his desperate need of her that exists only in her (mis)recognition of it.

He struck her, *inevitably* as gallant and splendid, but what took her most of all and gave her the courage she afterward showed<sup>25</sup> was that he put the whole thing to her as a favor, an obligation he should gratefully incur.<sup>26</sup> (*Italics added*)

The "inevitability" of the uncle being perceived as "gallant" and "splendid" is a retroactive allocation of these qualities to him only after Miss. Jenny has (mis)perceived his call for a governess to be a call *to her* - a call that only she can hear.<sup>27</sup> This (mis)perception is the product of the process of subjectivization:

By means of 'subjectivization,' the subject (presup)poses the existence of a symbolic network, which enables (her) to experience the universe as a meaningful totality, as to locate (her) place in it, i.e., to identify (her)self with a place in the symbolic space.<sup>28</sup>

Miss. Jenny *finds* herself *in* the Uncle when she (mis)perceives his general need of a governess to be a personal plea for assistance, thereby creating a symbolic space for herself within his world, as she simultaneously fills it.

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<sup>23</sup> Zizek (1991), op. cit., p.8.

<sup>24</sup> As Alan Sheridan explains this term in relationship to his translation of Lacan's text:  
The 'a' in question stands for 'autre' (other), the concept having been developed out of the Freudian 'object' and Lacan's own exploitation of 'otherness.' The 'petit a' (small 'a') differentiates the object (whilst relating it to) the 'Autre' or 'grand 'Autre' (the capitalized 'Other').

Alan Sheridan in Jacques Lacan, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis, Jacques-Alain Miller, ed. (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977), p. 282. See also page 10n18 of this paper.

<sup>25</sup> The importance of this courage instilled in her by her (mis)recognition of the uncle's intention will show itself in her relationship to the children of Bly House.

<sup>26</sup> James, op. cit., p.4.

<sup>27</sup> Other woman had turned the job down because of the strange demands of the position, but this seemed to indicate to Miss Jenny that only she could effectively *fill the empty position*, i.e., fill the void of the Thing with the substance of her desire (objet petit a).

<sup>28</sup> Slavoj Zizek (1992), op. cit., p. 186.

As was discussed above, Miss. Jenny is unable to immediately identify with the Uncle because of his abhorrent bourgeoisie excessiveness. When she is confronted with this mythical man, a gap in her own imagined world is created (a position of non-meaning) and she is nervous and feels, in a sense, out of place in her own world. However, through the process of (what Lacan/Zizek call) *subjectivization*, Miss. Jenny identifies with her lack of understanding by finding/positing it outside of herself in the form of a call created by the Uncle's desperate need/lack? In other words, the Uncle becomes the very embodiment of a man "who has everything" precisely insofar as he occupies the place of exception with regard to it - that of being in dire need.<sup>29</sup> To further clarify this point, let us draw from Zizek's example:

We all know Hegel's deservedly famous answer to Napoleon's 'not man is a hero to his valet': 'not, however, because the man is not a hero, but because the valet is a valet, whose dealings are with the man, not as a hero, but as one who eats, drinks, and wears clothes' – in short the valet's gaze is unable to perceive the world-historical dimension of the hero's public deeds. The lesson of the Lacanian *objet petit a* as the remainder of the Real here is that Hegel has to be supplemented... (I)n order to venerate a person as a hero, the awareness of the world-historical dimension is not enough; in order for this awareness to become a true veneration, it has to be supplemented by some detail from the 'pathological' domain of the hero's idiosyncratic fancies – it is only because this 'little piece of the reality,' this touch of the 'real person' behind the public mask (some personal weakness or similar 'endearing foible'), that changes a noncommittal appreciation into true veneration.<sup>30</sup>

When Miss. Jenny identifies with that "real" person within him (this uncanny familiarity, this *objet petit a*), the uncle is raised to the level of a "sublime

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<sup>29</sup> Slavoj Zizek, The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-Theory, (London: British Film Institute, 2001), p. 27.



object,” (“the concrete universal”).<sup>31</sup> That she is the only one who can *see* his personal weakness beneath all of his wealth and privilege elevates the uncle to the position of being a pure object of veneration,<sup>32</sup> a *Thing* in Lacan’s terms.<sup>33</sup>

The crucial point not to be missed is that *objet a* functions as the inherent, internal “excess” which impedes from within the “smooth running” of the psychic apparatus, as its immanent antagonism, whereas reality always, by definition, appears as an *external* limit; the Lacanian name for such an internal self-impediment is, of course, the *Real*... “(R)eality” is not something given in advance but something the ontological status of which is in a way secondary, in other words: something constituted in the precise meaning this term acquired in German idealism. What we call “(external) reality” constitutes itself by means of a primordial act of “rejection”: the subject “rejects,” “externalizes” its immanent self-impediment, the vicious circle of the driven antagonism, into the “external” opposition between the demand of its drives and those of the opposed reality.<sup>34</sup>

The uncle’s position in Miss Jenny’s reality (that of a Master Signifier in Lacan’s terms) is privileged in that, from this point on, everything that Miss Jenny does to help the children will be for him. In other words, in taking the position of governess, by “sacrificing” herself (as he put it) she becomes indebted to the uncle, not because she is grateful for the job, but because he has given to her a great responsibility for which she now owes him the exceptional care of the children.

What is not clear in James’s story is how Miss Jenny could be so enchanted by the uncle as to subordinate her entire being to acting under his

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<sup>30</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: or, why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 48.

<sup>31</sup> Žižek (1991), op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>32</sup> This Thing that becomes the object of veneration, is also referred to as the phallus, the lost object, or the Master Signifier at different times in this paper.

<sup>33</sup> Žižek (1992), op. cit., p.8.

<sup>34</sup> Žižek, find quote

pervasive, but absent, Gaze?<sup>35</sup> As he was never to be contacted, and therefore, would never know precisely what she did *for* the children, she nonetheless acted *as if* he could. This exaggerated and pathological fixation on the Uncle appears to come out of nowhere, so from where does it come? It might be suggested that her fascination with the Uncle is but a means to narcissistic self-congratulation in that she sees hers as a privileged position, or that she is somehow destined to be the answer to his needs. But this would only be, what will later be called, a “latent” interpretation of her behavior. The question is, in the Real of her desires, what motivates her transition from the imaginary (being mystified by the Uncle) to the symbolic (where she is the destined answer to his call)?

A 1994 (Showcase) film version of *The Turn of the Screw* tries to answer this question by implying (through a sequence of Miss Jenny’s dreams) that her father, a minister, committed suicide when she was a young girl. For the sake of interest, let us assume this is the case. As was suggested above, when Miss Jenny is confronted with the uncle for the first time, he inadvertently takes the symbolic position of the Master Signifier, for which all activity is offered. (The Master signifier of a system determines all other relationships within that system, despite the fact its privileged position is, objectively, unjustifiable.) The uncle is perceived to be something more than himself precisely in that he offers her (unbeknownst to either of them) identification with her father. The “little piece of

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<sup>35</sup> It is also interesting that Miss Jenny’s (mis)identification with the “kernel” of the Uncle’s being is the inverse of the male fantasy which sustains the pacified integration into the symbolic order (i.e., the symbolic Law of sexual constraints in the Name-of-the Father) only by sustaining by some hidden exceptional transgression (i.e., some super-ego injunction (the primordial father) to enjoy excessive sexual pleasure; whereas, the uncle in himself assumes the position of unbridled sexuality which is sustained by the secret of his symbolic paternal function. Here we see that the object-cause of desire is constituted through the uncle’s transgression of his sexual liberty. See Žižek (2000), *The Fragile Absolute*, p.24.

the real” (i.e., *objet petit a*) that Miss Jenny sees in the uncle, that makes him more than himself, distorts/warps her feelings of responsibility for her father’s death by manifesting it in the form of *his* asking for help. In taking the position of governess, Miss Jenny, in the Real of her desire, responds to her father by saving/sacrificing the children in order to redeem her father, i.e., in order to save his soul. That the debt to be re-paid is metaphysical (the soul) is supported by the fact that she must protect the children, not from mortal danger (strangers, cars, etc.), but from the supernatural, i.e., ghosts. Only by saving the children at a metaphysical level can her father be saved from eternal damnation. This is further evidenced by her transference of desire to the children (particularly Miles) as she struggles to have the children confess to that which is secret within them (their knowledge of the ghosts presence). What is to be the unanswered question of the James’ reader (and the film’s director) is whether Miles confesses to the reality of the ghosts or the Real of Miss Jenny’s desire.<sup>36</sup> Henry James’ story ends as follows:

With the stroke of the loss I was so proud of he uttered the cry of a creature hurled over an abyss, and the grasp with which I recovered him might have been that of catching him in the fall. I caught him, yes, I held him – it may be imagined with what a passion; but at the end of a minute I began to feel what it truly was that I held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped.<sup>37</sup>

Can we not see in this statement further evidence of the film’s success? When Miles states the name of the ghost, Miss Jenny takes it to be evidence, not just of the ghosts, but perhaps too, of her being fixed within her father’s omnipotent

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<sup>36</sup> One of the characteristics of the subject’s *objet petit a* is that, despite its many forms, it carries with it the same meaning within each of the symbolic networks that it travels. Žižek,

Gaze. The excessive intensity of her initial success stands in stark contrast to the realization that the boy is dead. When Miles speaks the name of the ghost it is a release from the relentless building of tension for both the characters and the reader. If Miles did not speak the name, then Miss. Jenny is a monster in a most horrific form: as the "objective observer who sees evil everywhere."<sup>38</sup> But Miles *does* speak the name and in doing so returns Miles from the limbo realm of the Real (the terrifying, "grey and formless," the "pulsing" chaotic abyss<sup>39</sup>), back into that of the symbolic (the dispossessed, the ethical, the dead). The experience of the Real was felt equally for Miss Jenny as it was for Miles and each epitomizes the dual nature of the Real:

The Real is not only death but also life: not only the pale, frozen, lifeless immobility but also 'the flesh from which everything exudes.'... (T)he duality of life and death drives is not a symbolic apposition but a tension, and antagonism, inherent to the presymbolic Real.<sup>40</sup>

By speaking in order to survive Miss Jenny's assault, Miles becomes the materialized void of that which remains when "we have lost our symbolic support."<sup>41</sup> But rather than being liberated (i.e., having the horizon of possibility opened before him), Miles, in his disclosure is emptied of the very Thing that kept him protected by/from Miss Jenny. For Miss Jenny, having paid her father's debt by saving Miles (a saved soul for a saved soul), is left with the material left-over of Miles' lifeless body that she kills him (out of love!) once he/it is emptied of the

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<sup>37</sup> James, op. cit., p.87.

<sup>38</sup> Zizek (1992), p. 122.

<sup>39</sup> See Zizek's discussion of Robert Heinlein's, The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathon Hoag in Zizek (1991), op. cit., p.14.

<sup>40</sup> Zizek (1992), op. cit., p.22.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.7.

“fillers” of the “empty places in [her] fantasy structure.”<sup>42</sup> The irony of course is that only by saving him does she kill him. Only by killing him, and thereby symbolically killing herself (for in Miles was the only objective witness to the “evil” she had conquered at Bly House), is she saved from the guilt of her father’s death.<sup>43</sup>

What will be the crux of the rest of this thesis is to approach this moment between chaos and order, the meaningless and the meaningful, the imaginary and the symbolic, and between the dream and reality. What we will find is that the moment just prior to identification does not follow the logic of a self-fulfilling prophesy (where someone simply “finds” what they are looking for), but is rather “a radical openness in which every ideal support of our existence is suspended.”<sup>44</sup> For Lacan, the father of this Event’s appearance is Descartes. By systematically doubting everything in order to conclude someThing, Descartes effectively splits human subjectivity forever in that “the subject” (of any discipline) can no longer be thought of outside of the epistemological assumptions about what the subject can and cannot know.

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<sup>42</sup> Idem.

<sup>43</sup> Here, Žizek equates Lacan’s position with Hegel’s:

(F)or Hegel...if we subtract from the thing the distortion of the screen [that is the Real], we loose the thing itself...which is why, for Lacan, who here follows Hegel, the thing in itself is ultimately the Gaze, not the perceived object.

Žizek (1992), op. cit., p.221.

<sup>44</sup> Žizek (1992), op. cit., p.8.

## Section 2: Reality is structured like a dream.

Descartes believed that only that which is perceived with absolute clarity can ever be true; therefore the muddled pre-conceived notions of the world must be bracketed out to permit access to things as they truly are. He reasoned that the first step to certainty is to “doubt everything.” All things should be doubted, at least initially. These “things” include, not only one’s own beliefs and presumptions, but all phenomena that one perceives outside of one’s self: other beings, nature, and most significantly, God. The world perceived through the senses can be misleading. In a *dream*, for example, the dreamer is unable to distinguish the “reality” that is the experience of the dream from the reality of waking life. Because the individual cannot be certain that his/her whole life is not a dream, the world of the senses (the world of God) must be doubted.

### Is it a dream or reality?

Once upon a time Chuang Tsu dreamed that he was a butterfly, a butterfly fluttering about enjoying itself. It did not know that it was Chuang Tsu. Suddenly he awoke with a start and he was Chuang Tsu again. But he did not know whether he was Chuang Tsu who had dreamed that he was a butterfly, or whether he was a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Tsu.<sup>45</sup>

Although Zhuang-Zhi’s parable initially strikes the reader as an account of two inversely related, parallel worlds (where “reality” is the unconscious of the dream and the dream the unconscious of “reality”), the symmetry is disrupted in the recognition that only in “reality” can the subject recognize that it has been dreaming and is now awake. In other words, the “symmetry” between the two

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<sup>45</sup> Chuang Zsu in Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty. “*The Boundary Between Myth and Reality*,” Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Science (Spring:1980), p. 99.

worlds is an illusion evidenced by the fact that the dialectical split is possible only one way.<sup>46</sup> The illusion cannot run both ways. Only in reality can the subject have knowledge of the fact that it participates in two “realities” simultaneously. But, paradoxically, only in a dream, precisely because the subject is completely (i.e., singularly) immersed in the dream consciousness, can it (the subject) come close to a Real awakening. As we will see, the truth of the subject’s desire (i.e., the Real of its desire) is most fully revealed to the subject within a dream. The trick, however, is that the dream can only maintain its consistency if the “real” world is kept from the subject’s conscious awareness. The activity of distracting the subject’s consciousness is essentially the work of deception and is the function of the “dream-work.”

What is the significance of Descartes question, “How do I know that my whole life isn’t a dream?” If a dreaming individual, such as myself, is unable to distinguish reality from dream “reality” how can I know which side of (un)consciousness I am on. What if my (everyday) belief that I am not dreaming (i.e., that I am able to “fully” assume the knowledge of two states of awareness) is the very condition that allows me to overlook the fact that I *am* dreaming? As I cannot answer these questions if I do not know whether I am dreaming or not, is there anything that I can know about the nature of my skepticism - my doubt?

### **Doubt**

For Sigmund Freud, the appearance of uncertainty or doubt in the analysand’s communication of his/her dreams (and reality) is derivative of the process of “dream-censorship” and as such points, with *certainty*, to some

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<sup>46</sup> Žižek (1989), op. cit., p.

repressed desire.<sup>47</sup> For Freud, dreams consist of three structural parts: the manifest dream-text, the latent dream-text (or thought) and the unconscious desire (i.e., the positive repressed content of the dream).<sup>48</sup>

Although it is generally believed that the essence of dream interpretation lies in understanding what is immediately signified in the manifest dream-text, i.e., the latent dream-thought, Freud posits that the unconscious is not part of the conscious-social mind and as such, does not have a social language or text by which to articulate itself. The key to dream interpretation then is to understand the *mechanism* (the “dream-work”) whereby repressed unconscious desire shows itself in the manifest dream-text by way of a distortion. Essentially, the unconscious desire “short-circuits” (Lacan’s term) with the latent dream-thoughts, producing the signifying images of the manifest dream-text.<sup>49</sup> Seen in this way, the unconscious desire is not “hidden deeper” than the latent dream-thought, but is on the surface, consisting entirely of the “signifier’s mechanisms” in the elaboration of its latent content.<sup>50</sup>

The degree of abstraction by which the latent-thought is distorted in the manifest dream-text is not uniform by any means. If the analysand can articulate a cohesive narrative of his/her dream with confidence, then the “dream-work” has been successful in obscuring the unconscious desire from conscious *judgment*. On the other hand, if the analysand is uncertain or doubts an element of the dream, then the work of censorship is insufficient, signaling the analyst to

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<sup>47</sup> Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams (New York: Avon Books, 1965), p. 555.

<sup>48</sup> Žižek (1989), op. cit., p.13.

<sup>49</sup> Idem.

<sup>50</sup> Idem.



address, (again, with certainty) that the element in question has a closer relationship to the latent-thought than is “safe.”<sup>51</sup>

If any doubt is thrown upon the value of the element in question, the psychical result in the patient is that none of the involuntary ideas underlying that element comes into his head. This result is not a self-evident one.... [I]t is precisely the fact that doubt produces this interrupting effect upon an analysis that reveals it as a derivative and tool of psychical resistance. Psych-analysis is justly suspicious. One of its rules is that *whatever interrupts the progress of analytic work is a resistance*.<sup>52</sup>

Lacan too suggests that doubt is a sign of resistance. However, its appearance indicates to the analyst that *something*<sup>53</sup> within the analysand’s “reality” needs to be preserved in order for it to continue to recreate itself.<sup>54</sup> Although doubt directs the analysand to believe that an element of a dream is unimportant or inaccessible (and should therefore be *overlooked*), to the analyst, doubt announces a gap between the individual’s experience of the dream and his/her account of it. It is a void which must *certainly* be filled by an unconscious desire (Freud), by “a little piece of the real” (Žižek/Lacan). That this certainty is derivative of doubt, i.e., that *someThing*<sup>55</sup> is revealed through its

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<sup>51</sup> Just to be clear, the manifest dream-text is “safe” if, even upon careful self-reflection, the relationship between the latent dream-thought and the manifest dream-text is fundamentally inaccessible to the dreamer. There is, however, a relationship between the two, i.e., they are negatively correlated to each other: “Where one is, the other is not.”

<sup>52</sup> Freud, op. cit., p.555.

<sup>53</sup> Although I will clarify this shortly, let me just say that for Lacan, the subject itself is constituted in this overlooking of *someThing* which is the constitutive positive correlate to the pure negative void that is the subject. (Much of the preliminary work for this discussion was introduced in the first section of this paper.)

<sup>54</sup> Lacan, op. cit., p.35.

<sup>55</sup> “Thing” is capitalized here in order to make clear a distinction between Freud’s repressed something, which is some positive event, or desire, that cannot be thought, and Lacan’s *someThing*, the empty, negative, suggestion of Form: “a chimeric apparition which, although it can nowhere be spotted as a positive, clearly delineated entity, nonetheless functions as the ultimate Thing regulating our lives.” Žižek (1992), op. cit., p123.

own absence, marks the point of convergence between Freud and Descartes as it relates to Lacan's conception of the subject of the "forced choice."<sup>56</sup>

### **The Malicious Demon**

The philosophical climate of the eighteenth century is generally conceived as one of skepticism. The authority of scholasticism and theology manifest in given or self-evident knowledge had come under scrutiny in light of the developments of the new sciences, raising questions as to the essence of matter, the processes of nature, and ultimately, the nature of God. Traditional doctrines and beliefs of the Middle Ages and Renaissance increasingly appeared irrational and superstitious.

For Zizek, Descartes was the first to "crack the ontologically consistent universe" of the pre-Enlightenment era<sup>57</sup> through his work in the Meditations on First Philosophy. The significance of this "crack" is that in its dividing, the subject of the "lost object" was forever lost. Descartes theorized a final blow to a "God-centered" universe, which bestowed authority and power to corrupt incumbents of "divine will" (the Church, government, academy, etc.), by formally shifting this, what will later be called pre-modern or pre-Enlightenment, ideology to a more *reasonable* "(hu)man-centred" universe.

Although God continues to exist in Descartes' universe, He is literally *reasoned* back into existence. Effectively, God is no longer the creator of Man, but Man the creator of God. At least this is how Descartes will be remembered by History: (i.e., through "the Master's gaze which, viewing history from a safe

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<sup>56</sup> I will return to this notion of a "forced choice" on page 33.

metalanguage distance, constructs the linear narrative of ‘historical evolution.’”)<sup>58</sup> But what this perspective (must) forget, according to Žižek, is that the “founding gesture” of the Enlightenment is the suspension of a “forced choice,” an ahistorical Act that is announced when *doubt* becomes *certainly*. Or, to rephrase this with a psychoanalytical twist, *behind the doubt there is the thought*.

(I)n the term *subject* – I am not designating the living substratum needed by this phenomenon of the subject, nor any sort of substance, nor any being possessing knowledge in his *pathos*, his suffering, whether primal or secondary, nor even some incarnated *logos*, but the Cartesian subject, who appears at the moment when doubt is recognized as certainty – except that, through my approach, the bases of this subject prove to be wider, but, at the same time much more amenable to the certainty that eludes it. This is what unconscious is.<sup>59</sup>

Knowing what we know about doubt in relation to dream interpretation and combined with Lacan’s suggestion that “reality is structured like a fiction,” what can be made of Descartes’ suggestion (in his first meditation) that he is determinately uncertain as to whether or not (waking) reality is a dream.

How can this be? Simply put, “there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep.”<sup>60</sup> Of course this is the very problem that Chuang Zsu’s presents. Is it possible to have certain knowledge that something exists without first reflecting on one’s degree/mode of consciousness? Is there a type of knowledge of which I can be certain of,

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<sup>57</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with The Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), p.12.

<sup>58</sup> Žižek (1992), op. cit., p.80.

<sup>59</sup> Lacan, op. cit., p.126.

<sup>60</sup> Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*. Trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 13.

irregardless of whether I am dreaming or not? Descartes says yes! Color, size, numbers, etc. possess the same character in both worlds due to the abstract determination of their values (i.e., they are not grounded in empirical perception). Therefore, these “universal things” must exist.<sup>61</sup>

Further reflection forces Descartes to confront the possibility that any knowledge that he may acquire of the world ultimately relies on his belief that God (as a benevolent non-deceiver) would never permit his logic to be led so far astray (for example,  $1+1=2$  because God would indicate if this were not so). But what if “God is a fiction?”<sup>62</sup> Though he himself is a believer, Descartes offers up God, and therefore all universal knowledge, to the realm of doubt in his pursuit of certain knowledge.

Descartes continues to struggle against his best attempts to cast doubt on things whose existence, by all reasonable accounts, *do* exist. In order to undermine his confidence (and comfort) in such “knowledge,” he introduces the existence of “a malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning” that deceives him (personally) by allowing him to believe that external reality truly exists when in fact it is “the delusions of dreams.”<sup>63</sup> Descartes now looks onto the world as the positing of pure suggestion, for it has no further support of its existence aside from its lifeless material presence.

The meditations to follow, he insists, will be an “arduous undertaking.” But, no sooner does he establish the “impossible” deception, than “a kind of laziness brings (him) back to normal life.” This remark strikes the reader as

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p.14.

<sup>62</sup> Idem.

slightly odd. Up until this point, Descartes' discussion has followed very clear and reasonable lines of argument, but the methodological introduction of the deceiving demon appears to "stick out," it is "out of place," in that having omitted a supernatural force (God), he introducing the existence of another (Demon). From a Freudian analysis, Descartes' suggestion that reality is nothing more than an illusion produced by a powerful source of evil could be interpreted as an attempt to retreat into fantasy as a means of escaping the "reality" of his crumbling beliefs. I will suggest otherwise.

As was introduced above, the function of dream-work is to ensure that the relationship between the manifest and latent dream-texts is ultimately indiscernible. When this mechanism of censorship fails, the subject may experience doubt in relation to elements of the dream. In order to avoid being brought under judgment by the subject, the appearance of doubt or uncertainty suggests to the subject that the "missing" dream content is inaccessible or insignificant and thereby can (should!) be overlooked. Since reality is structured like a fiction (a dream), does not the appearance of Descartes' "laziness" (immediately following the positing of the deceiving demon, but before his act of interpretation), function in the same manner as doubt in the interpretation of dreams? Does it not allow him to overlook (or at least postpone) his analysis of this paranoiac presence? What can be made of Descartes' suggestion that his weariness brings him "back to normal life"? Where in his discussion prior to this has he indicated that he even recognizes something like a "normal life"? Perhaps the "laziness" and "normal life" are symptomatic of a repressed

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p.15.

