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AFTER CATASTROPHE: FROM BECKETT TO ŽIŽEK

Beckett's Waiting for Godot

Samuel Beckett's classic play *Waiting for Godot*, written in author's own account as some sort of diversion from his serious work on the trilogy of novels, takes place in an unnamed land and at an unnamed time. All the information we are given at the beginning is this: there is a tree somewhere near a country road, and it is evening (Beckett 2001, 24). Reading the text, we get a sense of a devastated, deserted, forgotten land, scarce in resources, scarce in people, scarce in everything, where a mere carrot is something of a luxury. There is no concept of time, no past, no future, only the waiting. One may wonder how comedy might even be possible in such a place. One may wonder how it is that immense hardships and lack of basic supplies are not described in genres of tragedy, sorrow or social realism—but in an almost uncanny genre of comedy, with an almost clownish sense of humor. Is this why the English version of the play comes with the label of tragicomedy—because we laugh at Vladimir and Estragon, but also feel sad about the conditions in which they live?

By examining a recent Internet phenomenon called “Latvian jokes” we can come to a better understanding of the correlation between comedy and extreme deprivation. First of all, this cluster of jokes, each following the same logic and placed within the same mythical framework, has nothing to do with Latvia, the Baltic country which constituted a part of the Soviet Union until 1991. It is completely artificial and in fact resembles the world of *Godot* with its extreme deprivation and lack of resources. It is always cold and dark in Latvia, people are always hungry, all soldiers rape women, all children cry, and a single potato is the greatest of all joys. This extremely inhospitable character of the land is somehow reflected in its language, for it is not simply broken English, it is much more, or rather, much *less*: its grammar lacks clear notions of past and future, its vocabulary consists of only a few words. There is no hope in Latvia, and there can be none. The minimal Latvian joke is probably this one:

Latvian 1: Is so cold.

Latvian 2: How cold is?

Latvian 1: Very. Also dark.

All Latvian jokes could take place in the evening on a country road while people are waiting for nothing to happen. The names of the principal characters in Beckett's play, Vladimir and Estragon, sound Eastern-European; perhaps they could be Latvians. The role of the carrot is replaced in Latvian jokes by the potato, but it is clear that its role is the same: the simplest of foods representing the sum of all human aspiration.

Latvian is rub lamp find genie. Genie say, "What is three wishes?" Latvian say, "I wish potato!" Then, POOF! Potato! Latvian so happy! "Oh! Is potato! Is potato!" say Latvian. Genie ask, "What is next wish?" Latvian is say, "I wish you go away so can enjoy potato!" POOF! So sad. Also, only lamp.

Of course, we cannot pretend that there is not a certain (American, Western-European) *Schadenfreude* at work in these kind of jokes; at least in part, these jokes seem to rely on the feeling of recipient's cultural, racial or class superiority. Indeed, Kazakhstan of the movie *Borat*, which is based precisely on the premise of an inexhaustible feeling of cultural superiority in the US, is similar to "Latvia" in many ways. However, like in *Borat*, it is also clear that the true recipient of a Latvian joke is not someone who really believes that people in a remote northern ex-Soviet state are resigned to live in such a deserted country. Even in *Borat*, the true recipient of the film is someone for whom it is clear from the very beginning that "Kazakhstan" is a completely fabricated land that simply serves as a screen for what our own (American, Western-European) culture imagines as pre-cultural, pre-historic, pre-modern, that is, for what our own culture imagines as its darkest nightmare.

Why, then, is extreme deprivation, extreme scarcity of food, culture and language, comical? How is laughter produced in a situation which, objectively, can only be a complete disaster, a catastrophe? To begin to answer these questions, let us recall that in the ancient theory of drama, the term catastrophe simply denotes the final resolution of the plot, whether it is happy or sad. Aristotle debates, for instance, whether it is more appropriate for tragedy to have the protagonist suffer a disaster or to enjoy good fortune, and argues that the happy ending is much more suitable for comedy (Aristotle 1902, 45-49; 1453a30-39). Bearing this ancient meaning of the term in mind, what we are really asking when we ask about the relationship between comedy and catastrophe is this: how is comedy possible at the end of all ends, where all action is already done, all hope is in vain and all fears are empty?

The point, of course, is that not only *Waiting for Godot*, but most of Beckett's plays take place precisely at a time that can be described as after the end. Beckett's plays can in general be said to be "catastrophic" in the precise sense of taking place at the end or even beyond end. For traditional poetics, strictly speaking, such a timeless series of events falls out of the field of dramatic as it is fit neither for tragedy nor for comedy. Indeed, Beckett has long been considered, and is still considered by some, as the master of the practice of anti-theater. The true aim of theater theory, as Martin Puchner points out, lies in adjusting our concepts of what is theatrical to include, or perhaps even to focus on what is revealed in the work of Beckett (and

many other modern playwrights); Puchner argues that what is often seen as anti-theatricality is in fact better explained as a reform of theater (Puchner 2011).