*someThing* that Descartes must overlook. Rather than escaping into fantasy in order to escape the dream that is reality, could Descartes be avoiding the Real intrusion that the introduction of the evil demon presents? Namely, that in the Real of the world, reality *is* being manipulated from behind his back, i.e., that “evil demons” are at work.

Even Descartes himself seems to realize that he is postponing a confrontation with an un-namable something that he would rather avoid.

I am like a prisoner who is enjoying an imaginary freedom while asleep; as he begins to suspect that he is asleep, he dreads being woken up, and goes along with the pleasant illusion as long as he can. In the same way, I happily slide back into my old opinions and dread being shaken out of them, for fear that my peaceful sleep may be followed by hard labour when I wake, and that I shall have to toil not in the light, but amid the inextricable darkness of the problems I have now raised.<sup>64</sup>

It is no wonder why Lacan looks to Descartes in order to reveal the psychic structure of the subject. The closeness with which he follows his own thoughts is wonderfully revealing, though the nature of his own disclosures (necessarily) remain inaccessible to Descartes himself.

Again to his credit, Descartes begins the second meditation by confronting the source of his anxiety<sup>65</sup> from the previous day. Plagued by the pervasiveness of his doubt, he has (literally) been unable to return to the reality that he left when he began his investigation. “It feels as if I haven fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor

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<sup>64</sup> Idem.

<sup>65</sup> Remember here that Lacan’s definition of anxiety suggests that it is a symptom of the Real getting too close to the subject’s consciousness. Žižek (1993), op. cit., p.92.

swim up to the top.”<sup>66</sup> In Žizek’s terms, this is the experience of “the abyss of the hole in the Other.”<sup>67</sup> Descartes’ inquiry has introduced a crack in the consistency of reality by revealing the inherent lack within the symbolic (given) order. The risk entailed by this experience of the void, the cause of anxiety, is located in the threat to Descartes’ very being. If *I am* (in my essence) inexplicably tied to reality, and reality is just an illusion, then what am I?

### **The *Objet Petit a***

If one thing is clear from the above discussion, it is that Descartes’ subject lacks some self-awareness, some self-knowledge, which affects/effects how it experiences reality. Before we can understand Descartes’ anxiety and comprehend the *violence* of what appears to be a mere “thought-experiment,” something must be made clear as to the nature of the subject (Miss Jenny, the dreamer, and what will be, the prisoner, the religious-citizen, etc.). According to Lacan/Žizek, the subject is fundamentally “divided,” or “de-centered,” in that it does not know itself essentially. But what is less clear is that this internal limit of the subject must be externalized, materialized, in Lacan’s *objet petit a*. This “little piece of the real”<sup>68</sup> is the “objective supplement, which sustains subjectivity.”<sup>69</sup> For Lacan, this *objet petit a* is the object-cause of desire, but in order to have a sense of its significance, it will be useful to mark the distinction between the aim of desire and its goal.

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<sup>66</sup> Descartes, op. cit., p.16.

<sup>67</sup> Žizek (1993), op. cit., p.86.

<sup>68</sup> Žizek (1993), op. cit., p.30.

<sup>69</sup> Idem.

In Kierkegaard's first volume of Either/Or: a Fragmented Life, the narrator, Johannes the Seducer, personifies Kierkegaard's reflective "aesthetic" subject (the first of three possible subjective states that the subject may obtain). Fundamentally egoistic, the aesthetic individual concerns him/herself with the pursuit of sensual pleasures and an "interesting" (vs. a "boring") life. The aesthetic pursuit can be satisfied actively, through physical gratification,<sup>70</sup> or reflectively, through imagination, irony and manipulation. This voyeuristic *creation* of possibilities is referred to as the "transfiguration" of mundane reality into its exotic ideal.<sup>71</sup> But this satisfaction is fleeting. Unable to sustain the climactic novelty of new experiences, and faced with the impossibility of repeating past successes, the aesthetic subject restlessly continues to seek out the next attractive possibility.

For example, through a contrived and exaggerated courtship, Johannes the Seducer acquires a mistress. Shortly following his success, his interest in her wanes and he thus orchestrates their break-up in such a way as to make the woman believe that it is for her sake that he must make a sacrifice of the relationship. Freed of his "responsibilities" to the woman, Johannes moves on to his next exploit in hopes of recapturing the thrill, the aesthetic pleasure, of a successful seduction.

To facilitate his/her experience of the enjoyment of sensual achievement, the aesthetic will deceive and manipulate circumstances with an errant

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<sup>70</sup> Don Juan is such a character as described by Søren Kierkegaard in Either/Or: A Fragmented Life (1843), ed. S. L. Ross, trans. G.L. Stengren (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986), p.26.

<sup>71</sup> Johannes the Seducer exemplifies this reflective aesthetic for Kierkegaard. Ibid., p. 220.



imagination. But as soon as this “goal” is reached, “it retreats anew.”<sup>72</sup> Johannes fails to recognize that he effectively lives the paradoxical sentence of Sisyphus, the mythical character sentenced by Hades to eternally roll a heavy boulder up a hill, only to have it roll down again. Zizek uses this myth to illustrate Lacan’s distinction between aim and goal. “The goal is the final destination, while the aim is what we intend to do, i.e., the way itself.”<sup>73</sup> From Johannes’ perspective, his goal is to experience the pleasure of a woman’s company while his aim is manifest in his seduction (i.e., the manipulation and exploitation of the woman’s perception of him). However, from a Lacanian perspective, Johannes (mis)recognizes the reason why he is existentially driven to repeat the same activity over and over. As Zizek explains:

Lacan’s point is that the real purpose of the drive is not its goal (full satisfaction) but its aim: the drive’s ultimate aim is simply to reproduce itself as drive, to return to its circular path, to continue its path to and from the goal.<sup>74</sup>

In other words, Johannes is blind to the fact that it is the enjoyment of the idea of a successful seduction that he is compelled to claim, not any one woman in particular.

The full realization of this enjoyment is ultimately “impossible” in that it is an attempt to repeat the sensation of the (primordial) first seduction. In Repetition, Kierkegaard’s narrator, Constatin Constanius, tries unsuccessfully to recapture the experience of a past trip to Berlin; first through vivid recollection, then by returning. Although Constatin visits the same places and “repeats” all of

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<sup>72</sup> See Zizek’s discussion of Zeno’s paradoxes. Zizek (1993), op. cit., p.5.

<sup>73</sup> Idem.

<sup>74</sup> Idem.

the same activities, he realizes that the substantive experience of the first trip will continue to elude him.<sup>75</sup> Both Johannes and Constatin, as manifestations of the aesthetic subject, are constituted in their (mis)recognition: each does not realize that their goal is fundamentally unattainable. Johannes cannot relive the experience of his first seduction anymore than Constatin can re-live his first trip to Berlin. But what is the condition of this impossibility of repetition?

The key to answering the question of repetition at the aesthetic stage is rooted in the transfiguring of the “boring” into the “interesting.” From a Zizekian perspective, the *becoming* interesting is facilitated by the subject’s “looking awry,” transforming an ordinary object into an objet petit a:

(I)f we look at a thing straight on, i.e., matter of factly, disinterested objectively, we see nothing but a formless spot; the object assumes clear and distinctive features only if we look at it ‘at an angle,’ i.e., with an ‘interested view, supported, permeated, and ‘distorted’ by *desire*. This describes perfectly the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire: an object that is, in a way, posited by desire itself. The paradox of desire is that it posits retroactively its own cause, i.e., the object a is an object that can only be perceived by a gaze “distorted” by desire, an object that *does not exist* for an “objective gaze.” In other words, the object a is always by *definition*, perceived in a distorted way, because outside of this distortion, “in itself” it *does not exist*, since it is *nothing but* the embodiment, the materialization of this very distortion...The object a is “objectively” nothing, though, viewed from a certain perspective, it assumes the shape of “something.”<sup>76</sup>

What is Johannes’ relationship with a woman if not the materialization of his distorted *interested* gaze permeated with the desire to repeat what can never be repeated? Objectively, the woman is “nothing” in the sense that her positive

<sup>75</sup> Soren Kierkegaard’s “Repetition” in *The Essential Kierkegaard*, H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong, ed., (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 104-9.

<sup>76</sup> Zizek (1993), op. cit., pp. 11-12.

existence, who and what she is, is ultimately irrelevant. She is a “formless spot.” But through Johannes’ looking awry, his desire transfigures her into the object of his desire. In other words, the “object-cause” of Johannes’s desire (i.e., that which is in her that is more than herself) is retroactively posited by its “effect” (i.e., Johannes’s interested gaze directed at a woman.)

Of course, another way to speak of a gaze permeated with desire is to refer to it as a “fetishized” gaze. What is the woman under Johannes’ gaze if not Marx’s sublime object, (i.e., Money) whose value, magically, is larger than the sum of its parts. This surplus-of-enjoyment found *within* the woman is the “surplus-value” of the libidinal dialectic of desire. To paraphrase Marx:

The Labourer [Johannes] is caught in the dialectic of demand and ends up producing desire. When [Johannes] demand[s] [the affection of the woman], [her] “use value” (the fact that [she] serves to satisfy some of [Johannes’s] needs) *eo ipso* becomes a form of expression of [her] “exchange-value”; [the woman’s response] functions as an index of a network of intersubjective relations. If [the woman] complies with our wish, [she] thereby bears witness to a certain attitude toward [him]. The final purpose of [Johannes’] demand for [a woman’s attention] is thus not the satisfaction of a need attached to it, but confirmation of [a woman’s] attitude toward [him]. [Johannes] thus pays for his [egoism] (his striving after “exchange value”) when [each woman] he obtains loses [her] “use value” and changes into a pure, useless embodiment of “exchange value.”<sup>77</sup>

We see here that the aesthetics’ relationship to “reality” is mediated through his/her relationship to an object of desire. Or, to put in Lacan’s terms, the woman, as object, is “raised to the dignity of a Thing.”<sup>78</sup> The consistency of this world (as some-thing that makes sense and is subsequently meaningful) is

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<sup>77</sup> Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, vol. 1: A critical Analysis of Capitalist Production, Frederick Engels, *ed.*, (New York: International Publishers, 1967).

<sup>78</sup> Žižek (1992), *op. cit.*, p. 136.

posited by the subject's self-centred pursuit of novelty (use-value); therefore, when our aesthetic Johannes loses interest in a woman it is because he is confronted with the inherently capricious and inconsistent nature (exchange-value) of his choice. Although he leaves the relationship, he unwittingly finds himself again in the exact situation that he has just escaped. The possibility of a new relationship is the "elusive make-believe" that motivates Johannes to leave one woman and seduce another, but "in reality, it is nothing at all, just an empty surface...but because of it the break is nonetheless well worth the trouble."<sup>79</sup> Is not his excessive behavior (in his courtships, in his excuses, etc.) symptomatic of his need to avoid the reality that what he "loves," is something that does not exist outside of the distortions of his desire. This is why *who* the woman is (i.e., the positive characteristics and qualities that she possesses) does not matter. Just as Marx reminds his reader that "money," as the universal expression of exchange-value (Lacan's Master-signifier, the Thing), could theoretically have been the linen, would not Kierkegaard and Lacan/Zizek insist that it is not important which woman arrives to fill the space of Johannes' desire, so long as one does.<sup>80</sup> Or, to use Lacan's expression, "A letter always arrives at its destination."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Zizek (1992), op. cit., p.8.

<sup>80</sup> Marx's insistence that "it could have been the linen" (In his discussion of how money becomes a commodity of universal value, Marx illustrates that money's Value is not derived from its positive qualities and, therefore, could have been linen.) is essentially the meaning behind Lacan's conception of the "arbitrariness of the signifier." Ibid., p.12.

<sup>81</sup> Idem.

## The Subject of the Forced Choice

I will return to the closed circuit of the symbolic (where the letter always finds its addressee), but what one must keep in mind is that there is no *objet petit a*, without its subject, and, as I will show here, there is no subject without its “forced choice.”

As Lacan articulates it, a “forced choice” is analogous to the threatening situation, “Your money *or* your life!” If I choose money, I lose both my life and the money. If I choose life, then I live, but my life is deprived of *something*.<sup>82</sup> Either way I lose, i.e. “I cannot have everything.” Lacan refers to the structure of this “or” [*vel*] (where I wish to choose neither one *or* the other), as an “alienating” choice and suggests that what is really at stake for the individual in the above decision is a question of “Your freedom *or* your life!”<sup>83</sup>

Let us look to Jacques Rousseau’s conception of the “social contract” for an example of a “forced choice.” It is Rousseau’s position that an individual enters into a social contract when s/he “freely” consents to obey the social mandate of a community in order to reap the rewards of its membership (i.e., protection, markets, rights etc.). But Lacan’s question is this, what life is there outside of the community? “The choice of community, the “social contract,” is a paradoxical choice where I maintain the freedom of choice only if I ‘make the right choice’: if I choose the ‘other’ of the community, I stand to lose the very

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p.212-213.

<sup>83</sup> If here is any doubt that the decision between “your money or your life!” is indeed an issue of freedom, then one need only recall that despite explicit policies, insisting on “complete cooperation,” bank tellers and convenience store clerks can still be seen on surveillance tapes, refusing and even attacking armed robbers.

freedom, the very possibility, of “choice.”<sup>84</sup> (In clinical terms, I choose psychosis.)<sup>85</sup> Rousseau’s insistence that the social contract is valid only if the individual enters into it of his/her own free will (because only a free choice is morally binding<sup>86</sup>) is, therefore, nothing more than a symbolic fiction that structures (i.e., “dominates and regulates”) the “real” life of the community. In other words, it is a myth, an “ideal point of reference which in spite of its inexistence, is ‘valid.’”<sup>87</sup> Understood in this way, Rousseau’s “social contract” acts as a fantastic tale of the origin of society, whereby the individual *sacrifices* his/her individual freedom in exchange for (and in the *Name-of-the-Father*)<sup>88</sup> Freedom and the Law.<sup>89</sup>

The forced choice of the community, i.e., the subordination to the authority of the Name of the Father, is “bad” since, by means of it, the subject “gives way as to his desire,” and thus contracts the indelible guilt (as Lacan says, the only thing that the subject can be guilty of in psychoanalysis is to give way as to his desire). This guilt, constitutive of the subject...can help to explain why the Lacanian mathem for the subject is \$, that is to say: the subject

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<sup>84</sup> Zizek (1992), op. cit., p.75.

<sup>85</sup> Idem.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p.74.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>88</sup> Here we begin to see the connection between the Gaze of Miss Jenny’s father and Lacan’s symbolic conception of the Name-of-the-Father. Although the Name-of-the-Father is only a metaphor for the symbolic order, and therefore has nothing to do with the subject’s biological father, the subject often mistakenly addresses the Other as if it were another person (i.e., small other). The subject (mis)recognized its ego ideal (symbolic identification) with its ideal ego (imaginary identification). The Name-of-the-Father is the metaphor for the restrictions and taboos associated with certain incestuous sexual behaviors that are inherited by the ancestors of the primordial killing of the “incestuous father.” In the originary act of killing their father, the sons are ridden with guilt and forbid themselves access to the very thing that they sought (i.e., sexual relations with the mother and sister). The Name-of-the-Father represents the making Law which must repress the fact that it came into being only by succumbing to the very desire that the Law is created to prohibit.

Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the psychic lives of savages and neurotics* (New York: Vintage Books, 1918)

<sup>89</sup> What I mean to introduce here is the economy of sacrifice, i.e., sacrifice as an act of exchange whereby I give someThing in order to receive someThing. Within Lacan’s schema, the subject’s entry into the symbolic order (the Name-of-the-Father) is the founding gesture of the subject itself.

crossed off, evacuated, reduced to the empty gesture of a forced choice.<sup>90</sup>

Marx explores the structure of this “originary” forced choice in his analysis of the “exchange of equivalents” and “the universal rights of men.” The “universal rights of men” gives the capitalist the right to go to market in order to buy labour, just as it gives the labourer the right to sell it. What Marx finds is that the “universality” of these rights is nothing more than a projected proposition posited retroactively (by the participants of exchange) to hide an inherent inequality (*dissymmetry*) within the exchange of money for labour.

The relationship between the capitalist and the labourer is based on the “exchange of equivalents” of pre-capitalist society and the abstract notion of the “universal rights of men” (the *a priori* condition for the possibility of the effective act of exchange in capitalist society). The appearance of a unique commodity (i.e., human labour) that creates more Value through its consumption over and above its exchange-value is, to use Freud’s term, “symptomatic” of something that is being over looked or repressed in the act of exchange (i.e., that it is inherently a relationship of domination and servitude). What is significant in the act of exchange between the capitalist and the labourer is not that the capitalist gets “more out of his dollar” (exchange values have always been arbitrarily determined, even in pre-capitalist societies), but that the effective act of exchange is based on the labourer’s right to enter “freely” into a relationship of exchange. When the only means by which the labourer can attain his/her means of subsistence is by the selling his/her labour at market, then his/her

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<sup>90</sup> Zizek (1992), op. cit., pp.75-6.

participation in the “exchange of equivalents” is not a “free” choice - it is *forced*. The “universal rights of men,” therefore, facilitates the effective act of exchange at the same time as it announces its “impossibility.”

The dissymmetry of the “impossible” Real of exchange,<sup>91</sup> which must be overlooked in its very act, is not reflective of its failure to be an exchange of equivalents; this is the latent dream-thought of the effective act of exchange. The “universal rights of men” is, in Name, the condition for the possibility of the exchange of equivalents, but the appearance of a labourer that must make *himself* an object of exchange marks the “impossibility” of the exchange itself. Therefore, what is sacrificed in the labourer’s “decision” to sell his labour is *someThing*<sup>92</sup> that did not exist in the first place, i.e., his/her freedom to choose. And what does the citizen/laborer receive in exchange for this *empty* sacrifice? Nothing!

As Žižek explains, the “sacrifice” of the forced choice is, in one sense, everything (i.e., I give my “all,” I give my “freedom”), but essentially it is “nothing” (i.e., I cannot give what is *impossible* for me to have; for if I choose freedom, I lose both my freedom and my life!).<sup>93</sup> The ethical-political (and economic) identity of a community is able to successfully present itself as a cohesive, reasonable, and self-evident reality only so long as the subject posits

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<sup>91</sup> Lacan’s term “Real,” is analogous to Freud’s use of the term “unconscious.” However, unlike Freud’s “unconscious,” Lacan’s notion of the Real is not some positive traumatic event (i.e., memory) that must be kept from the conscious mind; rather, the Real is a negative *something*, a void, that must be overlooked by the subject in order to prevent him/her from confronting the (Real)ity that his/her very being is constituted through a desire for a “lost object” (the phallus), which has never existed.

<sup>92</sup> Again, the Thing (the phallic, Master-Signifier) marks the stand in for the void of the symbolic order (exchange). It is “the subjective supplement which sustains the objective order,” the “lost object,” which never existed, but none the less “overdetermines” the symbolic register.

Žižek (2002), The Fright of Real Tears, p. 65.



as his/her own free choice, that which is forced upon him/her. The subject constitutes itself when s/he sees positive reality as produced, rather than *always already* given. This process is called “subjectivization”(a mechanism of the Other),<sup>94</sup> and ensures that the subject can never fully realize itself. It is here that we can see why the religious-citizen does not realize that God need not exist for reality to exist; and why the dreamer does not realize that s/he is dreaming: The big Other keeps the subject caught up in its (the subject’s) imaginary relationships with “reality” (with others)<sup>95</sup> in order to keep its symbolic identification<sup>96</sup> at bay. But why is this case? What is at stake in the subject’s consciousness?

### **The Big Other and Bentham’s Panopticon**

The Other (also referred to by Lacan as the big Other), in its most benign articulation, is the shared implicit beliefs and norms that regulate and determine social activity. Think of the subject’s experience of the big Other as you would the relationship between the dreamer and the manifest dream-text. During the course of a dream, the dreamer experiences the events of the dream as a natural unfolding of a “real” and meaningful narrative, but upon waking, the dream loses its cohesiveness: ideas which seemed reasonable within the dream, become irrational and incoherent; events that logically followed one another, now seem

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>94</sup> To repeat, “Other” with a capital ‘O’ is not the “other” of small ‘o.’ Whereas “other” refers to someone or thing that is “not that;” ‘Other’ refers to a closed symbolic system of signifiers, where any one signifier’s meaning is determined by its relationship to all others and is, therefore, constantly changing with the addition of any new signifier. Žižek (1993), op. cit., pp. 92, 97, 146.

<sup>95</sup> This is the subject’s identification with its “ideal ego” within the register of the imaginary. Lacan, op. cit., p. 257

<sup>96</sup> This is the subject’s identification with its “ego ideal” within the register of the symbolic. Idem.

to have no relationship at all; even the faces of friends and family, appear to be “misplaced.” When awake, the inconsistencies of the dream are obvious, but while dreaming, the gaps between associations must be overlooked so the subject will remain asleep. *But life is not a dream!* It is only *structured* like one.

The relationship between the structure of the big Other and the pre-enlightenment “dream,” is ideally reflected in Foucault’s reading of Bentham’s penopticon. The penopticon is an architectural design for an institute of discipline (e.g., prison, mental hospital, etc.). What is of interest to Foucault is how this structure is analogous to the way social institutions govern “docile bodies” (subjects).<sup>97</sup> In Bentham’s schema, a surveillance tower is located in the center of a prison courtyard. The prisoners in the courtyard believe that they are always under observation because they are potentially always within the field of visibility of the guards that watches from the central tower. The structure of the tower is such that the prisoners can never be certain that they are truly being watched, because the guards are not immediately visible.<sup>98</sup> Because they do not know when they are or are not being scrutinized, the prisoners act *as if* they are and behave according to the rules of conduct established by the prison. The effectiveness of this method of surveillance is manifest in the fact that the prisoners not only watch over their own behavior, but the behavior of those

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<sup>97</sup> For an extensive discussion on Foucault’s reading of Bentham see Barry Smart’s, Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth (London: Tavistock Publications, 1980) or Sharon Kuropatwa’s Master’s Thesis, Docile Bodies (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 1995).

<sup>98</sup> Zizek (1993), op. cit., p. 92.

around them. In fact, the prisoners regulate their own behavior so effectively that there is no real need to have anyone watching them at all.<sup>99</sup>

The big Other of the pre-enlightenment can be characterized as a complete and cohesive *suggestion* that the world (culture and nature) is a meaningful place whereby each individual universally has purpose; a belief ultimately supported by the “existence of God.” Just as Bentham’s prison design determines where the prisoners are and how they are to behave, God’s Will provides the ground from which to build social, ethical, and political structures (terrestrial representations of a divine order), effectively positing each individual within a symbolic space as a means of facilitating God’s plan. Just as the prisoners watch over their own behavior (and their behavior in relation to others’) so as not be caught being deviant by the guards (who see me from where I can not see them), the religious-citizen guards his/her own behavior so as not to be caught ‘in the wrong’ by God. Now we can see what Žižek means when he suggests that:

This dimension of the ‘big Other’ is that of the constitutive alienation of the subject in the symbolic order: the big Other pulls the strings, the subject doesn’t speak, he ‘is spoken,’ by the symbolic structure. In short, this ‘big Other’ is the name for the social Substance for all that on account of which the subject never fully dominates the effect of his acts, i.e., on account of which the final outcome of his activity is always something else with regard to what he aimed or anticipated.<sup>100</sup>

Although the individual (prisoner, religious citizen, dreamer) imagines that the relationship between him/herself and the other (guard, God, the dream

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<sup>99</sup> Consider this “reasonable” account to be the manifest-text of Bentham’s panopticon.

content) is constant and direct, and therefore must monitor his/her own *physical space* (i.e., behavior) accordingly, in (Real)ity it is the big Other, (“structure of discipline,” the “symbolic order,” the “dream- mechanism”), which innocently<sup>101</sup> mediates their relationship by holding (alienating) the individual (i.e., the individual’s consciousness) to a particular *social space* (e.g., through the designation of roles, in Naming, of “prisoner,” “religious-citizen,” “non-dreamer”). It is this aspect of surveillance (where I watch myself from the “supposed” position of an Other) that Foucault finds so sinister. This further explains Zizek’s position that the subject can never know how and from where the Other sees it, and therefore, has no control over the outcome of his/her activities. Let me explain.

Alienation is part of the subject’s relationship to the symbolic order. But, through the process of “separation,” no sooner is the subject alienated in the ordering realm of the big Other, than it (the subject) begins to see that the big Other too is divided. Returning to the dream analogy, we recall that in order for the subject to remain asleep s/he must (mis)recognize the “reality” of the dreamscape, i.e., s/he cannot know that it does not “really” exist. Is this not also true for the prisoners? Foucault suggests that the system of surveillance depicted in Bentham’s panopticon is an insidious system of discipline for the very fact that it has no need of a guard in order to function. Or, more to his point, the machinery that is the “institution” (e.g., government, the penal system, etc.) is an

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<sup>100</sup> Slavoj Zizek, *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001), p.216.

<sup>101</sup> The big Other is “innocent” in that it is just “the rules of the social game,” and therefore “fails to grasp the significance of what it sees.” Zizek (1993), op. cit., p. 72.

autonomous system that runs on its own.<sup>102</sup> Because the tower does not allow the prisoner to see the “guard” who surveys the courtyard, the prisoners believe that they are being watched and behave as if they are being watched, but in “reality” they are not. The secret behind the effectiveness of the prison is that its structure hides the real nature of the prisoner’s actions – that their own behavior makes them prisoners of themselves.

In summery, the constitutive condition for the prisoners’ imprisonment is the cohesive appearance of an effective structure of the “hierarchal Gaze” (i.e., the tower which hides the guard), whose “consistent” and “constant” surveillance maintains the imaginary relationship between the prisoner and the guard, which in turn, allows the prisoners to remain asleep.<sup>103</sup>

### **The Thing and its Objet Petit a**

Until now, I have spoken of the big Other (the dream-work) as if it were an external force working upon the dreaming subject,<sup>104</sup> but of course, the big Other is part of the internal mechanism of the subject’s psyche and therefore does not exist without the subject. Seen in relation to the objet petit a, the job of the big Other is to eclipse the hole/gap in the symbolic order that was created with the inclusion of the subject.

Here again, it is useful to return to dream analysis. Because the subject’s external environment frequently threatens to rupture the continuity of the dream narrative with an intrusion of reality (e.g., a phone ringing, sirens, etc.) the dream-

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid. p.146.

<sup>103</sup> Consider Foucault’s explanation to be the latent-text of Bentham’s panopticon.

<sup>104</sup> We see here that Lacan’s insight into the function of the big Other is analogous to Descartes’ malicious demon who presents only the semblance of reality in order to deceive.

work (the big Other) acts as a buffer between dream reality and real "reality." Only through the dream-work's active *distortion* can the interruptions be integrated into the dream narrative. In doing so, the subject experiences the dream narrative as continuous, allowing it (the subject) to remain caught up (alienated) in the dream-text.

Because the closed symbolic system is a system of signification, in Lacan's interpretation, any one signifier has meaning only in relation to the rest of the set. In other words, the system of signification has no basis in reality, as such, but is an authoritative, and therefore, determining suggestion which functions only through the authoritative proposition "it is so," or "so be it!" When a dream is interrupted and momentarily experienced as an out of place, meaningless event, the dreaming subject experiences separation from the dream-text and briefly loses his/her grounding in the experience of the dream? Why? Because the dreamer is being confronted with the (Real)ity that it (the dream subject) is not who it thinks it is.

In order to keep the subject dreaming, the dream mechanism fills the empty surplus-space with *something*, some positive object that will literally *hold open/up* the dream reality. For example, the void created by the ringing of the phone becomes the hammering of a nail; the moving of the bed, become waves beneath a ship, etc. It does not matter what *form* fills the hole, as long as the dream-work can successfully direct the dreaming subject to 'overlook' its significance, i.e., that it is a trace of the subject's *always already* displaced being. For example, the hammering of a nail is introduced into the narrative through the

mode of “it is so” (i.e., “it is where it belongs!”), which, in its being accepted by the subject (i.e., through the subject’s re-alienation), *retroactively* posits the sound of a hammer over the empty hole which is the sound of the phone. In other words, the dreaming subject does not recognize that his/her (dream) identity is tied to some inert element (the sound of the hammer), that marks as it hides “the point of eruption of an otherwise hidden truth.”<sup>105</sup>

In other words, the paradox of the [dream] subject is that it exists only through its own radical impossibility, through a ‘bone in the throat’ that forever prevents it (the [dream] subject) from achieving its full ontological identity.<sup>106</sup>

Again, this “bone in the throat” is what Lacan refers to as “objet petit a,” the material-surplus of the symbolic order – “the subjective element constitutive of objective-external reality.”<sup>107</sup>

### **The Objet of the Forced Choice**

Lacan’s *objet petit a* points to the libidinal dynamic of the psyche, the object-cause of desire that motivate, and allows the subject to remain caught up in the circuit of “surplus-enjoyment.” Understood in this way, it is easy to see how Lacan modeled the concept of “surplus-enjoyment” from Marx’s conception of “surplus-value.” The *objet petit a* is the surplus object which gives body to the “lost object” (the phallus, the Thing, Master-Signifier, Money) of the symbolic order.

*Objet petit a* is therefore the exact opposite of the phallus (the space which signifies the “lost object);” rather it is the “objective supplement which sustains

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<sup>105</sup>Zizek (1993), op. cit., p. 140.

<sup>106</sup>Zizek (2000), *The Fragile Absolute*, op. cit., p.28

<sup>107</sup>Zizek (2001), *The Fright of Real Tears*, op. cit., p.55.

subjectivity in its contrast to the subjectless objective order.”<sup>108</sup> In other words, *objet petit a* sustains the subject as divided, as empty, by standing in for the subject’s constitutional non-knowledge of its symbolic place: “it ‘is’ the subject itself in its otherness.”<sup>109</sup> In a sense, its appearance marks both the fissure and suture of ‘objective reality’ that is negatively correlated to the subject. (As is becoming clear, the Real of the subject is the “impossible” knowledge that in-itself, it is itself nothing more than this circulation of negative self-referencing.)

### **Descartes’ Symbolic Suicide**

Zizek articulates that there are three types of suicide: imagined, symbolic, and Real. Suicide at the level of the imaginary is meant to be a “message” for the Other. Although the Other is closely tied to the symbolic register, the suicide is imaginary in that “the subject who accomplishes it is sustained in it by the imaged scene of the effect his or her act will have on posterity, on its witnesses, on the public, on those who will learn about it.”<sup>110</sup> A recent example of this type of suicide would be those of so called “suicide bombers” whose death, they imagine, will send a “particular” religious-political message. The Lacanian response to these acts (and actors) would be to point out that because the subject can never be sure how and from where the Other sees it, it can never be sure that the right message is received.

At the level of the Real, suicide is a violent act of passage (*passage a l’acte*), where the subject directly identifies with the *objet petit a*.<sup>111</sup> As was

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p.65.

<sup>109</sup> Zizek (2000), *The Fragile Absolute*, op. cit., p.47.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>111</sup> Idem.



discussed above, the subject and its objective support can never meet. They are negatively correlated to each other and as such, the subject is constituted by its inability to recognize itself in this, its material leftover.

Subject and object are thus not simply external: the object is not the external limit with regard to which subject defines its identity, it is ex-timate with regard to the subject, it is its internal limit."<sup>112</sup>

What is so shocking and disturbing then, is that suicide at the level of the Real is the subject's direct identification with the object.<sup>113</sup> The subject is constituted in its search for the "lost object," but suicide in the Real amounts to the subject falling into the object, i.e., becoming the object. Only against the background of the missing object, can the *objet petit a* appear. If the object is "found," the subject as fundamentally constituted by the void, also disappears.<sup>114</sup>

In the *passage a l'acte* the Void of the forever lost object of the forced choice *becomes* the incestuous object, i.e., *lost freedom* assumes a direct positive

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p.29.

<sup>113</sup> Idem.

<sup>114</sup> In the Rod Sterling's 1969 film, "Night Gallery," three stories are presented to the audience, which have been inspired by the three paintings he reveals, the third being a thematic case of suicide in the Real. In this story, a Nazi officer tries to avoid capture, following the war, by hiding out in South America. The officer feels the imminent threat of capture, but each day risks visiting a particular painting that hangs in the local gallery. Longingly, he looks deep into the image of a lone man fishing in a small boat. The scene is beautiful and tranquil, and the man depicted in it appears content and, above all, absolutely free. Each day the officer visits the painting, and each day he intently desires to be the man portrayed in it. Until one day, he looks so hard into it that he imagines that he is the man in the boat. Startled, by seeing his own face in the painting (animated and looking back at him), he is shaken out of his "fantasy." When the officer returns to the gallery the next day, he experiences again the strange phenomenon of *being* the man in the boat, but the experience is more intense this time. He feels himself slipping into the world of the painting. And, we imagine, he would have had his attention not been interrupted by other visitors. When the officer comes again, he is being chased. His identity has been discovered and there is no place for him to hide except *in* the painting. The gallery is dark when he rushes in, but he has visited the picture enough times to know where it is. In a single intense moment he looks into the painting, and in his looking wills his entire being into it. The officer screams just before he disappears. The camera moves in closer to reveal that he had not been looking at his painting, but one that he had previously *overlooked* when it hung on the opposite wall. Replacing the tranquil fishing scene, hung a picture depicting the horrors of the holocaust; its terror inscribed on the tortured, twisted face of a man. A man who, as the camera gets closer, seems to resemble the officer.

ontological existence<sup>115</sup> as the subject recognizes itself in the most “insignificant” aspect of its life, in a revelation of “I am nothing but that.”

(T)he suicidal *passage a l'acte* is not that the object falls out of its frame, so that we get only the empty frame-void (i.e., so that ‘nothing but the place itself takes place’); what happens, rather, is the exact opposite – the object is still there; it is the Void-Place that disappears; it is the frame that falls into what it frames, so that what occurs is the eclipse of the symbolic opening, the total closure of the Real.<sup>116</sup>

For example, when I look into a mirror, I take for granted that I find myself outside myself. But if I were to think about it, I could concede that I am somehow captured by the Gaze which looks back at me. There is something uncanny and disconcerting about this image, which is my “objective” appearance, because I *know* it to be something more than is visible to the eye. What I cannot see reflected back is the Gaze, the *objet petit a*, which pins my identification to this image. What I take to be my “objective” appearance is unconsciously mediated by my adopted symbolic social position (I am nice, I am rich, I am...). It is from this position that I am captured by this image that is “more than meets the eye.”<sup>117</sup> Myself as subject (as “I”) is constituted by my inability to see myself from where my reflected image sees me. Having said this, suicide in the real amounts to the subject’s falling into his/her *objet petit a*, in this example, into the object-gaze. This is the experience of seeing oneself doubled.

In Stephen Spielberg’s 2001 film, *A.I.*, an android is created who can love. This opens up the philosophical possibility of a virtual being who experiences himself as real. The young android-boy, David, travels far and wide, to reach what

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<sup>115</sup> Idem.

<sup>116</sup> Idem.

he thinks will be the Blue Fairy who changed Pinocchio into a “real boy” in the Hans Christian Anderson children’s story. What he finds instead is his double. Looking into the face of an exact duplicate of himself, (another “living” android-boy, who even shares the same name) David sees himself as Others (humans) see him, as a *fake*. David falls into the object-gaze in the unbearable experience of “finding oneself at this very point of a pure gaze.”<sup>118</sup> David, who has otherwise not shown any tendency towards violence, immediately looks to destroy the clone, in order to free himself from (R)eality, in order to restore his “pathological” desire/identity of being one of a kind, of being “special.”

Suicide at the level of the symbolic is, for Lacan, the “passage through the zero point.”<sup>119</sup> This type of suicide is the only authentic ethical Act in that the subject passes through (as opposed to becoming) the abyss of the Real and is subsequently destroyed. When the subject emerges on the other side, it (the subject) is never the same again.

(I)n it the subject is annihilated and subsequently reborn (or not), i.e., the act involves the temporary eclipse, *aphanis*, of the subject. Which is why the very act worthy of this name is “mad” in the sense of radical unaccountability: by means of it I put everything at stake, including myself, my symbolic identity; i.e., the act is therefore always a “crime,” a “transgression,” namely of the limit of the symbolic community to which I belong.<sup>120</sup>

In the symbolic suicide, everything that I am, everything that I identify with (at the level of the imaginary and the symbolic), everything that I have inherited (the symbolic debt) or have “chosen” through the forced choice is

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<sup>117</sup> Zizek (1992), op. cit., p.127.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p.126.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p.44.

<sup>120</sup> Idem.

not destroyed, rather it is completely suspended, eclipsed. It is a definitive “No!” to the symbolic debt that the big Other looks to collect; a debt that, paradoxically, grows the more that you pay it back. *You are student, learn.* “No!” *You are daughter/son, obey.* “No!” *You are man/woman, spouse, employee, and citizen – do what you are suppose to do.* “No! No! No! No! I am Nothing but this space!” For Lacan, only in the full act of this No! is the subject free, for s/he effectively *repeats* the “forced choice” by assuming full responsibility for it. In other words, in the *becoming* of the subject, the subject chooses not to choose! This is an act that suspends all shared morality and social ethics, it denies the “Father’s” prohibition and even (and especially) denies intersubjectivity i.e., language, which alienates the subject within a system of which it has *no say*. To put yet another way, Zizek frequently refers to the following quote from Hegel to clarify the significance and horror of the subject’s experience of the Real:

The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity – an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him – or which are not present. This night, the interior of nature, that exists here – pure self – in phantasmagorical representations, in night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head – there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye – into a night that becomes awful.<sup>121</sup>

Only now can we hope to understand the significance of Descartes’ doubting and the psychic violence entailed by this act. As we have seen in the above discussion, in dream interpretation, doubt announces that the dream-work has not been adequately successful in displacing the significance of the manifest dream-text from the latent dream-text. And since it has appeared time and again

that what we take to be “reality” is structured like a dream-text whose consistency is maintained though its support by a fantasy structure, let us suggest that Descartes’ doubt is meant to undermine the importance of his suspicions in order to motivate him to overlook its significance, thereby reaffirming his commitment to “reality.” This is, again, the movement between the processes of *separation* (where one sees inconsistencies in the big Other and begins to disassociate from its authority), and the subject’s *re-alienation* back into the symbolic. In effect, the subject “sutures” the gap in the Other in order for reality to maintain its consistency.

“Suturing” is a term coined by Lacan (and later adopted by Jacques-Alain Miller, Jean-Pierre Oudart and English Screen theorists in the 60’s and later, deconstructionists)<sup>122</sup> to designate a “patch work closing”<sup>123</sup> that allows the structure of a film to (mis)perceive itself as an enclosed totality of representation. Zizek borrows the term in order to designate the seamless three-step integration of a “free floating” Gaze. He gives the following example:

Firstly, the spectator is confronted with a shot, finds pleasure in it in an immediate, imaginary way, and is absorbed by it.

Then, this full immersion is undermined by the awareness of the frame as such: what I see is only a part, and I do not master what I see. I am in a passive position, the show is run by the Absent One (or, rather, Other) who manipulates images behind my back.

What then follows is a complementary shot which renders the place from which the Absent One is looking, allocating this place to its fictional owner, one of the protagonists. In short, one passes

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<sup>121</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, in Zizek (2000), *The Fragile Absolute*, op. cit., p.102.

<sup>122</sup> Zizek (2001), *The Fright of Real Tears*, op. cit., p.31.

<sup>123</sup> Idem.

thereby from imaginary to symbolic, to a sign: the second shot does not simply follow the first one, it is *signified* by it.<sup>124</sup>

Imagine that the pre-enlightenment is represented by the first shot that captures the audience, i.e., it “suspends the audience’s sense of disbelief” (like a dreamer in a dream). Descartes begins his analysis in the second step when he outlines his doubts about the nature of the first shot. That is, he suspects that “reality” may be a show; that it is the product of some terrestrial or metaphysical manipulation that takes place without his knowledge. Rather than moving onto the third step, and thereby suturing away his doubt, Descartes’ Act of doubting maintains the radical and disconcerting openness between the imaginary and symbolic identification. By enduring the Real that is the suspension of the symbolic (the holding back of the third shot), Descartes is confronted with the *first* appearance of the “forced choice.” This moment is analogous to waking up in the middle of one’s life. What is the right action to follow such an event? Which is the right choice when, as Žižek suggests, what is (Real)ity cannot be determined between two subjective perspectives, between two signifiers (i.e., two shots), for this does not allow either “realities” to be (mis)perceived as closed? Each position is not what it claims to be.<sup>125</sup>

In the second meditations, in order to avoid deception through the senses, “the mind uses its own freedom and supposes the non-existence of all the things about whose existence it can have even the slightest doubt.”<sup>126</sup> And it is through this doubt of *everything* (imaginary and symbolic identification) that is the

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid. p.32.

<sup>125</sup> Idem.

<sup>126</sup> Descartes, op. cit., p.9.

*originary* “No!” that marks the end of one epoch (the pre-enlightenment) and the start of (what will be) “modernity.” But let us not get ahead of ourselves for fear of missing the importance of the Event. Clearing his mind of all things doubted, Descartes intuits that there is only one thing that he can be certain of: Not that he is a man, nor an animal, nor a body, but only that he is “a thing that thinks,” (“a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions”)<sup>127</sup> In the complete absence of all representation, of all signification, Descartes intuits that there *certainly* exists, still, a thought. That this thought is a maintained desire for certainty is what is ‘behind’ Descartes doubt, and as such Lacan will call this the historical introduction of the unconscious.

(T)he Cartesian I think, in which I designated the inaugural point that introduces, in history, in our experience, in our necessity, the *vel* [or]<sup>128</sup> of alienation, which prevents us for ever from misunderstanding it. It is in the Cartesian approach that the *vel* [or] was taken for the first time as the constituent of the dialectic of the subject, which now cannot be eliminated in his radical foundation.<sup>129</sup>

For Lacan, that there exists certain knowledge of thinking even when there exists nothing else (not even an object to think, for Descartes doubts the existence of his own body and mind), indicates that the skepticism (doubting) is the only subjective position that can lead to knowledge. This does not mean that one should systematically doubt everything, but that skepticism “is holding the subjective position that *one can know nothing*.”<sup>130</sup> If the reader is tempted to

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<sup>127</sup> Idem.

<sup>128</sup> See page 33 of this paper.

<sup>129</sup> Lacan, op. cit., pp. 221-2.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p.223.

equate this with Socrates' position, s/he should recall that Descartes' certainty came without benefit of the Gods, voices, etc.<sup>131</sup> Descartes is the first to announce (through his own (mis)recognition) that the Real truth of the subject is the certainty of its constitutive non-knowledge.

Knowing what we know about the third step of suturing, of the alienation of the subject of forced choice, we can see as the rest of Descartes' argument unfolds how it is that the subject becomes "subjectivized," i.e., how the "chaos of the encounter of the real is transformed into a meaningful narrative."<sup>132</sup> Or, to put another way, subjectivization designates "a determinate subject position, recognizing oneself as a socially defined 'somebody.'"<sup>133</sup>

Descartes follows the certainty of the "I think" with the certainty "that this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind."<sup>134</sup> But what can be known of the "I" that exists? *Cogito ergo sum* (I am thinking, therefore I am.). Through the certainty of his existence, Descartes attempts to reconstruct a system of reliable knowledge. If it is possible to be sure of one's own existence, is it possible to be certain of anything else? Unlike notions of substance and shape, things and non-things, duration and numbers, which (it can be reasoned) are eminently contained "in me," the idea of God as immutable and eternal, supremely intelligent, supremely

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<sup>131</sup> Plato. "The Apology," The Great Dialogues of Plato, trans. W.H.D. Rouse, Signet Classic, 1999, pp.423-446.

<sup>132</sup> Žižek (1992), op. cit., p.186.

<sup>133</sup> Idem.

<sup>134</sup> Descartes, op. cit., p.19



powerful, creator of myself and all things, cannot come from an inherently flawed, imperfect, being such as myself.<sup>135</sup>

If I perceive myself to be an imperfect being, it must be that I have some prior notion of a perfect being, the knowledge of which I cannot attribute to myself for “it is obvious that a deficient, inferior entity or representation cannot be the cause of a superior entity or representation.”<sup>136</sup> “Altogether then, it must be concluded that the mere fact that I exist and have within me an idea of a perfect being, that is, God, provides a very clear proof that God indeed exists.”<sup>137</sup>

God assumes a central position in Descartes system. If I can attribute my faculty of reason to God and if God is perfect and would never deceive me, then I can ascertain some certain knowledge of those things, which I perceive through reason. The nature of God (as perfectly good, as non-deceiver) guarantees that that which appears “clearly” before me truly corresponds to *reality*.<sup>138</sup>

Descartes’ reinstatement of God as the guarantor of reality’s order marks a transition in the natural sciences. It is of particular interest to Lacan that Descartes expels all “universal” and “eternal” knowledge (at least initially) to the same place as he does God; thereby, making the consistent character of this knowledge ‘God’s business,’ so to speak.<sup>139</sup> Lacan notes that at the same time as his meditations, Descartes had developed a geometry which replaced the traditional use of capital letters (which have a corresponding number in the Hebrew alphabet) with the use of small letters which did not have corresponding

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid. p. 28.

<sup>136</sup> Žizek (2000), Tarrying with the Negative, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>137</sup> Descartes, 1986, p. 35.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. p. 54.

numerical values: "(T)hey are interchangeable and only the order of the commutations will define their process."<sup>140</sup>

Zizek asks, what can be made of this change? Whereas under Judaic law/mathematics, God is inseparable from each letter/number and the world (since life was created with the letters)<sup>141</sup> of the Hebrew alphabet, Descartes, in what I believe to be an essentially Christian gesture, places God outside of the letter/number system. This both excludes God as it necessitates his position as subject "supposed to know."<sup>142</sup> Precisely by being the exception (as taking the totalizing position of zero)<sup>143</sup> God guarantees the closed circuit of meaning of a universal order. Or to put another way, He "guarantees that the inconsistent string of 'free associations' will receive meaning"<sup>144</sup> Zizek offers that the effect of this switch from Judaic to Christian Law is that God is no longer present, but exists outside the system of earthly concerns, leaving it up to hu/mans to dictate the manner by which they discover the laws He has set in place. (God is the guard in the tower who we know is there because of the tower (because  $1+1$  still = 2), though we cannot see him). God is no longer needed to make the sun rise, and no

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<sup>139</sup> Lacan, op. cit., p.225.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. p. 226.

<sup>141</sup> Idem.

<sup>142</sup> For Lacan, the "subject supposed to know" is a kind of "sublime subject" of the big Other. Although it can take on a number of different roles, the big Other ultimately is "supposed" to have knowledge of some secret in the world and in me. For Descartes, God is the reassuring presence, which guarantees that the world has meaning; for Miss. Jenny, the exceptionalness of the Uncle revealed to her that there was *something* in him more than himself (objet petit a) and that he was *someThing* that could see her from where she could not see herself.

<sup>143</sup> Lacan, op.cit., p. 226.

<sup>144</sup> Zizek (1992), op. cit., p.39.

one need wonder “whether God leafs through modern treatises on mathematics to keep up to date.”<sup>145</sup>

Another indication that Descartes’ Act of sacrifice is a mark of the transition from Judaic to Christian Law can be seen through the account of his experience of the real, i.e., in the limbo of the symbolic suicide. Let us recall the anxiety that he felt when reality, and in particular, God had been called into doubt. “It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top.”<sup>146</sup> This description is certainly homologous to Hegel’s notion of the “night that becomes awful” as referenced above. But what is not clear, is how Descartes’ Act of symbolic suicide, where he is subsequently thrown into a confrontation of the real, can be articulated through a “thought experiment.” Where is the risk? From where does the anxiety come? Descartes’ doubt of God is a significant Act as Christianity demands that one must not only guard ones actions, but ones thoughts. Does not Jesus say:

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT ADULTRY:

But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.  
(Matthew:5:27-8)

That Descartes’ thoughts of absolute doubt “qualify” as an Act (and a terrifying one at that), is manifest in how his doubt announces a fissure in “reality,” by revealing a secret that threatens to tear himself (and history) apart. This is the (Real)ity of the “forced choice.” Let us return to the context of

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<sup>145</sup> Idem.