Waiting for Godot certainly takes place in a timeless bubble. While Vladimir and Estragon do speak about the past, they are completely uncertain of it, and it is impossible to determine whether the events they are referring to transpired a day or a decade ago. The same goes for their future. The arrival of Godot is not only completely uncertain, it is also quite unclear whether he is supposed to come that evening, the next, or ten years from the present. Their waiting is not so much waiting for some future arrival, but rather waiting as such, waiting that never began and will never be over, waiting in an eternal present. Many commentators have reflected upon the relationship of Didi and Gogo's position of timeless waiting to Heideggerian concept of boredom or to his existentialism of *Geworfenheit* as developed in the philosopher's famous book, *Being and Time* (for instance: Anders 1965, 144; Moran 2006, 104; Valentine 2009, 136). On some level, arguing for the play's implicit Heideggerianism seems justified inasmuch as for Heidegger, too, existence has neither a beginning point nor an ending point; one can only exist as already in the world (see especially: Heidegger 1996, 57). However, this analogy is dangerous insofar as it can lead us to the conclusion that it offers us the key to unlocking the play in its entirety. For the protagonists of the play, waiting is not only without boundaries in time, it is also without purpose, which certainly cannot be said about Heidegger's *Dasein*. In the dispositions of profound boredom and anxiety, when *Dasein* is returned to its own-most possibility—the possibility of non-existence—it is returned to its authentic existence as a possibility. In *their* waiting, Vladimir and Estragon do not face their authenticity at all; they simply are.

On this point, we should perhaps add another remark. *Waiting for Godot*, its fame and world-wide recognition notwithstanding, is probably not the most representative of Beckett's work. What is more, precisely because it appears to offer the reader so many simple keys to unlocking the play, using topics and motifs that we seemingly know a lot about—ranging from the questions of death and existence without a God to the question of suffering in the fragile, finite bodies and imperfect souls—that an inexperienced reader may explain all these elements too hastily and too spontaneously. Some Beckett scholars may therefore not even begin to analyze the work, either because it is too risky or because it is unnecessary. From the point of view of this paper, however, this wide-spread misinterpretation is reason enough to attempt an analysis.

In my view, the reason why *Waiting for Godot* can only be a comedy lies in its temporality: because it takes place “after the end,” when the disaster has already occurred, it cannot serve as a basis for the tragic heroine's desperate attempt to prevent it. As Terry Eagleton puts it: “If tragic figures meet with a fall, Beckett's figures fail to rise to a height from which a fall would be possible” (Eagleton 2003, 67). The only possible action is a non-action, a futile and meaningless action, thwarted not by the intervention of an opposing external or internal power but fruitless in itself. There is a great deal to be said in favor of declaring such a disposition tragicomic,

especially since the author did so himself in the English version of the play. I insist, however, on calling it comic, not so much because I wish to engage in a dispute over what exactly separates comedy from tragedy, but principally because I want to avoid a terrible misreading of the play that I fear is still prevalent. It seems that the label of tragicomedy allows many readers to conclude that, while the (non-)actions of the characters make us laugh, they still somehow speak the truth of some terrible, immensely sad human condition. In other words, I think it is precisely this term that makes it very easy to recognize in the play its existentialist, theological or generally “humanist” elements.

There are two kinds of commentary that fall in this trap. The first kind is extremely naive, as it takes note of Beckett’s general interest in minimalism, physical handicaps, physical and mental injury and degradation, and concludes that it must mean that “suffering and death are humanity’s lot” (Feldman 2009, 13). Or, when Estragon compares himself to Christ, “Beckett is undoubtedly drawing parallels with Christ to highlight the intensity of our suffering on earth” (White 2009, 20). These readings are naive because they simply register certain words, themes and motifs that correspond to an easily comprehensible and well-known narrative, but fail to understand their functioning in the work itself. This way of reading is of course not limited to the works of Beckett; unfortunately, it presents a troublesome predicament of the humanities which are still crumbling under the weight of their metaphysical conceptual clutter. In this regard, a considerable part of the humanities remains in a pre-Heideggerian, perhaps even pre-secular, but certainly pre-modern condition.