Descartes' inquiry: "Obey God (in all of his terrestrial manifestations) or choose to deny God and be damned!" I have used the word "obey" in order to make clear that what Descartes' "forced choice" demands of him is nothing less than to make an "ethical" judgment which has already been chosen, sacrifice your doubt for the community. But as we have seen, Descartes *abstains* from the choice [Freud's notion of *Versagung*].<sup>147</sup> In the choice between "your money or your life!" he introduces a third choice, to choose not to choose! This is the only free, and therefore, only ethical, act for Lacan/Zizek. It is an Event that changes everything and, as such, makes forever inaccessible the experience of the life that preceded it. For Lacan/Zizek, this is Descartes' legacy.

(T)he Enlightenment is irreversible, the epoch of the Enlightenment is "an epoch to end all epochs," i.e., by means of the *Versagung* which constitutes the subject of the Enlightenment, an abyss becomes visible against the background of which ever all other epochs can be experienced in their epochal closure, as something contingent. The point is simply that the Enlightenment, like a cancerous tissue, contaminates all preceding organic unity and changes it retroactively into an affected pose.<sup>148</sup>

In other words, only by virtue of the Cartesian subject as empty, and substanceless subjectivity (the pure *cogito*), the evolutionist notion of history, can appear. Not as the essential unfolding of events, but rather as a completely contingent event, which pivots on some "No!" that opens up the dimension of temporality and historicity, thereby closing one epoch and beginning another. It is the experience of the event in its becoming, in its pure "impossible" irrationality.

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<sup>146</sup> Descartes, op. cit., p.16.

<sup>147</sup> Zizek (2000), *The Fragile Absolute*, op. cit., p. 154.

<sup>148</sup> Zizek (1992), op. cit., p. 184.

## Versagung and Kierkegaard's Religious Subject

What Descartes' meditations hide is what cannot be expressed through language? In order to understand what abstaining from the "forced choice," the *Versagung*, reveals, let us read Descartes No! in terms of Kierkegaard's religious subject.

Soren Kierkegaard suggests that there are three possible existential positions or stages that an individual can move through within his/her life: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. The aesthetic must first choose and move through the ethical before arriving at the religious (though Kierkegaard believes fundamentally that few individuals ever arrive at this last stage). Both the ethical and the religious subject must be mindful of their actions in order not to slip back into the trappings of their previous position.<sup>149</sup>

The ethical stage follows Kierkegaard's notion of the aesthetic stage (as was illustrated in the first section in the discussion of Johannes the Seducer). At this new stage the individual cognitively chooses to forfeit the pursuit of his/her own personal interests for those of the community as a whole. The chase for capricious ("pathological") short-lived pleasure is replaced with a self-effacing commitment to uphold the social Good through an attentive observation of universal social mandates.<sup>150</sup> By "taking refuge in the universal," by *alienating* him/herself in the abstract identity of "moral agent," the individual is no longer

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<sup>149</sup> It is probably more accurate to say of the religious stage that it is not a consistent state of being, but is rather constituted within the occasion of particular existential moments of an individual's life.

<sup>150</sup> This is the essence of the ethical position in that it can justify, not only the sacrifice of individual interests, but the sacrifice of the individual him/herself for the good of the whole.

subsumed in an existence of *imagination* and sensualism, but is raised to a position that recognizes “its” social *symbolic* nature and subsequent duty.

That, for Kierkegaard, the ethical subject must “freely” choose his/her membership in the community in order for the individual to fully assume the position of a moral agent, appears to us to be the “forced” position of the social contract, whereby, through the process of symbolization, I take upon myself as chosen, that which has been forced upon me. But what makes Kierkegaard’s ethical subject different (within the context that I have introduced above) from the subject of, for example, Rousseau’s social contract is that the ethical subject consciously commits to *be* in private what he does in public. What I mean to say is that as a subject of the social contract, I am compelled to behave as long as I feel the Gaze of the big Other (of the social mandate) watching over me, holding me to my commitment to the symbolic order to act accordingly. But as this Gaze is the Gaze of the social order, when I am in private I am able to hide from its scrutiny. What is of significance here is that my obligation to the community is necessitated not through my belief in its legitimacy above all else, but through the effective activity of obedience. The social mandate is therefore: “You do not have to believe, but in your social activity, act as if you do!”<sup>151</sup> For Kierkegaard,

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<sup>151</sup> Did we not see an example of this after “the events” of September 11, 2001. Having just come off an embarrassing win for the presidency (he was elected without the majority vote), George W. Bush is frequently made the object of ridicule in the press/media and the international community. But following the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on September 11, not a public word is said in the U.S. to undermine the competency of the President despite his frequent and public humiliations (his inability to deliver a cohesive speech or answer press questions adequately necessitated (it is rumored) a time delay between when he gives his public addresses and when the “live” version airs on television.) Was this not the grave error of Carolyn Perish, the Canadian MP who, having “misplaced” a private discussion, was over heard calling President Bush a “moron,” revealing in public what every one knew in private? Who then did not know? Precisely the big Other from which such deviations must be kept if society is to maintain the appearance of a consistent order.

however, the subject's commitment to the ethical mandate must be thorough in that the Gaze of the big Other does not distinguish between public and private, i.e., one does what one believes, there is no distinction between activity and belief.

Only through the ethical can the religious stage be arrived at. The ethical subject is constituted by his/her commitment to the logic of the ethical position (i.e., that the social good is manifest perfectly in the prohibitions of the Name of the Father, i.e., the universals of the Law, Marriage, Family, Language<sup>152</sup> etc.), but the religious individual will sacrifice this beloved responsibility (and thereby himself) if so commanded through conscience under God. In the moment of decision, when the individual is confronted with the choice to either uphold the integrity of the social or to follow the command of God, the religious individual, recognizing the ultimate authority of God in determining what is Good and Evil, follows His direction.<sup>153</sup>

The decision to transgress the ethical is what Kierkegaard refers to as the "suspension of the ethical."<sup>154</sup> The religious individual does not condemn or negate the precepts of the social when s/he obeys God's command, but rather impossibly preserves its validity and integrity by sacrificing it, effectively

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<sup>152</sup> Language, communication, is an ethical necessity in that it brings into being the possibility of participating in the social.

<sup>153</sup> Note that this moment is the synthesis of infinite possibilities (aesthetic) and absolute conviction (ethical). The religious subject follows God's out of immediate unreflective recognition of His ethical authority i.e., not through any reasonable "if...then..." calculation emanating from economical concerns, but from an irrational absurd openness to that which is in ethics, more than ethics.

<sup>154</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Dialectic Lyric* by Johannes de silentio, Alastair Hannay, *trans.* (London: Penguin Books, 1985).

deferring the condition of its sanction.<sup>155</sup> From a religious position, there is no social support (i.e., no corroboration, no empirical evidence) for the “belief” that what is to be sacrificed will be returned, but in spite of this, the religious subject acts with certainty, and with *faith*. For Kierkegaard, faith is not an attitude, a reflective hope, or a constant state; it is an act, a “mad” decision.

In The Gift of Death, Jacques Derrida looks to understand the nature of the religious subject through a reading of Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling, which follows Abraham’s experience of being called by God to make a sacrifice of his son, Isaac. As Derrida explains, the gift of death is that which I take upon myself as responsibility in an experience outside of norms, the social, and language. The gift of death is therefore a betrayal of the Other, of the ethical. Abraham betrays his community, his family, and his son in order to respond to God’s call to/for sacrifice, and therefore must, in the eyes of the ethical, seem “irresponsible” and monstrous.

The sacrifice of Isaac is a non-justifiable act in that it remains within the *secret*.<sup>156</sup> It cannot be explained in terms of ethical explanations, for if forced to defend his actions, Abraham would be unable to. The answer (the reason) why he must act has not been revealed to him and *must* not be revealed. The absolute meaning of the sacrifice is to remain inaccessible if it is to be an act of faith and of absolute responsibility. For here we see that this sacrifice is a sacrifice of objective certainty as much as it is of Isaac.

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<sup>155</sup> In Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard follows Abraham’s transgression of the ethical as he accepts God’s command to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham’s silence and commitment to the *act* exemplifies for Kierkegaard the religious character. I will discuss this at greater length later in this paper.



The nature of the sacrifice is one that must fall outside of any understanding of the economy of sacrifice. The gift of death removes the object of the gift; the gift is, in the purest sense, solely the Act of giving. The gift of death cannot be incorporated into a calculation of reciprocity, so its Value remains unknown. In addition, the giver of death can never succeed in reaching his/her goal in that each one's death is their own and as such cannot be given to the other anymore than the other can be saved from his/her own death. The gift of death is the Event by which I Act with complete certainty (the movement of the eternal) before the absolute "impossibility" of my success (within the finitude of temporality). By not allowing the act to be justified, within the instant of the choice, Abraham is in a state of madness. He is in complete contradiction with his feelings and beliefs. Abraham cannot unburden himself of his singular responsibility by escaping into the community (the ethical), by speaking what must not be spoken. He cannot tell anyone what he is to do. He cannot share the responsibility of what *he must* do, for in doing so, he would make himself absent from the (A)ct and *excuse* himself of complete responsibility. For Simone Weil, faith "is the contradiction (tension) between infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty."<sup>157</sup> For Abraham to act in faith, he can only give Isaac death. With the infinite passion of his responsibility to God, Abraham transgresses the objective uncertainty of his ethical commitment in the Act that makes possible what can only be impossible, not that he can trust in God, but that he has become what he has always been, worthy of being Isaac's father.

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<sup>156</sup> Jaques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, D. Wills, trans., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>157</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, E. Craufurd, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1951).

### Section Three: 1+1=3

To begin this third section, it seems necessary to reaffirm the importance of Descartes' "I am thinking, therefore I am." Just as Abraham is compelled to act in faith (not in response to some external dominion (for this is the nature of Kierkegaard's Ethical), but because of an internal command that holds him to respond to a call outside of responsibility), so too is Descartes. The reader should not be confused here. Descartes Act of faith is manifest in his objective Act of doubting everything (i.e., God), which precedes the writing of the meditations as the "thought before the thought." Therefore, what is revealed in the meditations is not a proper account of his traumatic sacrifice (though at times the (Real)ity of what he has done returns, as manifest through his feelings of angst and vertigo), but rather, his need to communicate, which, as we have seen, is symptomatic of his desire to escape the absolute responsibility of the Act, thus revealing what he must necessarily "overlook" if his sacrifice is to count for anything. In other words, what is manifest in Descartes' words is that which truly defines his Act, as an Act of faith, is his "impossible" certainty that God *does* exist and therefore *must* be doubted. Understood in this way, Descartes' Act appears to be a sacrifice of that which he loves most, God. For how better to show God that you believe in Him, despite all the inconsistencies of those objective Truths which are created in His Name (i.e., Church, Law, etc.), than to sacrifice Him with the secret certainty that He will be returned to you - *that when all is destroyed (doubted), someThing will remain.*

This is the reason for Descartes' jump from "I think" to "I am." The gap which separates the two propositions is understood more precisely when it is read as we have understood Descartes' work, "By the nature of the fact that I doubt, I am." The certainty that is derived from the act of doubting, points to an absent something that has not been articulated: that against all established reason, God exists, and "therefore I am." Understood in this way, it is not the nature of God that has changed following the Enlightenment, but the nature of mankind.

Descartes does not reason God back into existence, for as we have seen, it was He for whom Descartes sacrificed all in the first place. What then can be drawn from Lacan when he says:

(T)he Cartesian *I think*, in which I designated the inaugural point that introduces, in history, in our experience, in our necessity, the *vel* of alienation, which prevents us for ever from misunderstanding it. It is in the Cartesian approach that the *vel* was taken for the first time as the constituent of the dialectic of the subject, which now cannot be eliminated in his radical foundation."<sup>158</sup>

Through Descartes, the alienating, and constitutive "forced choice" is revealed through the gap created by the division between subjectivity and objectivity, between inside and outside. What the subject can know, can no longer be represented in the symmetrical (imaginary) relationship of  $1+1=2$  (objective "I" + subjective "I" = I), but rather, in the dissymmetry of  $1+1=3$ , because subjectivity is *always already* divided through its alienation in the symbolic. For Lacan, the subject is forever "out of joint" within the world. The "I," through which the subject interacts with the world, is not the signified subject of subjectivity, but is itself a signification of that Thing which announces its presence through its very

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<sup>158</sup>Lacan, op. cit., p.222-3.

absence, i.e., the unconscious. It is this absence which appears as it disappears in the gap which separates “I think” (subjectivity as  $1=2$ ) from the “I am” (objectivity as  $1=1$ ). It is the appearance of this structural discrepancy that reveals the subject to be constituted through a certain non-knowledge on its part. In order to illustrate more explicitly how the “de-centred” nature of the subject determines the epistemological limits of what we can know about the world, it may be useful to introduce Žižek’s reading of Kant in relation to Descartes’ *res cogitans*.

Through Žižek’s reading of Hegel, the divided subject is reinterpreted (yet again) in such a way as to return the question of epistemology back to a question of ontology. Hegel’s conception of a divided, intelligent, Absolute Spirit, which designates the nature of the subject (that it is always already inaccessible to itself) as being the Void of the pure self is for Lacan, the structural foundation for the possibility of the subject. If the subject is just this Void of pure self-relating, then the “experience of an insurmountable obstacle [consciousness] is the positive condition for us, as humans, to perceive something as reality. Reality is ultimately that which resists.”<sup>159</sup> That structural necessity of reality’s persistence will be shown through a discussion of the ideological subject who, despite the fact that it no longer believes in “reality,” continues to participate within it.

### **Kant vs. Descartes: “X” marks the spot**

Immanuel Kant believed that the answer to the question “what can we know?” was firmly grounded in the question “how do we know?” Kant, unlike Descartes and the rationalists of the age, did not agree that “certain” knowledge

was attributable to the mind's application of reason alone; nor did he believe, as the empiricists, that all knowledge of the world proceeded from the senses. In Critique of Pure Reason, Kant takes a middle route when he suggests that knowledge does not exist outside of the union of *intuition* with *understanding*:

Neither concepts without intuition in some way correspond to them, nor intuition in some way corresponding to them, nor intuition without concepts, can yield knowledge.<sup>160</sup>

If Descartes' position is articulated in "I am thinking, therefore I am," i.e., that 'only in the activity of my thinking, do I experience the fullness of my being,' then Kant's response is that 'the condition of the possibility of thinking are at the same time the conditions of possibility of the objects of thinking.'

In contrast to Descartes, Kant believed that there could be no such thing as certain knowledge of the *Thing-in-itself* (the noumena). Because all knowledge consists of the relationship between representations, and because these representations are known only through our personal experience, we can never have immanent knowledge of the Thing, as it is, independent of our formal knowledge of its possibility in general. It is from here that we can address specifically, Kant's criticism of Descartes.

According to Zizek, Kant's concern arises in Descartes' movement from *cogito* to *res cogitans* - in the movement from the empty "I think" of intuition to the knowledge of myself as thinking *substance* (a Thing that thinks). Descartes wrongly assumes that "self-consciousness renders self-present and self-

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<sup>159</sup> Zizek (2001), op. cit., p. 226.

<sup>160</sup> Immanuel Kant in Norman Melchert, The Great Conversation: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy. Second ed. (California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1995), p. 385.

transparent the “Thing” in me, which thinks.”<sup>161</sup> In other words, *res cogitans* implies that the form “I think” simultaneously gives access to the positive thinking substance of the “I.” It is this coincidence of ‘thinking form’ as identical to ‘thinking substance’ (of “the analytical proposition on the identity of the logical subject of thought, contained in “I think,” and the synthetical proposition on the identity of a *person* qua thinking thing-substance”)<sup>162</sup> that indicates a problem.

Kant insists that Descartes’ “I think” does not and cannot denote access to the pure subject/“substance” of the self: “The ‘I’ is indeed in all thoughts, but there is not in this representation the least trace of intuition, distinguishing the ‘I’ from other objects of intuition.... We do not have, and cannot have, any knowledge whatsoever of any subject.”<sup>163</sup> From this it is possible to note Kant’s distinction between existence as experiential reality and existence as a logical construction, between the “I” of self-experience and the “I” of pure apperception. Because I am always thinking of something (for example, “I think that ...I will leave,” ...it is hard,” etc.), it is *reasonable* to suggest, as Descartes does, that there is some thinking Thing within me that is the source of all representations of thought. But this is a logical illusion.

Just because I need to express my thinking by using subject/predicate forms in which the “I” occurs, I cannot infer that *noumenal reality* is structured that way. I cannot transform a necessity of my mode of representing myself into a metaphysical necessity concerning my nature.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Zizek (2000), *Tarrying with the Negative*, p. 13.

<sup>162</sup> Idem.

<sup>163</sup> Kant in Melchert, op. cit., p. 394.

<sup>164</sup> Kant in Melchert, op. cit., p. 395.

The representation of "I think" is a spontaneous act that is not a product of sensory empirical perception, but rather is the activity of the ego, of pure apperception (self-consciousness), which must accompany all representations if they are to exist for me. That all representations that follow the pure apperception of "I think" are mine, suggests a *condition* whereby all such representations exist together within one self-consciousness. "The unity of this apperception I call the transcendental unity of self-consciousness, in order to indicate the possibility of a priori cognition arising from it."<sup>165</sup> This condition denotes an *a priori* idea of something in general, but this something cannot be reduced to substance. It is only the intuition of a spontaneous possibility of a synthesis:

(O)nly because I can connect a variety of given representations in one consciousness, is it possible that I can represent to myself the identity of consciousness in these representations; in other words, the analytical unity of apperception is possible only under the presupposition of a synthetical unity.<sup>166</sup>

"I think," therefore, does not reference a thing that thinks; rather it is a consciousness of the uniting of one representation to another (again, 1=2).

Where then is the "I" of the "I think" located? Kant suggest that "I" is analogous to "indexicals," concepts such as "now," and "here" and "this" which have no positive content in and of themselves, but indicate something relative to the "circumstances of utterance."<sup>167</sup> Unlike indexicals, however, "I" is not a concept; rather it is an empty representation, a form of intuition without substance, i.e., a "bare consciousness which accompanies all concepts."<sup>168</sup> (It, of course, is no

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<sup>165</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, (New York: Routledge, 1943), p.77.

<sup>166</sup> Kant, op. cit., p.77.

<sup>167</sup> Melchert, op. cit., p. 395.

<sup>168</sup> Kant in Melchert, op. cit., p. 395.

coincidence that Kant's understanding of "I" appears as homologous to Lacan's conception of *objet petit a* (which has been discussed at some length in section two). Now, if "I think" accompanies all concepts, and knowledge is attained through concepts, then it seems that "this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks" is a kind of "vanishing mediator" that can never be known in itself apart from the thoughts which are its predicates. Or as Žižek explains:

I encounter *being* devoid of all determinations-of-thought at the very moment when by way of the utmost abstraction, I confine myself to the empty form of *thought* which accompanies every representation of mine. Thus, the empty form of thought coincides with being, which lacks any formal determination-of-thought.... (T)his coincidence of thought and being in the act of self-consciousness in no way implies access to myself as thinking substance.<sup>169</sup>

Like Descartes, Kant associates existence, *being*, with the empty form of thought, but rather than offering this as evidence of the "unconditioned condition" (i.e., the existence of a thinking substance), the I of pure apperception opens up a space, a void, within the totality of representations. Through doubting everything, Descartes sacrifices his positive existence as *being* a thing of the world. He empties himself of knowledge of God, of the world around him, of his physical being, etc., but this tear in the "ontological consistency of the universe" is resolved in the reduction of *cogito* to *res cogito*. Rather than conceiving of *cogito* as an "autonomous agent which 'spontaneously' constitutes the objective world opposed to itself,"<sup>170</sup> like Kant, Descartes concludes that "in the empty 'I think' which accompanies every representation of an object, we get hold of a positive phenomenal entity, *res cogitans* [a 'small piece of the world,' to use Husserl's

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<sup>169</sup> Žižek (2000), *Tarrying with the Negative*, p. 13-14.



terms], which thinks and is transparent to itself in its capacity to think.”<sup>171</sup>

Descartes’ notion of the thinking substance, the Thing in me that thinks, returns the subject to the totality of things whose certain relationship is guaranteed by the existence of God.<sup>172</sup>

From the above discussion, we can surmise what Zizek means to suggest when he states that Kant logically *precedes* Descartes. Kant locates what Descartes must necessarily overlook, the “impossible” gap between the form “I think” and the substance which thinks, thereby articulating the paradox of self-consciousness:

(T)he paradox of self-consciousness is that *it is possible only against the background of its own impossibility*: I am conscious of myself only insofar as I am out of reach to myself qua the real kernel of my being (“I or he or it (the thing) which thinks”). I cannot acquire consciousness of myself in my capacity of the “Thing which thinks.”<sup>173</sup>

The individual, as an I of pure apperception, is characterized as the “spontaneous transcendental agent, which constitutes reality.”<sup>174</sup> I have an *a priori* knowledge of the possibility of things in the world and this shapes how the things in the world appear to me. Therefore, objective reality is the synthesis of the representation of the possibility of a thing and the thing as it is represented to me as sensuous intuited material. Although I have some knowledge of myself it “can

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>171</sup> Idem.

<sup>172</sup> Descartes believed that this Thing, what he called the “pineal gland,” could be located in a small part of the brain, which is supposed to be the source of “common sense.” . Descartes, op. cit., p. 59.

<sup>173</sup> Zizek (2000), *Tarrying with the Negative*, op. cit., p.15.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

be thought only as something in general = X”<sup>175</sup> for the general form of every possible object reverts to the empty representation of the “object in general.”

If this transcendental object, X, cannot be known noumenally, it nonetheless is a condition of subjective thought to express X *as if* it were substance, but what it is in itself is unknowable. The “I” then, as the *impression* of an object, as a metonymical object, is posited by some (pre)supposed, but unknowable, Thing - the transcendental subject. In other words, Kant’s insight into Descartes’ Thing that thinks reveals a structure that is homologous to Lacan’s conception of the psyche. Is not the transcendental object the personification of *objet petit a*, just as the transcendental subject is the Thing, the void against which “reality” may appear.

The transcendental object [objet petit a] gives a body to the gap [the Thing, Void] which forever separates the universal formal-transcendental frame of “empty” categories from the finite scope of our actual experience, of the affects that provide our intuition with positive content...(I)t guarantees that transcendental categories will refer to all possible future objects of experience.<sup>176</sup>

If this X or “I” of the self is only the proposition of a transcendental object, it is in itself then, nothing. That is, if it is X to whom the world appears and by which reality is structured into objects, then ‘X marks the spot’ opened up by the impossibility of knowing things noumenally. This gives form to the incommensurable union of our *finiteness* (as sensuous beings of experience), with our *infiniteness* (as beings which always already possess knowledge of all possibilities of the objects of experience). Or to put this another way:

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<sup>175</sup> Idem.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., p.18

(B)ecause of the inaccessibility of the Thing in itself, there is always a gaping hole in (constituted, phenomenal) [symbolic]reality, [symbolic]reality is never “all,” its circle is never closed, and this void of the inaccessible Thing is filled out with phantasmagorias through which the transpersonal Thing enters the stage of phenomenal presence [as objet petit a].<sup>177</sup>

What has, up until now, been implicit in my discussion of Descartes in relation to Lacan, now begins to show itself through Kant. What I am referring to is that which is a question of epistemology with Descartes (What can “I” know? How can the subject not know what it is?), has become through Kant (and later in Hegel and Lacan), an ontological one. As Žizek explains:

It was, of course, well before Kant that philosophers doubted the capacity of man to know the Infinite and affirmed that we can only conjecture the Infinite by means of improper metaphors. Yet Kant adds to it the crucial twist: man’s finitude is not the simple finitude of an inner-worldly entity lost in the overwhelming totality of the universe. The knowing subject is a substanceless point of pure self-relating (the “I think”) which is *not* “part of the world” but is, on the contrary, correlative to “world” as such and therefore *ontologically constitutive*: “world,” “reality,” as we know them, can appear only within the horizon of the subject’s finitude. The black space of the Thing in itself is therefore something extremely dangerous to approach – if one gets too close to it, “world” itself loses its ontological consistency.<sup>178</sup>

Unlike Heidegger’s notion of Being-in-the-world, which finds Dasein (the subject) inseparably tied to the world into which it is “thrown,” Kant/Lacan’s conception of the subject is that it is constituted by its being negatively correlated to the world. The subject’s knowledge of the “world,” “reality,” is without substance in that the subject is caught up in the libidinal circuit of the imaginary where it finds only what its desire is looking for.<sup>179</sup> Within the context of this

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<sup>177</sup> Žizek (1992), op. cit., p.136.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., p. 136-7.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

discussion, I find an “I”. If we recall from the discussions of sections one and two, the subject participates in the symbolic (“reality,” the community, the Law, the prison, etc.), without an understanding of its relationship to the system in its totality. Its knowledge is necessarily always incomplete, or, to repeat yet again, Žižek’s expression, “its circle is never closed.” The subject’s fundamental non-knowledge is (as Kant explains) manifest as someThing (a void or gap), which threatens the cohesiveness of its conception of reality. This void is noxious to the subject in that it threatens to reveal the subject as substanceless (as not *res cogitans*). This motivates it (the subject) to fill the void of self through fantasy (i.e., desire), thereby concealing the inconsistencies that threaten its very identity (its “I,” its sense of self). “Reality,” therefore, only appears to the subject against the backdrop of its own “impossibility.”

An interesting illustration of the subject as “pure self-relating” is best rendered in the 1999 film, *Being John Malkovich*.<sup>180</sup> In the film, John Malkovich takes the impossible position of being conscious from within his own unconscious, and is terrified to find that all other people (in world) appear to him as himself, i.e., as John Malkovich “clones.” This claustrophobic experience is amplified as the Malkovich(s) each look to him, incessantly and excitedly repeating his name over and over, “Malkovich,” “Malkovich,” “Malkovich.” This scene exemplifies Lacan’s conception of the subject who, unbeknownst to itself, is nothing but this empty self-relating.<sup>181</sup> In other words, in the Real of our

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<sup>180</sup> See page 6n10 of this paper.

<sup>181</sup> That the inaccessibility of the Thing that thinks is now being attributed to the (Real)ity of the subject as pure negativity, i.e., of *being* the Void that is the self, is reflective of Hegel’s take on Kant, and posits that

relationship to the world, we (as subjects) are sustained only so far as we see ourselves reflected back on us. It is precisely in this sense that *we constitute the world that we participate* (for, in Hegelian terms, the “world” is fundamentally “for us”) *though we are not part of it.*

### **Hegel: From Epistemology to Ontology**

Hegel’s Phenomenology traces the movement of Spirit in the “education of consciousness” as it is manifest through out history. This is an evolution of the bringing to consciousness of “world spirit” and is synonymous with the development of Reason as it is engendered at both the level of the individual, i.e., “subjective spirit,” and the social (through its institutions i.e., the Family, Civil Society, and the State), i.e., “objective spirit.” What is here of utmost importance to my thesis is the necessity of the subject’s involuntary, *repressed*, participation in “world spirit,” through the individual’s finite subjectivity, as a matter of necessity. However, because we have already come to understand so much about the relationship between the Real, the imaginary, and the symbolic, it will be useful to think of “world spirit” (also referred to as “Spirit” or the “Absolute”) as our conception of the unconscious (as the thought before the thought) in order to hasten our understanding of the intended relationship between Hegel and Lacan. Although Kant’s approach to epistemological concerns tacitly points to ontological conclusions, Hegel’s task is to make such a claim explicit. As I hope to show, Hegel’s insistence that it is impossible for the subject to occupy a neutral position from which to determine the gap between the semblance of knowledge

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“the human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity.” See page 46 n104 of this paper.

and the Real Truth-in-itself is already aligned with the work we have already done.<sup>182</sup>

Kant insists that we can never know Things-in-themselves because they are forever *beyond* the capacity of human thought and perception. But if it is impossible to know things-in-themselves, then how can we be sure that they exist at all? For Hegel, the very possibility of the notion of an external unknowable “beyond,” separate from thinking, is derivative of an *internal* distinction between consciousness and its objects. Rather than conceiving the subject as separate from the object, Hegel’s phenomenology, by seeing consciousness itself as the phenomenon in question, attempts to discern an ‘internal dialectic’ that will explain how, *within* the subject, something like the idea of a separate phenomenal reality can emerge.

As we have seen above, Descartes was the first to articulate the necessity of a methodological skepticism, whereby all truth must be doubted due to the mind’s incomplete access to “objective” reality. Hegel will suggest that there is no object [*a*] without the subject and therefore all knowledge is necessarily subjective.

In our everyday lives, we address objects as if they are (in themselves) what they appear to be (for us). This continuity between our knowledge of the object and the object itself is reflected in the fact that their ‘relationship’ goes unreflected upon, and as such, is not brought to our immediate, immanent, attention. Consciousness/the subject itself, however, is constituted in the determination of a discrepancy between an awareness of the object and the object

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<sup>182</sup> Zizek (2000), Tarrying with the Negative, op. cit., p.20.

itself, as each is presented together before one consciousness. Therefore, consciousness is the *name* of this comparison, “for it is [only] for this same consciousness to know whether its knowledge of the object corresponds to the object or not.”<sup>183</sup> Therefore “the object of consciousness is not, never has been, and could not be some completely independent thing-in-itself... Every object, indeed, every *conceivable* object, is an object *for a subject*.”<sup>184</sup>

When, inevitably, discrepancies arise between awareness and its object, consciousness corrects itself by appropriately adjusting its awareness of the object. This shift in *subjectivity* in turn changes the object. From this new perspective, the previous form of the object *appears* to be something other than what it is.

Its former status as thing-in-itself (a status it had only because the former consciousness *ascribed* that status to it) is now withdrawn, and it is seen as having been only an object for us. Thus arises the distinction within consciousness between appearance and reality.<sup>185</sup>

Hegel’s phenomenology attempts to follow the dialectical succession of these revised states of consciousness (from sense-certainty, to perception, to understanding, and finally, to self-consciousness) until eventually Reason is satisfied and there cease to be discrepancies between the idea and the thing-in-itself. This is the “impossible” condition of Absolute Knowledge.

For Hegel, the simplest form of knowledge is sense-certainty and refers to the immediate experience of an object before the visual field of consciousness.

This act consists only of the pure sensing of the object’s *presence* and is therefore

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<sup>183</sup> Hegel in Melchert, op. cit., p. 417.

<sup>184</sup> Melchert, op. cit., p.417.

void of any conceptual work of interpretation. This type of experience, therefore, amounts to a consciousness of receptivity, possessing an unmediated certainty of a thing's presence, i.e., that "This" is presented to an "I." The "This" is sheer particularity in that it is not characterized by any universal conception of it (aside from the fact that the experience is immediate and therefore presented *Here* and *Now* before consciousness). Even if the "I" should shift its attention to a different "This," this knowledge will not change anymore than the "Here" and "Now" of the experience. Therefore, "Here" and "Now" are universal concepts since they can apply to every object. By the same logic, if another "I" looked upon "This", this new "I" would be no less an "I" than the first and therefore, like the "Here" and "Now," "I" is also a universal in that it reveals nothing about the "I" in question, aside from its presence.

What then can be said of this simple "concrete" knowledge of sense-certainty? Only that it is no knowledge at all, since "This" being presented before "I" is the most universal, and therefore, most 'emptied' of any substantial content. There can be no knowledge derived from an unsubstantial thing appearing before another. The inadequacy of this type of "knowledge," impels consciousness to go beyond itself. The fact that "concepts" are inadvertently included in this stage reflects consciousness' inherent working out of its own inconsistencies, beyond the subject's subjective knowledge. (Or to use the language of the unconscious, these "concepts" are "the thought before the thought."). Through this experience, consciousness has learnt that knowledge does not come from passive receptivity, or retreating into projects of re-discovering "first conditions" (like Descartes'

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<sup>185</sup> Idem.



foundation in certainty). "Sense-perception" is thus negated because its pretensions to knowledge are false. In the stage of Perception to follow, consciousness will perceive and incorporate the *true* contents of the previous stage (i.e., sensual experience), by *actively* interpreting it through the use of concepts.

Although I will save myself, and the reader, from studying every step of Hegel's phenomenology, the following summation of the stages of Perception and the Understanding will be useful. In the "moment" of Perception:

(O)bjects are characterized using concepts (universals) that describe their properties. Perception's structure is consciousness of *things* that *have* these properties. But what is a thing? Is it a mere collection of the properties? That hardly seems right, since it misses the *unity* of a thing. Is it then something lying behind all the properties? But then it becomes an unknowable X, since we know things by perception only in terms of their properties. This dilemma forces consciousness on to the next stage of ...

*Understanding*, in which things are understood in terms of laws, as in Newtonian science. These are thought to express the truth of things – their inner essence. They explain the properties and give us an account of the unity of things – of why a given thing has just the properties it does have. But in producing such explanations, consciousness is active, not merely passive. And in recognizing this contribution by itself, consciousness reaches the stage of explicit Self-Consciousness.<sup>186</sup>

According to Žižek, Kant's philosophy is positioned at the level of Understanding in that it presents the union of sense and intuition. This unity is not manifest in Kant's "I" of apperception (if the individual did have access to this "intellectual intelligence" there would be no such thing as phenomena, i.e., all things would be known as Things-in-themselves), but exists as an abstract notion of a synthesis

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., p. 421

that “takes place in a separate domain beyond their splitting.”<sup>187</sup> Is not the aspiration of science to (re)discover an undifferentiated Truth, which underlies this contingent *thing* that we call “reality”? What we (mis)perceive in the very idea of a union *beyond* is nothing but a projection of the limited knowledge of finite beings. This beyond, this irreducible *Otherness* that is the place of Things-in-themselves, is the empty materialization of the insurmountable void between *intuition* and *intelligence*.<sup>188</sup> Notice that I have replaced “concept” (Kant) with “intelligence” (Hegel). This difference, I will show, indicates how the status of the unknowable beyond is an epistemological void for Kant, but an ontological one for Hegel.

If we recall, at the stage of sense-certainty, consciousness’ knowledge consists only of being able to perceive immediate presence, void of any particular qualities (color, height, etc.). But even here, at the earliest stage, there is the conception of “Here” and “Now.” The significance of this lies in the fact that the determination of a concept is the product of a process of abstraction, whereby a common property is discerned across different particulars. If consciousness is just another name for the comparison between *concept* and object, then its appearance at this earliest stage of sense-certainty (of “pure” receptivity) indicates an *a priori* abstraction by some unknown Other, preceding consciousness.

(E)very tension between Notion [Kant’s “concept”] and reality, every relationship of the Notion to what appears as its irreducible Other encountered in the sensible, extra-notional experience, already is an intra-notional tension, i.e., already implies a minimal notional determination of this “otherness.”<sup>189</sup>

<sup>187</sup> Žižek (2000), *Tarrying with the Negative*, op. cit., p.39.

<sup>188</sup> Melchert, op. cit., p. 421.

<sup>189</sup> Žižek (2000), *Tarrying with the Negative*, op. cit., p. 20.

If this tear in reality, which limits my subjective knowledge by positing it as Other to some indivisible truth, is really a negative reflection of some internal void, then where am “I” in relation to this internal Other? From where does this inherent notion of Otherness emerge?

As was discussed above, the movement of spirit, in the trading of one kind of knowledge for another (e.g., perception for understanding), does not free our subjectivity from the limits of its belonging to a finite, historical being. Our knowledge is not only forever limited in relation to what we can know about reality, but also about what we can know about our knowing. This was already evident through our following of consciousness’ “working-out” of the inconsistencies between perception and intuition as it is forced to move beyond itself. That this movement takes place somewhere *beyond* our subjective knowledge, irregardless of the stage of consciousness, demonstrates that we will forever lack “any measuring-rod which would guarantee our contact with the Thing itself.”<sup>190</sup> This is not to suggest, as Zizek explains, that Spirit[Unconscious] is effectively manipulating human beings “behind their back,” making them mere instruments of Spirit[Unconscious]’s self-reflection. Unlike Kant’s transcendental knowledge which is the product of a “reflective insight” into the *a priori* concepts which outline the limits of the field of phenomena,

Hegel’s logic is the reflection of the Absolute [Unconscious] itself which appears to itself in the thought of the (finite) subject... What Hegel has in mind is that the split between us and the Absolute (the split on account of which we are subjects) is at the same time the

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., p.20.

self-split of the Absolute itself: we participate in the Absolute [Unconscious] not on account of our exalted contemplation of it, but by means of the very gaze which forever separates us from it.<sup>191</sup>

What is this explanation if not Lacan's conception of the negatively correlated relationship between the subject and its objet petit a? Is not the constitutively "de-centred" subject the product of its participation in the unconscious by means of its (the subject's) seeing itself from where (objet petit a) it cannot see itself seeing?

### **Communication: the Position of Enunciation and of the Enunciated**

I have discussed at some length in the first and second sections how the subject effectively functions in two "realities" at once: one "reality" is based in the circuit of the subject's desire (the imaginary), the other, is an effective proposition which is maintained through the subject's "forced" participation (the symbolic). But for fear of losing our footing, it may be useful to ground this discussion in its relationship to language. For Lacan, language exemplifies the symbolic order in that language is the primary means by which a society/the symbolic/ the big Other subjectivizes the individual. In other words, subjectivity becomes what is implicitly implied within the discourse of language. The implications of this are determined through the subject's relationship with the Other.

If the subject participates both at the level of the imaginary and the symbolic, then the subject effectively speaks from two positions simultaneously: from the position of the *enunciated* (the imaginary) and from the position of *enunciation* (the symbolic). The level of the enunciated consists of what the

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid, p.243-4n33.

subject is literally saying, i.e., the subject *imagines* that what it is saying is being heard and understood exactly the way it is intended. For example, I (presup)pose that anOther subject (the reader in this case) understands what I am saying, i.e., I assume (at some level) that *we* are 'on the same page,' so to speak. Implicitly, the success of this communication is dependent upon the big Other's (social order, language, etc.) "guarantee" that what I am saying is being understood.

Unfortunately, as we have seen above, the big Other is ever changing and, therefore, inconsistent. Such is the nature of a system of signification. As a result, and this too has been introduced above, the subject is in part constituted by its inability to know *where* it is positioned within the symbolic system, to know its position of enunciation. Because the symbolic order determines meaning not through a literal, natural, or objective resolve, but from the order and relationship of its signifiers, the subject can never be sure that its message is properly received.

In a sense, every time the subject speaks or attempts to communicate, it is playing the children's game of "telephone" where a simple phrase, upon being passed from mouth to ear and child to child, becomes unrecognizable in its final articulation. As the subject is never sure, when trying to communicate, how many children are participating, or how "good" they are at playing, the subject cannot be sure what is happening to its words *before* they have even left its mouth (hands, etc.).

Subsequently, our inability to know our position of enunciation suggests too that our words and actions may have consequences that we have not foreseen.

For example, what happens if a statement that is to be understood metaphorically is taken literally? Or visa versa? What if our words are used out of context or are adopted by others to argue a position within a different context than was intended?<sup>192</sup> This gap between the subject's position of the enunciated and the position of enunciation is the basis of Lacan/Zizek's position that "there is no metalanguage."

There is no metalanguage" insofar as the speaking subject is always already spoken, i.e., insofar as he cannot master the effects of what he is saying: he is always saying more than he "intended to say," and this surplus of what is effectively said over the intended meaning puts into words the repressed content – in it, "the repressed returns."<sup>193</sup>

Let me offer the following example of the speaking subject as "always already spoken." In the 1989 film *Bladerunner*, again, human androids are created to look, act, and not only experience themselves as human beings (like David), but due to memory implants, believe themselves to be human beings. Due to some human error, six androids discover their real identity, and, having escaped the "off world colonies" (where they worked as slaves, prostitutes, and soldiers), return to earth in search of their creator. In one scene, Pris (a "pleasure model") mocks the "success" of an android designer (Sebastian) when she proudly (and cynically) states, "I think, therefore I am." The significance of this statement lies in the fact that Sebastian's success as a designer locates his "failure" as a human being. Pris *knows* what she is (an android) and as such is the "pure" personification of

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<sup>192</sup> When George W. Bush announced that in response to the attacks of September 11, that the United States had the right to defend itself and retaliate against the Al Queda, his words unintentionally set an international precedence as it was immediately adopted and incorporated into the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine; a conflict which escalated significantly (in the weeks following the United States attack on Afghanistan) as each country too claimed the right to retaliate against their attackers.

Descartes' "Thing that thinks." In other words, her enunciated position ("I") and her position of enunciation (I) are located in the same place.

The repressed Real of the statement that "returns" is not for Pris, as she is fully aware that she is "always already spoken" for, but for the programmer who is confronted with the fact that the very mantra of human self-awareness (Descartes' "I think, therefore I am"), is the very mode of human self-deception. Pris' use of the expression<sup>194</sup> announces her freedom from the fantasy of her being human, while simultaneously pointing to the fantasy that is the constitutive non-knowledge of real human beings. Precisely because humans believe themselves to be spontaneous, unique and privileged in their self-awareness, they are lost to themselves and as such (unlike Pris), can never know themselves. (They can never know if what they say is spoken from the same place from which they speak). This marks the significance of Lacan's statement "where I think, 'I think therefore I am' is not where I am."<sup>195</sup> I can never know from where the "I" (the imaginary/the enunciated) of "I think, therefore I am" is speaking from (the symbolic/the enunciation). I do not have direct knowledge of the nature of this "I."<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Zizek (1992), op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>194</sup> That it has become an "expression" signifies its incorporation into the consciousness of the big Other. As part of the symbolic other, its form lacks the substance of its conception.

<sup>195</sup> Zizek (1993), op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>196</sup> That Descartes' uses quotation marks when he introduces "cogito ergo sum" is now revealed to be of Real significance in that it inadvertently points to what we have already been suggesting: that the Real significance of the statement is that in spite of the fact that Descartes has doubted out of his existence all others, he is nonetheless speaking to someone. What must necessarily remain unconscious if Descartes statement is to be true; what is already alluded to in his jump from "I think" to "I am": that he is speaking to, and thus bearing witness to, his continued belief in the big Other, God, who sees him from where he does not see himself (i.e., from his position of enunciation).

### **Marx's Subject of Ideology: "they do not know what they are doing..."**

Interpreting the gap between what the subject says and the social position from which it (the subject) is speaking is essentially the foundation for sociology's understanding of the social subject. For example, when the labourer says, 'I am free to sell my labour,' the social scientist understands that although the labourer may be telling the truth from his/her perspective (i.e., at the level of the imaginary), within its social context (i.e., at the level of the social symbolic, from the labourer's position of enunciation) it is not true. If the social subject is characterized by its (mis)recognition of its own social position (again, its position of enunciation), then it can be suggested that sociology works within the field of Marx's determination of ideology: that "they do not know what they are doing, but still they are doing it."<sup>197</sup>

Following Marx's lead then, sociology sees ideology as manifest through a basic constitutive naiveté on the part of its participants thereby creating a gap between "reality" and the subject's ("false") consciousness of it.<sup>198</sup> The underlying goal of sociology is therefore to "lead the naïve ideological consciousness to a point at which it can recognize its own effective conditions, the social reality that it is distorting, and through this very act dissolve itself."<sup>199</sup> But Lacan suggests that this classic concept of ideology as being supported by "false consciousness" is not the condition for reality's concealment, but rather, is the very condition for reality itself. The ideological distortion of reality is written into the very essence of reality. Therefore any suggestion by sociology that the

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<sup>197</sup> Zizek (1989), op. cit., p.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p.



ideological illusion is located in the *knowledge* of the subject must be re-examined. The fundamental status of ideology is not that of an illusion masking the real state of things, but that of an unconscious fantasy structure which allows there to be something like a “reality” at all.

Lacan believes that Marx’s analysis of the fetishism of commodities is remarkable in its insight, but sees a deeper understanding of it than even Marx did at its conception. For Lacan, Marx makes the error of understanding ideology in terms of *knowing* rather than *doing*. Marx believes that the proletariat, through the misrecognition of the fetishistic inversion, perpetuates the bourgeois ideology through their participation in the selling of their labour. Again, “they do not know it, but they are doing it.”<sup>200</sup> For Marx, only in the knowing can they (the proletariat) *begin* to destroy the conditions of capitalism, i.e., only in the recognition of the exploitive content of the capitalist form of labour consumption (the particular that confronts its universal as its inherent negation), can the bourgeoisie ideology collapse upon itself. For Lacan, however, the place of the “ideological illusion” is on the side of action rather than knowledge. How the subject acts is at the essence of this fantastical reality, and at the heart of this reality, is the effective act of commodity exchange.

Unlike Marx, Lacan’s conception of ideology refers to the totality of social relations. Ideology is not simply an illusion blinding the individual to the truth that lies hidden behind it; it is the active reality, which, in its essence, is a

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., p.

(mis)recognition of reality. In other words, ideology is the objective participation in a fantastical projection of belief. Let me explain.

Through the act of exchange, the labourer's consciousness is divided into two modes of existence: the theoretical (universal/knowing) and the practical (particular, "doing"). As Zizek quotes Sohn-Rethel's:

Thus in speaking of the abstractness of exchange we must be careful not to apply the term to the consciousness of the exchange agents. They are supposed to be occupied with the use of commodities they see, but occupied in their imagination only. It is the action of exchange, and the action only, that is abstract... The abstractness of that action cannot be noted when it happens because the consciousness of the agents is taken up with their business and with the empirical appearance of things which pertain to their use. One could say that the abstractness of their action is beyond realization by the actors because their very consciousness stands in the way. Were the abstractness to catch their minds their action would cease to be exchange and the abstraction would not rise.<sup>201</sup>

This is not unlike the children's tale<sup>202</sup> about an ant that was jealous of the centipede that was known throughout the garden to be the greatest dancer of all the insects. One day when the centipede was dancing, the ant came to him and said, "Incredible, Centipede! What a terrific dancer you are! Tell me, how do you do it? Do you step 12 and then 6 then 30 or is it 15, 24, and then 3?" It had never occurred to the centipede to think of his dance in that way before. He was of course conscious of his feet and his posturing, but which foot came first and why he could not determine. Confused, tripping and stumbling, the centipede tried to follow his own steps, but could not. From that day on, the centipede could never dance again, no matter how he tried. The point of this story is, during the act of

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<sup>201</sup> Sohn-Rethel in Zizek (1989), op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>202</sup> I believe I first heard this story from a PBS interview with Joseph Conrad.

exchange, the labourer is caught up in the commodities of its desire. If the social character which (Real)ly constitutes the Value of the commodity were to be present to the labourer's consciousness, the effective act of exchange would not appear to be a free choice, but as it is, a forced participation in a symbolic system whose possibility exists only on the condition that its impossibility is overlooked by those who participate in it. That which is overlooked, the impossibility of an exchange of equivalents, surfaces, not as an inconsistency that threatens the functioning of the whole system, but instead, as an "impossibly" *intelligent* commodity which determines the value of all other commodities. This commodity, endowed with consciousness, is of course, money. For Lacan, money effectively *believes itself* to be universal and as such becomes the Master-Signifier, the sublime Thing, which overdetermines the "social" network of commodity exchange.

Marx (in his later years) and Lacan recognize that the subject knows that the material quality of money does not give it its exchange-value, but in its *actions*, the subject behaves as if this sublime material *does* exist.<sup>203</sup> Lacan/Zizek suggests that the individual essentially participates within another reality, a reality where the conscious mind focuses on what will ultimately allow for the effective act of exchange. By acting as if money is Value, and thereby acting as if all social relations between commodities are real, the individual is able to maintain the "working" illusion of an exchange between equivalents. The subject's constitutive non-knowledge is not based in its being blind to the contradiction between ideology and reality, between knowledge and action; rather, it is located in the

subject's inability to recognize the conditions for the possibility of the effective act of exchange. Do we not see here yet again, the same structure of Zsu-Chuang's dream?

Once upon a time [a labourer] dreamed that he was [a commodity], a [commodity] fluttering about enjoying itself. It did not know that it was [a labourer]. Suddenly he awoke with a start and he was [a labourer] again. But he did not know whether he was [a labourer] who had dreamed that he was a [commodity], or whether he was a [commodity] dreaming he was [a labourer].<sup>204</sup>

In other words, the consciousness of the dream exists only outside of the dream just as the consciousness of a labour-commodity exists only outside the effective act of exchange. Of course, what is important here is that knowledge of the nature of the relationship between the two "realities" is obfuscated by the nature of consciousness, which is constituted through a *certain* non-knowledge of itself.

**Lacan's Subject of Ideology: "they know what they are doing, but still..."**

It is important to look more closely at this illusory Other world that the individual participates in. Before there was the *idea* of exchange, before the conscious mind was divided between theoretical and practical, there was a place where the possibility of these conceptions already existed. This space was the effective act of exchange.<sup>205</sup> Before any quantitative determination of value was created, before any qualitative following of the "changeable character" of commodities,<sup>206</sup> there was exchange itself, independent of reflection and quantitative analysis. What is being articulated here is that in the practical actions of the individual, s/he is participating in the Real reality, i.e., that which preceded

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<sup>203</sup> Zizek (1989), op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>204</sup> Chuang Zsu in Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, op. cit., p. 99.

<sup>205</sup> Zizek (1989), op. cit., p.17.

the universal truth of the individual, “the thought before the thought”<sup>207</sup> Because this reality is not based on a physical reality, but on a postulate perpetuated in the effective act of exchange, then that which is “universal” in consciousness is in fact not universal in that it is dependent upon the nature of individual subjectivity.<sup>208</sup> Because the external reality is based only on a proposition, an irreducible abstraction which was already present in the world prior to the internal processes of “thought-abstraction,” then Truth cannot and does not exist for or within the individual. This must remain unconscious for the individual, i.e., that the symbolic order “is precisely such a formal order which supplants and/or disrupts the dual relationship between ‘external’ factual reality and ‘internal’ subjective experience.”<sup>209</sup> The subject must “overlook” the fact that his/her (mis)recognized position at the level of the imaginary (the enunciated) is the very condition for his/her position at the level of the symbolic (the enunciation).

For Lacan, the self-conscious commodity is the symptom of this internal negation that is at the heart of Marx’s conception of fetishism. That which is universal in the individual is the product of a “declaration,”<sup>210</sup> a “so be it!” that must be ‘overlooked’ in order for the effective act of exchange to continue. For Lacan, the subject’s relationship to ideology is formulated as, “I know very well that there is no Truth behind Bourgeois ideology, but still I behave as if there

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<sup>206</sup> Idem.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

<sup>208</sup> Idem.

<sup>209</sup> Sohn-Rethel in Zizek (1989), op. cit., p.19.

<sup>210</sup> Zizek’s discussion of John Searle’s conception of the “taxonomy of illocutionary acts” outlines three different types of speech acts: assertives, directives, and declarations. Although I will not go into detail here of the first two, the latter, a declaration, is a unique in that the speaker “is trying to cause something to be the case by representing it as being the case...[I]f he succeeds he will have changed the world by representing it as having been so changed.” Searle in Zizek (1992), p. 97.

was.”<sup>211</sup> It is not in the knowing of what lies behind ideology that destroys the conditions for its existence, rather, it is through its effective activity that ideological reality is able to perpetuate itself. The real essence of ideology is therefore, not that it clouds the subject’s judgment, but that it can continue to recreate its own reality regardless of what the subject thinks it believes.

Because this “reality” is necessarily (mis)recognized/overlooked by the subject, its repression inevitably surfaces as a symptom. Within the context of this discussion, the symptom surfaces as the “commodity-form.” Because the bourgeoisie rights and prejudices have mystified the domination/servitude relationship, the labourers’ repressed understanding of the essential social nature of their labour takes the form of a belief that must not be recognized as a belief. It is a belief that announces itself through action, rather than as an abstraction of universalities. That belief is something external to the individual suggests that regardless of what the individual knows, or thinks it know, through the sublime medium of the commodity form, s/he is objectively creating and perpetuating anOther reality.<sup>212</sup>

The “real abstraction” of the effective act of exchange is the unconscious of the transcendental subject, and as such is the support of all “objective-universal scientific knowledge.”<sup>213</sup> The real exchange occurs at the level of the unconscious, in a proposition analogous to the declaration “it is so!” We may know that the Value of a commodity is not determined by its positive qualities and that its exchangeability has nothing to do with equity, but still we act *as if*

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<sup>211</sup> Žižek (1989), op. cit., p.18.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid. p.34.

exchange functions as an autonomous authority manifest as a magical logic<sup>214</sup> which can, for example, shift an entire country's economic status seemingly on a whim.<sup>215</sup> This of course is Marx's fetishistic inversion: "I know very well..., *but* still I am doing it."<sup>216</sup> The gap (the "but") between the "knowing" and the "doing" (between the "I think" and the "I am") is indicative of the real abstraction that takes place *somewhere else*.<sup>217</sup> Finally we are able to address the homology between Marx's fetishism and Lacan/Zizek's notion of fantasy:

The ontological paradox – scandal, even – of this notion of *fantasy* lies in the fact that it subverts the standard opposition of 'subjective' and 'objective': of course fantasy is by definition not 'objective' (in the naïve sense of 'existing independently of the subject's perceptions'): however, it is not 'subjective' either (in the sense of being reducible to the subject's consciously experienced intuitions). Fantasy, rather, belongs to the 'bizarre category of the objectivity subjective – the way things actually, objectively seem to you even if they don't seem that way to you.'<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid. p.18.

<sup>214</sup> Do we not grant this same irrational "benefit" to our computer, cars, bank machines, etc. when, without any Real knowledge of its internal operation, learn through plenty of trial and error that a particular series of steps must be followed if a particular desired activity is to be performed and any number of bad returns avoided; this, though the actual relationship between the activity and the result is completely unknown. Is this not Max Weber's conception of the stereotyping of behavior characteristic of the most primitive religions who were essentially "stained" with superstitions and magic.

<sup>215</sup> Has not every televised fire, bombing, explosion, dusty letter, etc. since September 11, 2001, not caused the Dow Jones to drop whole points until it is confirmed that the violence was not caused by terrorists.

<sup>216</sup> Zizek (1989), op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>217</sup> Milan Kundera's book, *Life is Elsewhere*, speaks to the phenomenon of the subject's Being as being in the past or the future, but never in the present (in an existentially immediate way). We can imagine this idea in terms of Kierkegaard's suggestion that flirtation takes away from real love because it "reduces moral action to an abstraction" whereby the more one adds to love the more one takes away. The more one adds/takes away to/from the immediate *moment* (through hope, memory, prediction, nostalgia, etc) the less complete the "moment," and therefore it ceases to be just that, the experience of a *moment*, as something in and of itself. Therefore, life happens either before us or after us, but elsewhere nonetheless. As is the case of the labour who anticipates the exchange, reflects on the exchange, but is never present (conscious) *in* the exchange; for in the effective act, the labour's repression holds his/her imagination

Soren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age and Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle*, Alexander Dru (trans.) (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962), p. 33.

<sup>218</sup> Zizek paraphrasing Daniel C. Dennett in Zizek (2000), *The Fragile Absolute*, op. cit., p. 35.

*Dissonance* is the psychological term for the internal conflict that arises when one's acts and beliefs are incompatible. The result is that the individual feels such tension that s/he, at some level, must concede one position (the act or the belief) to the other. In other words, the individual must stop the inconsistent behavior or adopt a new comportment to the activity. The significance of the fantasy is that it appears as a way out of the tension of the *forced choice*. Unlike Descartes who, as a Christian before an omniscient God, must guard his thoughts as he would his physical actions, the modern subject (the Cartesian subject, i.e., the subject of the founding Act of freedom) has the luxury of living separate public and private lives. This is to say, that the subject creates a psychic distance between his actions (which are objective and public) and his beliefs (which are subjective and private). Therefore when it is revealed to the labourer that his/her "decision" to sell his/her labour on the market is a "forced choice," the labour is not freed from the choice, but instead responds 'Yes, (subjectively) I know, but I will (objectively) still do it.' We see here that the only thing that the labourer is freed from is the dissonance, the anxiety, between belief and the act. Fantasy allows for the private and public (for knowledge and activity, for subjectivity and objectivity) to appear before consciousness simultaneously without their inherent antagonism. How? Because something that is experienced as fundamentally personal, intimate, and subjective (i.e. belief) happens *outside* of consciousness. Again, this is the nature of the *objet petit a*. And yet, on the other side of this same coin, it can be said that something that is absolutely general, communal, and



objective (i.e. the exchange of “equivalents”) is inherent to consciousness. This is the nature of the Thing, i.e. the “lost object”.<sup>219</sup>

In order to avoid the (Real)ity that it (the subject) is inextricably split, forever barred from knowing itself in its being, the subject’s desire mediates the subject’s double existence through the “objectively subjective”- i.e., the fantasy support of “objective” reality. As Žizek points out, this notion was inherent to Marx’s commodity fetishism and manifest in Marx’s suggestion of an “objectively necessary reality.”<sup>220</sup>

So, when a critical Marxist encounters a bourgeois subject immersed in commodity fetishism, the Marxist’s reproach to him is not ‘A commodity may seem to you a magical object endowed with special powers, but really it is just a reified expression of relations between people’; Marxist’s actual reproach is, rather, You may think that the commodity appears to you as a simple embodiment of social relations (that, for example, money is just a kind of voucher entitling you to a part of the social product), but this is not how things really seem to you – in your social reality, by means of your participation in social exchange, you bear witness to the uncanny fact that a commodity really appears to you as a magical object endowed with special powers.<sup>221</sup>

In a sense, the labourer coordinates the exchange, but imagines the commodity as being “the Deal Closer” (to use a sales expression) i.e., the One that is assigned to do whatever it is that it does to “make it so.” What is being introduced here is that even if the subject is aware that there is no choice, it still participates in reality’s “effectivity,”<sup>222</sup> by positing a declaration of “it is so.”

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<sup>219</sup> Although this may sound like Durkheim’s notion of organic solidarity, I think it is more accurate to articulate its significance in terms of Wendy Doniger O’ Flaherty’s discussion of how the individual’s and community’s moral commitment to the myth is not the effect of “social conscience,” but rather of “cumulative *individual* conscience.” O’Flaherty, op. cit., p.102.

<sup>220</sup> Žizek (2000), The Fragile Absolute, op. cit., p.83.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., p.83-4.

<sup>222</sup> A terrible term, which is meant to denote the effectiveness of a process, not after the fact, but in its becoming.

Remember, a declaration<sup>223</sup> is a “pure” performative, an act that effectuates its prepositional content.<sup>224</sup> Understood in this way, the labourer’s participation in the exchange of equivalents *makes* the possibility of the exchange of equivalents, always already possible. Therefore, the subject is not miraculously freed from the constraints of ideology upon acquiring the knowledge that ‘things are not what they seem’ (i.e., that the big Other, which structures our reality, is inconsistent), but rather, the subject separates itself, psychically, from the anxiety of such a realization by (re)constituting the ‘consistency’ and ‘autonomy’ of the big Other through the effective act of exchange. To summarize then, “reality,” as ideology, *does not care what you think you believe, only what you do.*

### **Déjà vu and the Big Other**

Zizek’s 2000 publication of the second edition of Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out, contains a significant addition to his 1992 first edition. This addition consists, in part, of a paper entitled “The Matrix, Or, Two Sides of Perversion,” that Zizek presented to the International Symposium at the Center for Art and Media in 1998. In it, Zizek offers a commentary and critique of the film, the Matrix, analyzing the relationship between the big Other and the Matrix (the computerized virtual symbolic order that obfuscates our ability to access (Real)ity as it really is). Within the context of his discussion, I would like to look at the film’s explanation for the experience of *déjà vu* as it relates to the subject of ideology.

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<sup>223</sup> See page 90 of this paper.

<sup>224</sup> Zizek (1992), op. cit., p. 97.

In the film The Matrix, human beings “live” within a computer-generated reality, a fictitious physical space where humans are cognitively, but not physically, present within “reality.” Imagine, for now, that the matrix’s relationship to (Real)ity is homologous to the relationship between the experience of a dream and waking reality. Just as in a dream, the consistency (and success) of the matrix is dependent upon its being experienced as a cohesive, natural, reality by its participant. If something occurs within the dream/matrix that seems “out of place” or “wrong,” the dream/matrix responds by introducing a new element, which, if we recall from film theory,<sup>225</sup> *sutures* the gap in “reality” that was created through the subject’s *doubt*. The subject is then able to perceive the “reality” (dream/matrix/film) as a cohesive totality (i.e., it appears *as if* the “first shot” signifies the “second shot”). However, what has really happened, however, is that through the subject’s desire for consistency, fantasy has allowed it (the subject) to overlook the fact that it is the “second shot” (following the gap), which signifies the first. This suturing of “reality” (dream/matrix/film) sustains the “realness” of the world retroactively, and subsequently, my certainty as to who I believe “*I am*.”

In the film, not all humans live within the matrix. Some were born in the Real world, while others were awoken into it. The Real world is a post-apocalyptic world where they (the humans who live within it) enjoy none of the luxuries of life in the matrix (e.g., one’s choice of a variety of food and drink, seasons, uncontaminated air and water, etc.), but they are *free* in that they *know* who they are because they know *where* they are. When the character Neo is

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<sup>225</sup> See page 47 of this paper.

literally, unplugged from the matrix (with the help of Morpheus and his team) and wakes up in the Real world, he learns of the differences between the world as it (Real)ly is and how it appeared to be in the matrix. This, of course, is a traumatizing event for Neo, analogous to the experience of “Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole,” to borrow Morpheus’ reference to Alice in Wonderland. Although Neo appears to have successfully made the physical transition into the Real world, psychically he remains torn between: what he knows to be true of “reality” (i.e., that life within the Matrix is “false”) and what he believes to be true of himself (i.e., a man whose identity has, up until now, been structured within the context of the matrix).

The dissymmetry of the “awoken” subject has been discussed above at some length, and again we see here that only when we are outside of the matrix (the dream, exchange, etc.) can we experience the doubt of one reality in relation to another “impossible” reality. The trick here for the subject, what makes the subject barred from pure self-knowledge, is that the subject cannot determine which reality to designate as “impossible.”

In the film, the humans who live in the Real world are able to plug their consciousnesses back into the Matrix - an experience, which, in keeping with the dream analogy, amounts to “lucid dreaming.” This type of dreaming refers to the dreamer’s ability to “wake-up” within his/her own dream. That is, the individual is able to transplant his/her waking consciousness into the dream consciousness without waking up. The result is that, with practice, the dreamer can consciously and willfully manipulate the dream content; an act which breaks the constituting

rules of each side of reality. First, dream-work demands that the subject overlook the fact that it (the subject) actively participates in two distinct worlds simultaneously while s/he is dreaming, in order to keep the unconscious, unconscious. Understood in this way, lucid dreaming is potentially risky in that the subject may see what it is not meant to see. And second, the subject's awareness of a dream reality within waking reality is psychically possible only if dream reality is subordinated to waking reality. Otherwise, the subject must concede that an essential aspect of its identity is played out *somewhere* else - a conclusion (with substantial value) that the subject must deny.

Although Neo *believes* that the matrix is not true, he *acts* as if it is. For example, because Neo knows that the laws of gravity as experienced in the matrix are only a dictating proposition that mimics Real gravity, he should be able to jump from building to building. But, because he (initially) cannot, he is reminded that at some level, part of him does not know that the matrix "does not exist." And what part of him does not know? Precisely that part of him which addresses the big Other, not as a symbolic abstraction of (Real)ity, but as an imaginary reflection of his own identity. In other words, unbeknownst to Neo, the world of the matrix still sees him from where he cannot see himself (i.e., it continues to relate to him, at the level of the imaginary, as if it was still *his* world). And as such, like a good subject of the big Other (the Matrix, the Law, the Father, etc.), Neo subordinates himself to the Laws of gravity and fails to make the leap to the next building. Neo may not believe in the matrix, but the matrix, in a sense, still believes in him.

What has any of this to do with the notion of *déjà vu*, the strange experience of, “I think that I have been here (felt this, seen this, etc.) before”? When Neo is plugged back into the Matrix with the others (Morpheus and his team), Neo sees two cats walk past him, one after the other. The uncanniness of the occurrence of the second cat compels him to say out loud, “Oh, *déjà vu*.” The team overhears Neo and recognize that *déjà vu* is a sign that the matrix overseers, the “agents,” have detected their presence. As the character Trinity explains, *déjà vu* is a “glitch in the matrix” that “happens when they (the agents) change something.” What can be determined from this is three-fold: first, we learn that the job of the agents is to maintain the appearance of a cohesive and consistent reality despite the fact that the content of that reality is constantly in flux; second, we see that they (the agents) are not always successful in their attempts to present a seamless reality; and third, that in spite of these “glitches,” the subject of the matrix (the big Other) is willing/desires to dismiss these signs as mere coincidence, or *déjà vu*, in order to avoid the Real of “reality.” But unlike doubt, *déjà vu* presents the subject with a distance not only from that which must be avoided (the unconscious Real), but also from the “false” reality within which it (the subject) believes itself to be a part of.

Does not *déjà vu* offer a moment of openness about the world (i.e., that I somehow know that I do not have all the information about this moment), at the same time as it (re)assures me that it is of little consequence and therefore should not be dwelled upon. If, in dreaming, the subject is closer to the unconscious than in waking life, then the lucid dreamer who knows that the dream landscape is the

product of its (the subject's) own dream-work, may stumble across or actively attempt to pursue the Real of its (the subject's) desire. But what have we learnt from Neo if not that even if we know what the relationship is between the mind and the matrix (the big Other), there is still something else going on "behind our backs." What is unique then about déjà vu, what Morpheus' team knew that Neo did not, was that déjà vu in the matrix is symptomatic of a manipulation (an intentional change) within an already manipulated reality (the matrix). Déjà vu, like doubt, announces that something is being overlooked, but it is not that "reality" is being structured by an underlying Real reality (which again, is the elementary understanding of the ideological break), but rather, that in our activity we effectively "download" our (un)consciousness into reality (the matrix, exchange, "I am"). What is déjà vu if not the uncanny sense of having found oneself outside of oneself? How? Not through conscious recognition, not through reason, knowledge, or reflection, but rather it is triggered through an activity.

Knowing what he knows about the nature of the matrix and his participation in it, why does Neo not immediately recognize the doubled cat as an error (an inconsistency) within the matrix? Though he knows that the matrix is not real, he acts as if it is. Through the experience of déjà vu Neo acts to (re)constitute the consistency of this matrix inconsistency. Before Neo was unplugged from the matrix, he suspected that the world was not what it seemed to be, but when he awoke in the Real world, his certainty, his knowledge of its falseness simply allowed him to distance himself from the dissonance between his beliefs and his actions when he returned to the matrix. The gap between his doubt (things are not

what they seem) and his certainty (that the matrix does not exist) is the void from which reality is (re)constituted. The matrix seems to take on an altered appearance when Neo is reintroduced back into the matrix; everything appears surreal, in that the expected mixes fluidly with the unexpected, but without the anxiety (dissonance) caused by their incongruity.

For those immersed in the matrix, the agents appear only as dream figures or hallucinations, but for those returning to the matrix with the knowledge of its hollow (meaningless) nature, the agents are all too real. To the “innocent victim” of the matrix (i.e., the subject fully immersed within it) the agents are analogous to the guards of Bentham’s panopticon in that they are present to the subject in an altogether, absent way. But, to those who know this, those who are ‘made aware,’ and subsequently, know that the tower is empty and that the prison is self-imposed and need not exist, the appearance of the guards (the agents) confronts them, not with the terrifying (Real)ity that “reality” (the prison) does not exist, but with the certainty that the agents *do*. Rather than watching from a “safe” distance (a distance so far removed that it is as if they did not exist at all), the agent/guards show themselves to be very Real and have, essentially, come ‘looking for you in response to your insolence.’ The agents show themselves, in this new world of revealed knowledge, to be all too real; appearing as invincible and omnipotent “super-humans.” From where do the agent/guards acquire this surplus-presence? Not from the fact that the agents (the guards) are able to manipulate the matrix (the prison) and move about without the constraints of the matrix’s imposed reality (space); nor is it because the team/the prisoners have not been completely



successful in freeing themselves of the rules of the matrix. No. Rather, when confronted with the matrix agents, they (the team, the prisoners) are confronted with the return of the Real, a return of what must be overlooked in order for the subject to be in two realities at once. When in the matrix, the “freed” subject is confronted with the fact that s/he owes a debt that can never be repaid in return for his/her acquired knowledge of (Real)ity. The result is that the subject of this knowledge becomes the paranoid subject who believes that the symbolic order (the big Other, the matrix) is “a plot staged by some evil prosecutor.”<sup>226</sup> The temptation here, of course, is to say that, yes, this is exactly what is going on, but Freud/Zizek reminds us that paranoia, like jealousy, has nothing to do with facts.

The lesson of such paradoxes is clear: pathological jealousy [paranoia] is not a matter of getting the facts false, but of the way these facts are integrated into the subject’s libidinal economy. However, what one should assert here is that the same paradox should also be performed as it were in the opposite direction: the society (its sociosymbolic field, the big Other) is “sane” and “normal” even when it is proven factually wrong.<sup>227</sup>

We see here that what is really at stake in the ideological break is not the subject’s liberation from the “lie” that is “reality” (the matrix, the prison), but the (re)constitution of a subject whose (imagined) relationship to the symbolic order has been changed forever; the (re)constitution of a subject who does not feel that it is being tracked down because it still owes an unpayable debt to those it was “forced” to commit to, i.e., social symbolic order.

What Neo’s experience of déjà vu reminds us of is that this “staged plot” of the symbolic order exists only in so far as the subject’s methodological

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<sup>226</sup> Zizek (1993), op. cit., p. 153.

<sup>227</sup> Zizek (2000), *Enjoy Your Symptom*, op. cit., p. 220.

comportment to the world is one of doubt and suspicion. The mechanism of this paranoia is revealed only when the subject finds itself in the “impossible” position of being outside of the “evil” the symbolic order (the matrix). Only then can the subject understand how it (the symbolic order/matrix) is able to perpetuate its own existence. Neo’s déjà vu reveals how the matrix operates effectively only if the subject desires cohesiveness in the midst of discontinuity. Through the active overlooking of the matrix’s inconsistencies (i.e., through fantasy), the subject denies the reality of its “forced entrance” into this suspect world, and thereby constitutes the symbolic order as being fundamentally corrupt. Because Neo’s team already knows that it is the “reality” of the symbolic order/matrix that is fundamentally paranoid (in that it, the symbolic order/matrix, is structured to be experienced as one reality which hides another), not the subject, Neo’s experience of doubt/suspicion as is manifest in déjà vu, alerts them to the presence of the gaze that sees them from where they cannot see themselves from their position of enunciation within the matrix “reality.”

As we saw above, the effective operation of “reality” is but an abstraction of the subject’s active participation within it. Because the subject can never know from where it is located within the symbolic order, it can never know itself, and therefore, cannot undermine the effectiveness of the social-symbolic through simply *knowing* that it is based on a falsehood. In other words, the persistent relationship between the subject and the matrix/symbolic order is guaranteed by a certain non-knowledge on the part of its members. The repression of this non-knowledge becomes manifest in the team’s belief that the agents (the guards) are

somehow more real than the matrix itself, even though they (the team) “know” that the agents are part of the matrix, and thus, cannot be “real.” This “surplus-value,” this “surplus-belief,” allocated to the matrix agents is symptomatic of the subject’s repression of its active participation in its own imprisonment. Morpheus and his team make it a rule to run from an agent if so confronted, but not because they will lose the fight (though this is what they think they believe), but because the agents appear to them as something more than itself, more than the matrix. Recall that (re)entrance into the matrix is analogous to lucid dreaming and as such introduces the possibility of getting closer to the unconscious of desire than would otherwise be possible. The anxiety that is provoked by the agents’ presence indicates that that which must be kept at a psychical distance has gotten too close. The gaze of the agent, which sees the matrix subject from where it (the subject) cannot see itself, confronts the subject with what it must forget: that its relationship to this “new” external reality (outside of the matrix) *is also* sustained by a certain non-knowledge on the part of the subject. The subject is, therefore, still not free.

In response to this section’s opening suggestion that the subject’s experience of an insurmountable obstacle [the big Other, the matrix] is the positive condition for its ability to perceive something like a reality at all, we can now ascertain what is entailed in Žižek’s suggestion that ultimately it is Reality (as obstacle) that resists.<sup>228</sup> What gives reality the authority to insist upon its own existence? Reality is thus a successful declaration whereby the gesture of an “It is

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<sup>228</sup> Žižek (2000), Enjoy Your Symptom, op. cit., p. 226.

so!” changes the world by representing it as *always already* having been so changed.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> See page 32.

## Section Four: The Temptation of the Ethical

The structure of the social scientist's ethical comportment to its subject is one that attempts to mimic the structure of, what has been called, the Event (the Act); to be more precise, to follow Marx's example of *being the call* for the subjects' liberation by means of an ideological awakening.<sup>230</sup> But as I have stated above, any attempt to repeat the Event through a formal orchestration of activities in hopes of achieving the same impact is "impossible" due to the fact that the Event is not a product of its having been planned out. Rather, the Event is a movement of the unknown in that it is the process of something's *becoming* in its most profound, and uncertain, inwardness. The Act, in its immediacy, is not a means to a specified end. Rather, it is a symbolic suicide,<sup>231</sup> a "passage through the zero point."<sup>232</sup> Far from being a calculation of reason, it is a fundamentally "irrational" action that threatens to destroy the subject through its endurance. Only in this moment of "radical unaccountability"<sup>233</sup> (Kierkegaard's "suspension of the ethical"), can the subject experience itself, and subsequently the world and its history, in its unlimited openness, void of all identification (representation).

If, as Lacan/Zizek suggests, the only ethical act is the symbolic suicide, an act of sacrificing oneself (of being in the wrong),<sup>234</sup> before the big Other, then the subject must *become* what it has had to deny within the symbolic: The subject

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<sup>230</sup> This slightly "romanticized" description of Marx's contribution is accurate *for* sociology. The present sociological take on Marx seems to approach him as a (failed) ethical hero (in a Kierkegaardian sense), whose image, like all "characters" of nostalgia, speaks more to the times from which the Gaze is situated than the time upon which it looks.

<sup>231</sup> See page 45 of this paper.

<sup>232</sup> Zizek (1992), op. cit., p.44.

<sup>233</sup> Idem.

<sup>234</sup> Lacan/Zizek suggest that the sacrificial Act is always an Act of "striking at himself." Zizek (2000), The Fragile Absolute, ob. cit., p.150.

must abstain from ceding to the “forced choice,” in all of its infinite nothingness and uncertainty. But in order to understand the difficulty of coming to this Act, in order to understand the “gift” of the Event, it is useful to look to the paradox that is the social scientist’s relationship to the Other.

### **The “Classical” and the “Advocate” Social Scientist**

In my mind, the nature of the social scientist falls somewhere between two “pure-types”: between the “classical” sociologist and the “advocate” sociologist. These delineations, though borrowed from Žižek’s distinctions between the “classical” detective and the “hard-boiled” detective of early twentieth century detective novels, offer an interesting insight into the inherently paradoxical role of sociology.

The “classical” sociologist, like the classical detective, is primarily characterized by his methodological detachment from the object of study. Through the use of “logic and deduction,” the classical sociologist maintains an “eccentric” position and is “excluded from the exchanges that takes place among the group”<sup>235</sup> constituted by the phenomenon in question. This approach finds the “objective” social scientist seeking certain, reliable, verifiable, universal “truths” within and between the activities of social beings through quantifiable empirical analysis.

The subject of the “classic” social scientist can be of two types: uninformed (preferably) or informed. The uninformed subject is constituted by its

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<sup>235</sup> Žižek (1993), ob. cit., p. 60.

“non-knowledge” of its being examined.<sup>236</sup> This is, of course, is beneficial to the social scientist in that it eliminates the possibility of the subject’s intentional or inadvertent deception of the analyst (a possibility that threatens the reliability of the scientist’s findings). The significance of this approach is that the unsuspecting subject does not/cannot obfuscate the appearance of that which might otherwise remain hidden had it (the subject) been informed.<sup>237</sup> Because the phenomenon in question is uncontaminated by the subject’s *awareness* of its being studied, the phenomenon’s appearance is assumed to be authentic or natural. But regardless of whether or not the subject is aware of the fact that it is being studied, the task of the “classical” social scientist is to penetrate through the phenomenon’s “false appearance”<sup>238</sup> into its “hidden reality”<sup>239</sup> by systematically eliminating compelling, but erroneous, explanations for its appearance.

Emile Durkheim’s analysis of suicide exemplifies this approach. In his book, Suicide,<sup>240</sup> Durkheim methodically undermines popular psychological explanations for the phenomena of suicide, before providing empirical statistical evidence (i.e., “social facts”) in support of a sociological cause. These “facts” can be understood as “knowledge in the Real” (to return to Lacan/Zizek’s terms) in

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<sup>236</sup> This “examination” need not take place in person, but may also include, for example, archived or published information, national statistics, etc. that can be analyzed without any direct contact with the subjects themselves.

<sup>237</sup> It is interesting to note here that Lacan attributes the potential for the subject (analysand) to deceive the analyst is paradoxically because the subject does not want to deceive to the analyst. For example, the subject may withhold relevant information precisely because it (the subject) believes that certain details are no longer relevant or would give the wrong impression, and thus lead the analyst astray. Lacan, ob. cit., p.

<sup>238</sup> This “false appearance” generally amounts to what a “common sense” interpretation would erroneously conclude. In other words, “common sense” is here equated with being ignorant of certain “social facts.”

<sup>239</sup> Zizek (1993), ob. cit., p. 56.

<sup>240</sup> Emile Durkheim, Suicide: A Study in Sociology, (New York: Free Press Publishers, 1997).

that they “objectively” function as social rules or laws. In other words, these objective “truths” are consistent with the phenomenon’s appearance.

It is here that the fundamental difference between the classical detective and the “classical” social scientist is revealed. Unlike the “classical” social scientist, the classical detective cannot simply discard false explanations for the phenomenon in question; but rather, he must take this false appearance into account in his final analysis. Not only must the classical detective show that the original version is false, but he must also demonstrate how the Real narrative accounts for the first’s false appearance. In contrast, the “classical” social scientist cannot claim that “the false appearance confronting him ‘exists only to conceal the reason of its existence’”<sup>241</sup> because there is no element of intentional deception.

The constitutional characteristic of the “classical” social scientist is not located in his/her claim of having attained “objective” findings, but rather is reflected in the means by which this “objectivity” is achieved. The “classical” social scientist’s position of enunciation is that of Lacan’s conception of the “subject supposed to know.” What makes this subject unique is that its status of effectively, “*being in the know*,” so to speak, has nothing to do with the truth of its enunciated position, but instead with its being located outside of, what we have come to call, the symbolic order. This “overseeing” position is authoritative in that, regardless of the truth of its content, the “classical” social scientist’s findings are received as truth, at least to the “common” subject (the big Other). The “subject supposed to know” is always a product of transference in that it is



supposed (i.e., assumed) by some other subject, to have a ‘God’s eye view’ of the social order as a whole (i.e., knowledge in what is right and wrong, true and false, etc. due to its “privileged” position of being “outside” the system, and therefore, not subject to its laws). The “subject supposed to know” appears *for* the other as a guarantor of order in an otherwise chaotic world. That this unique subject with “impossible” knowledge exists only *for* another suggests that its status is a product of the subject/s anamorphic gaze which transforms it, through desire, into a subject that is some*Thing* more than subject.

Just as the presence of the “classical” detective guarantees that the scattered clues of a crime scene will be shown to have a relationship, the “classical” social scientist guarantees that despite the capricious and inconsistent psychology of the individual, a sociological explanation will be revealed, thus (re)constituting the ontological<sup>242</sup> totality of the social world.

It is easy to see how the enigmatic character of the “classical” detective/social scientist plays into the subject’s libidinal economy in that the “classical” detective/scientist’s perceived “neutrality” becomes the screen upon which the subject can project, through fantasy, the Real of its desires. In other words, the most significant aspect of the “classical” social scientist is that, although s/he (theoretically) does not allow the subject of his/her study to be incorporated into his/her own libidinal economy (by actively striving to keep an

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<sup>241</sup> Žizek (1993), op. cit. p. 56.

<sup>242</sup> Although social theorists may differ in their understanding of human nature, typically they share the following two assumptions: first, that human beings are fundamentally social, i.e., that they are *always already* entered (positively and/or negatively) into (direct and/or indirect) relationships with other human beings; and secondly, that subject, as an essentially social being, is not self-evident to it, i.e., there is *something in the subject that is more than subject*. In other words, the responsibility that is sociology is to *see me(the subject) from where I cannot see myself*.

objective distance from the “reality” of its psychological life) inevitably, the “classical” social scientist, as “subject supposed to know,” is incorporated into the subject’s individual fantasy. The “classical” social scientist becomes what the subject is looking for. This is why the social scientist can never be sure how his/her message is being interpreted, for s/he takes on a different position of enunciation for each subject who has incorporated it (the “subject suppose to know”) into its imaginary relationship to the big Other.<sup>243</sup>

The “advocate” social scientist<sup>244</sup> (or “hard-boiled” detective), on the other hand, stands in stark contrast to his/her classical counterpart. Far from positioning him/herself at an “objective” distance from the phenomena in question, in accepting the case/cause, the “advocate” social scientist is primarily constituted by his/her falling into the same structural traps of deception that s/he is hoping to help others escape. In other words, the more that the “advocate” social scientist reveals about the other’s social nature (position of enunciation), the more s/he finds him/herself playing an intrinsic part of its possibility. In other words, unlike the “classical” social scientist whose presence outside of the symbolic “domain of exchange and sacrifice”<sup>245</sup> (however “impossible” this position may be) guarantees that his/her perspective is neutral and objective, the “advocate” social

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<sup>243</sup> In the 1995 film, *Heat*, the psychotic rogue member of Robert De Niro’s criminal team looks into the blank stare of a guard who is in shock after having been injured by the team’s robbery attempt. The guard’s eyes are wide and expressionless as they look (without seeing) at the psychotic robber. The robber is unsettled by the blank stare and kills the guard, having perceived/projected a threat in the “knowing” black abyss of the guard’s Gaze. In this example, the guard is perceived to be “the subject supposed to know” by the serial killer who sees in the neutral Gaze of the guard, the knowledge of his own guilt.

<sup>244</sup> I have adopted the designation “advocate” social scientist to refer to those who are advocates of, what is popularly referred to as “social justice,” i.e., those who look to speak on behalf of/or “in the name of” what are commonly referred to in academia as “marginalized” groups (e.g., ethnic minorities, single mothers, the impoverished, children, etc.).

<sup>245</sup> Žizek (1993), op. cit., p. 61.

scientist is not, and cannot, keep him/herself separate from the “inter-subjective” economy of relationships that are constituted from the subject’s entrance into the symbolic order (i.e., the shared social debt that all subjects, as subjects, must assume due to the nature of the “forced choice”). To put this still another way, the “advocate social scientist” has *always already* been “involved” in the case/cause and thus participates in its becoming “reality.”

It is interesting to note that the hiring of the novel’s “hard-boiled” detective is almost always the product of the detective having been “duped.” That is, the detective’s psychology (i.e., desires) is taken into account and thus becomes the context of his being “forced” to take a case. The detective is presented the problem of the case in such a way as to make him believe that his acceptance of its responsibility is a “free” decision grounded in personal ethics and a sense of duty. The “hard-boiled” detective’s ‘answer to the call’ usually has an element of restitution before the big Other, for example, the detective concedes in order to close some outstanding debt (though his/her “payment” may be coming too late).<sup>246</sup> For example, the detective may take the case because the person who has been killed was an estranged friend, or because he feels obliged to help a “woman in distress,” or perhaps he “inherits” the responsibility that had been his deceased father’s (i.e., ‘the sins of the father...’), etc. Whatever the reason, due to the fact that he is caught up (at the level of the imaginary) in the righting of a wrong, the hard-boiled detective is unable to see into the “true” narrative (the supporting symbolic order) that lies behind the perceived chaos of the circumstances surrounding the case.

I am not suggesting that the “advocate” social scientist is “duped” into his/her participation in the case/cause in the same way as the “hard-boiled” detective is, but I do offer that this social scientist necessarily (mis)recognizes his/her relationship to the field of study (the symbolic order) to which s/he has committed him/herself to understanding (and changing?).

Recall that entrance into the symbolic order is synonymous with the constitution of the divided subject and as such, the big Other is established through a fundamental non-knowledge on the part of that subject. In other words, irregardless of the “advocate” social scientist’s good intentions, his/her participation is dependant upon his/her continued “overlooking” (repression) of the (Real)ity of his/her own activity. In other words, s/he contributes to the effectivity and perpetuation of the distorted problematic “reality” that s/he looks to resolve.<sup>247</sup>

The “truth” at which [s]he attempts to arrive is not just a challenge to his reason but concerns him[her] ethically and often painfully. The deceitful game of which [s]he has become a part poses a threat to his very identity as a subject. In short, the dialectic of deception in the hard-boiled detective novel is the dialectic of an active hero caught in a nightmarish game whose real stakes escape him[her]. His[Her] acts acquire an unforeseen dimension, [s]he can hurt somebody unknowingly – the guilt [s]he thus contracts involuntarily propels him[her] to “honor his[her] debt.”<sup>248</sup>

In other words, the internal motivation for the “advocate” social scientist’s compulsion to enter into the symbolic cause is not, for example, to test a theory, but rather, to address in a distorted way, his/herself. Because s/he (mis)recognizes

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<sup>246</sup> Idem.

<sup>247</sup> It may sound as if I am being excessively critical of the “advocate” social scientist, but my point is only that the social scientist, as subject, is constitutionally just as caught up in the libidinal economy of the imaginary as any other subject of the symbolic order.

the symbolic as being corrupt and deceitful, the “advocate” social scientist is compelled to undermine its authority so that others, too, will see its false nature. The (Real)ity of this position, however, is that in the Real of the “advocate” social scientist’s desire, the goal to “free” others is inadvertently a desire for him/herself to be free.<sup>249</sup> In this sense, Miss Jenny, of Henry James’ novel, The Turn of the Screw, appears as an exemplary case of the potential dangers that may befall those whom the “advocate” social scientist wishes to help. This interpretation of the novel would suggest that the ghosts from whom Miss Jenny sought to protect the children, were in fact a fantasy creation which functioned, for Miss Jenny, as a means to *explain* what she perceived to be the “impossibility” of the children’s “perfect” innocence. To those who suggest that this is too harsh, I wonder how this is different from certain feminist perspectives that would insist that, for example, if an “exotic dancer”, having taken a “feminist” course, changes her costume from a nurse’s outfit to a doctor’s, that she has ‘missed the point.’ My point is, that from some/most feminist perspectives, it is “impossible” for a woman to be a “feminist” and a “stripper;” therefore, some cause must be “discovered” that *will* explain first, this incompatibility and second, how the dancer’s interpretation of the feminist message is “false,” though in (Real)ity the dancer has “awoken” from someThing.

As I have mentioned above, the “classical” social scientist and the “advocate” social scientist are presented here as “pure-types,” and as such are

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<sup>248</sup> Žižek (1993), op. cit., p.63.

<sup>249</sup> This shares the same sentiment of the narrator of Ivan Klima’s Love and Garbage: “Man longs for a cleaning but instead he starts cleaning up his surroundings. But until men cleanses himself he’s wasting his time cleaning the world around him.” (p. 221)

meant only to designate the parameters within which most/all social scientist “types” (myself included) can be located. But these assignments are clearly not radical in that they suggest only that the difficulty with sociology, and the crux of its critique, is that it is stuck between two extreme, but inevitable, polarities: that sociology is either “too objective” or “too subjective.”

### **Social Theory and the Subject of Social Theory**

What has not been resolved from the above discussion, what sociology cannot escape, is the (Real)ity that *they* (the social scientists) are incorporated into the libidinal economies of all the subjects that they directly/indirectly address (e.g., research subjects, policy makers, other academics/researchers, etc.), and that this is manifest in ways that they cannot and have not intended. Again, this is inevitable in that all subjects, by definition, are forever separated from the knowledge of knowing where they are positioned in the symbolic order (i.e., their position of enunciation). It is for this reason that Lacan suggests that there is no such thing as “inter-subjectivity,” for the subject can never know enough of itself, or the (O)ther, to *know* with *certainty* what it is (Real)ly saying or doing.

As was introduced above, the conception of a sociological mandate to lead the (mis)guided social subject from its constitutional naiveté (“false consciousness”) to a position of “informed consent” now seems even more problematic. Not only have we seen that the subject can only have something like a “reality” if it (the subject) suspects that the world is not as it seems (that its consciousness is “doubled” in that it is always already divided between its imaginary (enunciated) participation and its symbolic, (enunciation) position of

enunciation), but now it appears that the social scientist cannot even trust his/her own motivations, interpretations, or conclusions. The question remains, what can the social scientist know?

Sociology can obtain, what Zizek calls, “knowledge in the Real.” What this entails is that although sociology can ascertain particular aspects of the symbolic order, because it is impossible to know the complete context from which this information is drawn, it can never be (re)integrated into the big Other (i.e., it can never become “common sense”).<sup>250</sup> In spite of this, sociological findings are being reinterpreted as they are (re)introduced back into the symbolic order through media, politics, language, etc., but rather than giving the subject the sense that it (the subject) is part of a larger social whole, it rather “forces” the subject to look at itself, in Kierkegaard’s terms, as a “third party.”

The subject ceases to have a position within the relationship; he has no direct relation to the king [social order, Law, “Father,” etc.] but simply becomes an observer and deliberately works out the problem; i.e., the relation of a subject to his king [social order, Law, “Father,” etc.].<sup>251</sup>

The subject is told to look at “reality” as if it is only an abstraction, “an artificial construct whose rules can be suspended”<sup>252</sup> This is the fundamental

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<sup>250</sup> A fortune cookie that I frequently come across posits that: *The philosophy of today is the common sense of tomorrow*. Does this axiom not reveal a hidden paradox within the structure of the sociological mandate? On the one hand, as an ethical discipline, sociology *wants* its knowledge to belong to the “Everyman.” (Does it not see itself as an advocate of the “commoner,” its responsibility being to actively seek out knowledge *in and for* the Other’s sake?) But on the other hand, sociology needs to refer to common sense as just that, “common,” belonging to the small “everyday man” (i.e., inferior, inadequate, lacking), in order to re-create itself; that is, in order to justify the necessity of its existence in terms of its being a useful and uniquely relevant discipline. The reader may suggest that I am making too much out of this sociological reference to common sense; that its reference is only meant to contest the “common” misconception that sociology is nothing more than “common sense.” But in light of what I have just said, does it not seem that sociology needs *tomorrow* to be indefinitely postponed. Does the fact that “knowledge in the Real” cannot be reintegrated into the big Other guarantee this.

<sup>251</sup> Kierkegaard (1962), op. cit., p.44.

<sup>252</sup> Zizek (2000), op. cit., p.225.

discourse of social construction theory which suggests, to varying degrees, that the subject can “re-create” him/herself at any time. The problem with this position is that it reduces the issue to one of the subject who acts in “bad faith,” who denies its own freedom. Rather than raising the subject to a position where it can assume full responsibility for its life (and subsequent “freedom”), the subject may feel weighted with the burden of guilt for what it has (forever) lost, the “freedom” to come to this recognition sooner. Therefore, the nature of the message received by the subject (whether or not this new knowledge ‘liberates,’ or ‘captures,’ the subject depends on how this information is incorporated into the subject’s circuit of desire.

Another contradiction inherent to the social sciences’ relationship to the subject is that the more that it (sociology) educates the subject, the less confidence the subject has in the discipline. On the one hand, the social scientist posits that institutions are instruments of ideology; that broad generalities are synonymous with undermined conceptions of Grand Narratives; that one should be suspicious of authority; and that all knowledge is relative and therefore “subjective.”

On the other hand, the subject is presented with an educator (the social scientist) who is symbolically positioned as “a subject supposed to know,” who tells the subject that who and what it is, is culturally determined; that if the subject does not follow the reasoning that will lead its consciousness in the direction of “freedom,” then it is living a lie (e.g., the “exotic dancer”); and that the subject should support the “ethical” notions of the universal rights of human beings and,



for example, universal health care, etc., because “it is right.”<sup>253</sup> The point that I am trying to make is that the contradictory messages that the subject receives from the social scientist and the big Other (which cannot be separated from sociology at this moment in the discussion) ultimately undermines all positions that the subject may take in relation to its own life. What then should the subject think if it is being called to action (i.e., called to be “autonomous” and “master of its own destiny,” etc.), while simultaneously being told that it is no position to determine what a “right,” “wrong,” “good,” or “bad” action might be. To paraphrase Žižek:

Therein resides the correct insight of [sociology]: on the one hand, it reduces reality to an artificial domain regulated by arbitrary rules that can be suspended, and on the other the concealed truth of this freedom, the reduction of the subject to an utter instrumentalized passivity.<sup>254</sup>

Or, to use Kierkegaard’s conception of a “state of exhaustive tension,”<sup>255</sup> the inherent internal antagonism of the divided subject is reduced to an empty gesture of representation.

The relationship [between desire and values] expresses its presence and its absence simultaneously, not completely but rather through it were drawled out, half-awake and uninterrupted... (T)he relationship continues; something is expressed with an abstract continuity which prevents any real break, but although it must nevertheless be described as an expression of the relationship, the relationship is not only ambiguously expressed, it is almost meaningless.<sup>256</sup>

This is essentially a different take on the reduction of the subject’s experience of dissonance. By holding itself at a psychological distance, the

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<sup>253</sup> See page 18 of this paper.

<sup>254</sup> Žižek (2001), *Enjoy Your Symptom*, op. cit., p.231.

<sup>255</sup> Kierkegaard (1962), op. cit., p. 46.

subject is able to reflect upon, through its expulsion, the tension, and risk that it would otherwise experience (endure) in the inwardness of its being. What has not yet been explained, however, is exactly what is at stake in the loss of this tension.

### **The Present Age**

Kierkegaard's conception of the "present age" seems as applicable today as when it was written. For Kierkegaard, ours is an age of "understanding and reflection," which, despite its moments of "enthusiasm," rationalizes its effective non-activity.<sup>257</sup> Through its "cleverness" (i.e., moments of spontaneous, reflective insight), the present age manages to escape taking Real action by revealing that things have not adequately been thought out, thereby, indefinitely postponing all activity.<sup>258</sup> Unlike a tumultuous and passionate revolutionary age, which, as "an age of action," overthrows everything and tears everything down, a "revolutionary," age that is reflective and without passion:

(T)ransforms that expression of strength into a feat of dialectics: it leaves everything standing, but cunningly empties it of significance. Instead of culminating in a rebellion it reduces the inward reality of all relationships to a reflective tension which leaves everything standing but makes the whole of life ambiguous: so that everything continues to exist factually whilst by a dialectical deceit, *privatissime*, it supplies a secret interpretation – that it does not exist.<sup>259</sup>

This is what is implied when Lacan /Žižek suggest that in spite of the fact that scientific study of the symbolic can reveal some "knowledge in the Real," these findings cannot be re-integrated into the big Other at par. In other words, science

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<sup>256</sup> Idem.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

can obtain knowledge of what the subject must “overlook” in its (the subject’s) effective activity. But when this information is re-introduced to the subject in the form of social theory, rather than disrupting the subject’s activity, the subject adopts the safe psychic position of “observer” which enables its “reality” to continue to function despite the subjects “belief” that it (reality) does not exist. How is this possible? Because, the Real nature of the subject’s relationship to the big Other, which, as we recall from the discussion of the matrix, has *always already* been constituted by reality’s incorporation of the subject’s fantastic (imaginary) belief that things are not what they seem.

Before the subject’s “reality” is shown to be “false,” reality functions as a naturalized symbolic system whose legitimacy appears to be self-evident; however, the moment that it is conceived to be a creation, i.e., an “ideological” artifact, “then the need arose for a “naturalized” zero-institution that would serve as their [the subjects’] neutral common ground.”<sup>260</sup> The neutrality of this “zero-institution”<sup>261</sup> (i.e., Reality, exchange, social contract, the tower guard, etc.) serves only a negative function in that it is an “empty signifier with no determinate meaning, since it signifies only the presence of meaning as such in opposition to its absence: a specific institution that has no positive, determinate function.”<sup>262</sup> Understood in this way, the social scientist is not re-directing the naive consciousness of the subject, but rather, is jockeying to occupy the neutral position of “zero-difference” (the void, the Thing) in order to “overdetermine” its

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid., p. 42-3.

<sup>260</sup> Žižek (2001), *Enjoy Your Symptom*, op. cit., p. 222.

<sup>261</sup> “Zero-institution” is a term coined by Levi Strauss and adopted by Žižek for use in an analogous vein. Idem.

particular position.<sup>263</sup> This is why the “unveiling” of an ideological “lie,” whose truth is determined by an alternative position (revealing both the “truth” and the reason for the success of the “lie”) is also necessarily ideological, in that it undermines and then removes the first ideological position from the “zero-institution,” not by showing the neutrality of the position, but by assuming the position for itself.

According to Žižek, the subject can avoid the Real via three modes. The subject can: distort “reality” through the anamorphic gaze (imaginary); add something to reality that has no place in it, i.e., social construction; or it can empty “reality” of its objectivity, leaving only an empty place. I imagine Kierkegaard’s conception of the failure of reflection to be analogous to these modes of perception in that each structures the subject’s relationship to reality as if it were a flirtation which “only toys with the possibility [of action] and is therefore a form of indulgence.”<sup>264</sup> Action, that might otherwise be based on faith and located in a profound sense of inwardness, is here replaced with a subject who acts “on principle;” thereby reducing “moral action” (i.e., the religious act), to an abstraction.

But in mere scope flirtation has all advantages, for one can flirt with anything, but one can only really love *one* girl. From this point of view of love, properly understood, any addition is really a subtraction..., and the more one adds the more one takes away.<sup>265</sup>

For Kierkegaard, any action that is done in principle is a way of avoiding personal responsibility. This again, is the “temptation of the ethical,” which, when one is

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<sup>262</sup> Idem.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>264</sup> Kierkegaard (1962), op. cit., p. 74.

called to Act religiously, prevents modesty, repentance, and responsibility from finding its terrestrial domain.<sup>266</sup>

### **The Forced Choice and the Gatekeeper**

In the novel, Love and Garbage,<sup>267</sup> by Ivan Klima, the wife of the narrator suggests that subconsciously, those who have “borne the brunt of ostracism” (those that the social sciences refer to as “marginalized” individuals (i.e., single moms, the impoverished, ethnic minorities, etc.), see themselves as having somehow been wronged and that psychotherapy helps to uncover the causes of their rejection by others.<sup>268</sup> As we understand it within the context of this thesis, the subject is constituted through its “forced choice” which posits it within the economy of the symbolic order as *always already* owing someThing to the big Other. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that the subject’s imaginary relationship to the Other is in part determined by its unconscious knowledge of its lack of choice; of its having been wronged the moment that it “decided” to commit, in its “freedom,” to the big Other (the social, the Universal, etc.). Do not all people have to somehow compensate for this unconscious knowledge of having been wronged? One would presume yes, since to be a subject means to have been “forced” to “freely” accept a position within the symbolic order. Then why are some symptoms cause for social rejection and others not? We know from the social sciences that some subjects’ position of enunciation (their position within the social order), *always already* limits/impedes what they can *be* due to

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid., p. 75-6.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>267</sup> Ivan Klima, Love and Garbage, (New York: Vantage, 2002).

<sup>268</sup> Klima, op. cit., p. 127.

social and political structures which undermine potential opportunities for “positive,” “vertical,” advancement.

Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, suggests that it is the big Other (common sense) that establishes the subject’s perception of the limits of their position in the symbolic order, because in (R)eality, the symbolic order does not exist. The social sciences want to direct the subject to freeing itself of the limits of the social order by either changing its structure (and thereby creating the possibility for change) and /or by suggesting to the subject that ‘up until now you have been a “victim” of circumstance, but now that you know that you are not your social position, you can liberate yourself from illusionary social mandates.’ Lacan, however, suggests to the subject that it can never know where its position is within the social order, nor what to make of this information even if somehow it could be known. Therefore, in light of this constitutive (non)knowledge, *your* circumstances, *your* “reality,” etc., is ontologically *for you*. Žižek suggests that this is analogous to Franz Kafka’s short story of a man who wishes to access the Law, but is refused entrance by the gatekeeper.<sup>269</sup> Having refused the man’s numerous requests for access, the gatekeeper informs him that even if he were to go through the first gate, there exists before him an infinite series of other gates and gatekeepers that will attempt to hold him back if he tries to enter without being invited. Rather than trying to force his way through the gates, the man waits his entire lifetime for access to the Law. Just before his death, the man asks the gatekeeper why, over so many years, have no others tried to come through the gates. The gatekeeper answers, revealing to the man that the door to the Law had

been *always already* for him, and him alone, and that now, with his death, the door would be closed. In much the same way, Lacan's approach to the subject is that the subject's relationship to the symbolic order (the Law) is singularly its own due to the fact that its "reality" is only a fantasy that is maintained through the subject's continued participation in the big Other's (the gate keeper's) proposition of authority combined with some illusionary understanding of what the Law is.

Does not the social theorist appear as a version of the gatekeeper who says to the "marginalized" subject, 'Now that I have described to you the structure of the Law and all of its gates and gatekeepers in relation to you, you can try to move ahead if you wish. But good luck!' Although this is admittedly cynical and oversimplified, the point that I am trying to make is that the social scientist's contribution to the big Other, is that it develops and solidifies in the imagination of the subject, its sense of having been denied access, of having been somehow wronged. The subject's "education" forces it, re-subjectivizes it, back into the symbolic order, and as such, into a new position of enunciation and, inevitably, alienation. Depending on how this information is incorporated into the subject's libidinal economy, social theory may present an excuse to do nothing, rather than motivate the subject into Action. But as we recall, the process of subjectivization is a process of taking to be what is forced upon oneself, as that which is chosen freely. How does this manifest itself in relation to the newly educated "marginalized" subject? The life of social theory in the big Other, again, does not present the message of the social theorist in its intended form; rather social theory, as it is adopted into language, culture, media, etc., often finds the subject adopting

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<sup>269</sup> Žižek (1991), op. cit., p.147.

the sociological perspective for an unexpected use. It is not an ethical position whereby ('on principle') I recognize the Other as equal, but rather as a defense, or excuse, for my own current situation. The product of the subject's positioning of itself in/through language - in its suggesting that "I am nothing but this message of inadequacy" - is that the subject continues to be in a position of perpetuating the "reality" of its "undesired" situation. The narrator of Love of Garbage speaks to this.

(T)o defend is a lie and corrodes the soul....I cannot depart all together nor arrive all together, I am unable to live in truth. I've hedged myself in with excuses, I'm having every sentence I utter examined by a guard dog.<sup>270</sup>

The subject's freedom, can be experienced, then, as stifling, and lead to despair when its realization (freedom) is mediated (guarded) by its (the subject's) relationship to the big Other.

What social theory fails to recognize is that the subject's ability to transcend the limits of the social-symbolic is possible, but that it cannot be a product of some equation of freedom. The subject's past cannot, and should not, be left behind. What Marx knew, but what contemporary theorist forget, is that there is honor and dignity in suffering. I am not romanticizing hardships here, what I am suggesting is that social theory does not recognize the position that suffering, as a passionate experience of an internal tension, can takes in people's lives. Rather, the subject is understood to be, to put in Simone Weil's words, "terribly afflicted."

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<sup>270</sup> Klima, op. cit., p. 89.



## Myth and the “Insoluble Paradox”

George Grant, Canadian academic and writer, believed that the social sciences have played a significant role in the dissolution of the meaningfulness of myths. This is not to the discipline’s credit. Myths, far from being simply a means of ensuring social order (a functionalist approach) or of enslaving and/or manipulating consciousness (a conflict approach), are fundamentally an “account of existence in this totality which reveals to most men their own mode of being in the world.”<sup>271</sup> Through myth, the individual finds true purpose in human existence. Myth “enchants the soul,” delivering the individual from his/her particularity by revealing the Truth of his/her universality.<sup>272</sup>

Considering the context of this discussion, it may be tempting to say that myth is nothing other than the big Other, a system of rules into which all its participants are allocated to a particular location with associated roles and ordering laws. But this would suggest that the importance of myth, its Value, lies in the (mis)recognized “Truth” of its positive content by the alienated<sup>273</sup> subject. But just as the effectiveness of ideology has nothing to do with the “falseness” of its content, the Truth of myth lies in the fact that it is someThing more than just the particulars of the events that it details. Although the social sciences may be able to explain how social and cultural elements have allowed for the creation of a particular myth at a particular time in history, it cannot explain why a myth can continue to give people meaning outside of both the time and culture from which

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<sup>271</sup> George Grant, “Value and Technology” (1964), The George Grant Reader (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1998), p. 388.

<sup>272</sup> Idem.

<sup>273</sup> See page 37 of this paper.

it was created. What is the “enchanting of the soul” but this recognition of transcendence? A certainty of having somehow found ourselves somewhere else; a sense that we are somehow *connected* to another time and/or place. What this “uncanniness,” this incomprehensible familiarity, this *déjà vu*, teaches us is that the big Other cannot tell us *who* we are,<sup>274</sup> for we *are* outside of all calculations.

The question is then, how does myth translate this (Real)ity to us? Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty suggests that myth acts as a “borderline between two adjacent territories...where fantasy and reality meet.”<sup>275</sup> Levi-Strauss states that “myth imagines certain impossible situations in order to show how they are impossible, to allow us to go on living with an insoluble paradox.”<sup>276</sup> For example, for Freud, the primordial “insoluble paradox” began with human beings’ first experience of death. The dead are lifeless, appearing to forever sleep, but in the sleep of others (i.e., in their dreams), the dead return re-animated (though their appearance and disposition may have changed).<sup>277</sup> The persistence of this phenomenon (the dead’s resurrection) engendered in early humanity the belief in anOther existence (reality) separate from, but frightfully close to our own (both in its proximity and the immediacy of the experience). In other words, the experience of two worlds immanently existing within one “reality” is fundamentally too traumatic to live with. Myth, therefore, does not attempt to explain the unexplainable, but rather gives meaning to the meaningless of this “impossibility” by acting as a barrier (its

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<sup>274</sup> This is the explanation that Trinity offers Neo in the film, *the Matrix*, when he asks what it means to still believe in something despite the fact that he knows that it does not exist. “It means that the matrix cannot tell you who you are.”

<sup>275</sup> O’Flaherty, op. cit., p.95.

<sup>276</sup> Levi Strauss in O’Flaherty, op. cit., p. 103.

<sup>277</sup> Sigmund Freud (1918), op. cit.,

position of enunciation) between the two worlds. Myth then is constituted by its ability to establish in the subject the symbolic limits of one world (the social, the big Other, the Universal), by allowing it (the subject) to safely pass beyond its boundaries (i.e., to transcend it).<sup>278</sup> By creating a palatable distance between these two realities, the individual is able to experience him/herself as a substantial being (a being of purpose) in a meaningful world, despite its inevitable inconsistencies and “impossibilities.”

To what then does Grant attribute the effective loss of myth in relation to the individual? What has the social sciences done? Essentially, through the language of “emancipation” and “liberation,” the social sciences have effectively equated myth with ideology. Therefore, if freedom from ideology entails the subject’s release from “false consciousness,” then freedom and myth become irreconcilable.

By freedom is meant the modern account of self-consciousness: that is, of the self as absolute. This is, indeed, the very heart of what modern history has been and is – the belief that man’s essence is his freedom. The negative aspect of this authentic and absolute freedom must be that every meaning, every purpose, every value has to come before the court of that freedom and is under the judgment of that sovereignty. We conceive ourselves to be the source of ourselves, the source of our own order. But it is the very mark of any myth to speak of those things which transcend the individual, to speak of an order of which the individual is a part, but which does not originate in his freedom. *The heart of any myth is to tell us that which our freedom does not create but by which it is judged.* This is, then, what I mean by that separation between freedom and myth. As modern people come to believe themselves to be the absolute source of themselves, all systems of order and meaning which appear to human beings as myth become other to them, and so in the very act of their sovereignty they experience the world as empty of meaning.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> O’Flaherty, op. cit., p. 118-9.

<sup>279</sup> Grant, op. cit., p. 389. (*Italics added*)

For Grant, the individual's separation from the "shared world of moral striving" is the product of having alienated itself from myth and by envisioning everything outside of the self as completely Other.<sup>280</sup> The "freedom" that is derived from moving through the world is dependent upon experiencing the world as consisting merely of a series of objects, which one can freely manipulate and/or avoid.<sup>281</sup> Therefore, it is not that the social sciences' dissolve the subject's sense of a meaningful existence by showing that its behavior is predictable, pre-determined, and therefore controlled, but rather, it is the assertion that its (the subject's) essence lies in its freedom (that it is a "self," and not a "soul").<sup>282</sup> As Leo Strauss puts it:

The self is obviously a descendent of the soul; i.e., it is not the soul. The soul may responsible for its being good or bad but it is not responsible for its being a soul; of the self on the other hand it is not certain whether it is not a self by virtue of its own effort.<sup>283</sup>

Grant suggests that the precursor to this transition lies in the language of the social sciences' fact/value distinction. For in this distinction is the implicit suggestion that the world in and of itself has value only in its *being for us*. Although this may seem liberating, Grant insists that the result is that the subject must carry the burden, not only of creating meaning in its in own life, but in creating a meaningful world within which to live, inevitably separate from the (object) Other.

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid. p. 390

<sup>281</sup> Idem.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid. p. 391

<sup>283</sup> Leo Strauss in Grant, op. cit., p.

But as we have seen above, myth creates meaning by allowing the subject to know itself inside and outside the limits of its knowledge. What can the subject who is without myth make of the inconsistencies, which are inherent in its experience of reality? How is it to create meaningfulness when it is continuously confronted with the limits to its knowledge? O'Flaherty's suggestion that myth as the "boundary line where fantasy and reality meet" does not only speak of myth as a psychic barrier, allowing the subject to handle the internal dissonance of its internal division (the limits to its understanding), but also as a "borderline" between subjects. Myth, therefore, is also "a place where an apparent barrier to human understanding may be forded or breached by the translation of one's reality into another's."<sup>284</sup> The gift of myth is that it acts as a fantasy space by which the subject can transcend its paranoia of being deceived through the presentation of two sides of reality, "impossibly" existing within one totality, In other words, the subject is able to experiences (to endure) the inconsistencies of the symbolic (shared) order by participating in the myth. This allows the subject to "overlook" the "insoluble paradox" (and its inherent tension) by "believing" in one reality (the everyday world), while unconsciously participating in another (the divided reality of myth).

### **The "Impossible" Religious Act**

Returning to Kierkegaard, do we not see Abraham as a mythical character who carries within his actions someThing that is more than the events that his story depicts (as incredible as these events are)? For Kierkegaard, the religious stage of life is not characterized as one may assume. It does not simply befall the

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<sup>284</sup> O'Flaherty, op. cit., p. 95.

subject in a moment of blissful endowment, but rather, it is the work of suffering and absolute sacrifice. The struggle of the religious subject is that the movement of faith “must continually be made by virtue of the absurd, but yet in such a way, please note, that one does not lose the finite but gains it whole and intact.”<sup>285</sup> The movement of faith escapes all reflection, the difficulty of which is two-fold. Reflection imprisons the subject, both through the selfishness of the individual (the imaginary), and through society (the symbolic).

The envy of reflection (within the individual) prevents him making a decision passionately. If, for a moment, it should seem as though an individual were about to succeed in throwing off the yoke of reflection which surrounds him. The envy which springs from reflection imprisons man’s will and his strength. First of all the individual has to break loose from the bonds of his own reflection, but even then he is not free. Instead he finds himself in the vast prison formed by the reflection of those around him. He can only escape from this second imprisonment through the inwardness of religion, no matter how clearly he may perceive the falseness of the situation.<sup>286</sup>

Here we see that what is at stake in the desire to free subjectivity from the “confines” of ideology is really a quest to initiate the movement of the religious. But, as we have seen, and what Kierkegaard points out here, is that even if the subject frees itself of reflection at the level of the imaginary, it (the subject) still participates in the symbolic, and as such, remains within the confines of reflection. For example, even if the prisoner is “liberated” from the belief that it is being watched by the tower guard, the prisoner is still not free so long as the other prisoners, who do not share its “revelation,” continue to insist on the guard’s presence. This being the case, the prisoner must continue to behave “as if” it is

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<sup>285</sup> Soren Kierkegaard (1985), op. cit., p.95.

being watched: "I know what I am doing, but still I am doing it." But how does the notion of envy relate to ideology?

Returning to the presentation at the Spinoza Institute, entitled, "Why September 12th is more important than September 11<sup>th</sup>," Žižek insists that a true ideological fundamentalist position does not assume the position of envious hatred towards the Other, in believing that the Other contains some secret which impedes its own ability to be complete (e.g., the Nazi position towards the Jew). Rather, a true fundamentalist ideological position does not care what the Other is doing. For example, as Žižek points out, the Amish do not strive to 'bring the world around' to their beliefs. They are not driven to be political activists, picketing outside of abortion clinics, or trying to bring an end to the death penalty. Instead, they assume a true monotheistic position. Kierkegaard insists that "he who loves God without faith reflects upon himself; he who loves God in faith reflects upon God."<sup>287</sup> Understood in this way, the Amish (despite their own problems) live a truly ethical life in that the enunciated content of their belief is "spoken" from the same place as its position of enunciation. That is, they are in private, what they are in public. The content of their beliefs, and the form of its expression, are balanced. As Žižek explains, other "ideological" positions (the sociological position), which sees the world as fundamentally divided between the appearance of "reality," and "true" reality, secretly betrays its underlying assumption of the "centered" or "informed" subject, in that, again, its struggle to dislodge an ideological position is really a struggle to assume that position of

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<sup>286</sup> Kierkegaard (1962), op. cit., p. 48.

<sup>287</sup> Kierkegaard (1985), op. cit., p.94.

authority<sup>288</sup> for itself. Understood in this way, the sociological project is faithless and polytheistic, in that it assumes the form of a metaphysical battle between competing Gods ("Truths"). The sociological position cannot escape the confines of reflection in that its position of enunciation (i.e., the form of its work) undermines its own message of "liberation."

Returning to the notion of the social scientist as the gatekeeper to the Law, we see that the sociologist, as the *subject supposed to know*, appears to have knowledge of the truth (the hidden secret, the *objet petit a*) of the Law. He (the gate keeper) not only understands the structure of its bureaucratic stages (the other gates and its gate keepers), but also, it is presumed, knows the subject's relationship to the Law, and therefore, the meaning of the subject. But the gatekeeper has nothing to say in relation to this question of meaning, commenting only on the facts of the subject's denied access. What do we make of the subject's wait until death? In its desire to know what the Law hides, in its inability to fully *identify* with the logic of the symbolic order and to *know* its relationship to it (that its gate is just *for* the subject), the subject lives a life of imprisonment, convinced that the essence of its life lies in the secret of the Law.

(T)he subject is actually 'in' (caught in the web of) power only and precisely in so far as he does not fully identify with it but maintains a kind of distance towards it...In short, inner distance and daydreaming about Life Elsewhere in effect enchain me to prison, whereas full acceptance of the fact that I am really there, bound by prison rules, opens up a space for true hope.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> A true position of authority is one in which entails its punctual suspension. This is the significance of assuming the "neutral" position of the "zero-institution." Zizek (1992), op. cit., p. 82.

<sup>289</sup> Zizek (2000), The Fragile Absolute, op.cit., p.148-9.



In so long as the subject of sociology continues to seek the “truth” of its “hidden” social identity, it becomes a subject of the authority of the social order. As long as the subject is “caught up” in calculating its own movement to crack the ideological code, it is sentenced to look forever for its *always already* “lost” something. “The only true solution is therefore to fully accept the rules of prison life and then, within the universe grounded by these rules, to work out a way to beat them.”<sup>290</sup> This is the movement of Kierkegaard’s “knight of resignation” who through great courage, renounces the “grip of existing social reality”<sup>291</sup> by refusing to make excuses for himself and enduring the “impossibility” of his own predicament. By accepting fully the rules of the symbolic order, the subject renounces its desire to know what is unknowable. This imprisonment is, of course, the constitutive condition of the subject of the “forced choice.” Liberation, therefore, is possible through the subject’s symbolic suicide, which renounces the unknowable “fantastic supplement” of the Law (its secret), i.e., the umbilical cord to our experience of reality as the limitation of our freedom. The form that this act must take is not an easy one. For it entails an act of the absurd, of the irrational, of the horrific, which cannot be recognized for what it is, i.e., a free act.

An example that Žižek offers as the “supreme case” of the radical gesture that is the Act is from the film The Usual Suspects, where when the inscrutable character:

Keyser Soeze returns home to find his wife and small daughter held at gun point by the members of a rival mob, he resorts to the

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<sup>290</sup> Idem.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., p.149.

radical gesture of shooting his wife and daughter themselves dead  
– this act enables him mercilessly to pursue members of the rival  
gang, their families, parents and friends.<sup>292</sup>

Understood in this way, we begin see that the Act is indeed a suicide, in that the subject sacrifices itself *for* the Other. Rather than have his wife and child live the rest of their life having been tortured and raped, Soeze sacrifices himself by killing them. The act is ultimately a strike against himself. In the giving of “the gift of death” to his wife and child, he acts outside of (suspends) all conception of society’s ethical mandate. Society cannot see his act as an act of love; it cannot recognize that the act saves them (from enduring a life of “impossible” suffering). The Act is not to save himself, for Soeze takes upon himself the full responsibility and terror of their sacrifice, and thereby, shatters himself. Having made the gesture of the infinite, Soeze returns to the symbolic economy of revenge, and takes the lives of his enemies as payment for the “forced” debt that he has put upon them.

If we recall from the end of section two, Kierkegaard’s conception of the religious Act returns to the deadlock that constitutes social theory. The problem of the social order, the object of sociology’s study, is essentially Kierkegaard’s conception of the Ethical (the Universal, the social); whereby, the subject, in its freedom outside of all calculation of “good” and “bad,” “right” and “wrong,” *knows* itself in its most passionate inwardness. This is what Kierkegaard means to be “always in the wrong” in relation to God (to Truth). In Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard posits Abraham as the Knight of Faith in his sacrifice of Isaac. By

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<sup>292</sup> Zizek (2000), op. cit., p.150.

taking upon himself fully, the responsibility (outside of the universal, the symbolic, the social, etc.) of giving Isaac death (the “duty outside of duty”); by failing to surrender to the “temptation of the ethical,” which would allow him to escape the responsibility of the act; by opening up the possibility of his “impossible” redemption before God (without benefit of reflection as to any economy of forgiveness), Abraham shatters himself, and in so doing, *becomes* what he had always been.

## Not To Conclude

It is very *tempting* at the end of this discussion to try to conclude *something* substantial; to try to prescribe, perhaps, a way out of this deadlock which dictates that anything that can be concluded is possible only if its constitutive “impossibility” is overlooked. This thesis has at times directly, but most often elliptically, undermined its own project by chipping away at the foundation of its purpose: to *communicate* to an audience a comprehensive *mastery* of some area of study. If this thesis has been successful at all, it has been in its attempt to illustrate how this is inherently problematic.

If forced to comment on what this thesis implies for the social sciences in general, I could only offer the following negative argument: that sociology must release itself from the pursuit of inter-subjectivity and objective communication, as well as abandon any formal conception of the subject’s need for assistance or ideological escape. What the gate keeper/social scientist must realize is that s/he too remains forever separated from the Law and that his/her knowledge is only ever for the subject. When the subject no longer looks for answers, what the gatekeeper/social scientist is left with, is nothing but the physical left-over substance that is the remains of the subject. What is the substance of the subject, which we have systematically de-substantiated throughout this paper? In Lacan’s conception, the subject is nothing but the stuff of its unconscious desire to be complete, a pure abstraction of a posited existence. That the social scientist is perceived to be the *subject supposed to know*, his/her presence presents the subject with the possibility of its completeness, thereby locking the subject in the

endless cycle of always falling short of itself, never quite being able to get through enough doors. But all of this has already been said above and no longer adds anything new to the discussion.

In conclusion, it seems that I must *not conclude*. Again, the temptation is, having emptied the subject (again, including myself) of all authority, of all *certainty*, I feel compelled to jump to a “Therefore...” or an “Only now...” (or an “I am”) in order to touch ground again; in order to “free” myself (save myself), and the reader, from the experience of its absence. But I offer nothing more.

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