The second type of commentary is much more interesting, though no less mistaken. In these cases, the interpreter doesn’t simply inscribe Beckett’s work in the traditional metaphysical value system the author is clearly, already at the level of artistic practice, separating himself from. The interpreter readily acknowledges that there is a great shift in paradigm at work in Beckett’s oeuvre, and that Beckett’s protagonists are clearly nothing like the tragic heroes of Antiquity; their dramatic action consists entirely of non-activity. The argument here is that the formula of (modernist) tragedy is the very absence of (classical, heroic) tragedy. Grounding his reading of *Godot* in an interpretation of Heidegger, Günther Anders writes: “the tragedy of this kind of existence lies in the fact that it does not even have a chance of tragedy, that it must always, at the same time, in its totality be farce” (Anders 1965, 142). My thesis can be formulated as precisely the opposite of Anders’ claim: the problem is not that today, tragedy is forced into an “unnatural” cohabitation with farce, in order to be tragic at all. Quite the contrary: the problem is that today, comedy is still forced to masquerade as recognizable tragic formulae in order to be recognized as a serious genre at all. More recently, Simon Critchley expressed almost the same point as Anders, writing that “the problem with the tragic-heroic paradigm is that it is not tragic enough and that only comedy is truly tragic” (Critchley 1999, 114). The difference with Anders is perhaps only that, for Critchley, comedy is not some necessary evil that tragedy must learn to live with, but a productive and desired

form, precisely the form through which tragedy reaches its authentic voice in modernity. Critchley, too, grounds his idea of comedy in a reference to Heidegger's concept of finality and praises Beckett's laughter "which arises out of a palpable sense of inability, inauthenticity, impotence, impossibility" (114.).

Even though the second kind of commentary on *Godot*, and Beckett in general, presents a much more interesting argument, it still remains in the clutches of the "humanist" ideology of European metaphysical tradition. By interpreting (Beckett's) comedy as a contemporary form of tragedy as Critchley suggests, or else as an "ontological farce" as proposed by Anders, it effectively neutralizes, suspends its comic power and re-interprets it as tragedy, as tragedy-after-tragedy. In other words, this form of commentary still praises comedy only insofar as it is "tragic," still considers it as a serious genre only insofar as it expresses, in one way or another, "the immense human suffering on earth." By not taking the comic of comedy seriously, it overlooks its genuine metaphysical, philosophical, social and political position. In fact, it is Critchley himself who presents the formula of comedy that should be avoided at all costs: *the comedy of finitude*.

As is well known, it is the genre of tragedy that we traditionally link to the idea of human finality—to the idea of uniqueness and fragility of our existence and of the ultimate fruitlessness of action. Critchley's "comedy of finitude" is therefore quite literally intended as a way of inscribing the very essence of tragic into comedy. Against this attempt, I strongly endorse the position taken by Alenka Zupančič in her book on comedy, where she insists on the "physics of the infinite against the metaphysics of the finite" (Zupančič 2007, 42-60). With regard to Beckett's hero, Zupančič quotes Alfred Simon's formulation that "he may not be immortal, but he's indestructible [increvable]" (Zupančič 2007, 217). She applies this indestructibility, which should not be confused with the immortality of the soul, to the comic in general. To make a long story short: one should not take comedy seriously only insofar as it is essentially tragic. Rather, what one should take seriously is the very essence of the comic. The reason why *Waiting for Godot* should be read as a comedy—and not as a tragicomedy—is precisely because we should avoid the temptation of reducing its comic indestructibility to a tragic testimony of human fragility and finality.

Aaron Schuster opens his essay on the philosophy of complaint by citing the following joke:

Somewhere, back in Russia, a traveler gets on a train and sits down next to an old Jewish man. Before long, the old man starts muttering, "Oy, am I thirsty." The traveler ignores him for a while, but the old man persists: "Oy, am I thirsty. Oy, am I thirsty." Finally the traveler can stand it no longer. He gets up, walks to the car where drinks are sold, and buys a bottle of water. The old man accepts it gratefully, drinks it, and settles down. A few minutes pass. The traveler can feel the tension building up in the old man. Finally, the tension gets the best of him, and he blurts out, "Oy, was I thirsty!" (Schuster 2012, 37)

The desire of the old man seems quite minimal, but even the quenching of the thirst can't really satisfy it. There is something in his desire that persists—and perhaps we can call it the indestructibility of the comic. Do not Vladimir and Estragon belong to the same kind of comic logic of infinite complaint? Clearly, their waiting got out of control, it is running wild. There is something endless in their waiting. The assumption that most commentators make, though rarely explicitly, is that Godot will never come, or that his coming is to be expected only at the end of time. This is quite natural, because by waiting we usually mean the disposition of expecting some future event, and it is indeed clear that in the play such event will not come to pass. But perhaps in this case, this assumption is somehow wrong, or at least incomplete. Perhaps the real predicament of the protagonists is that *Godot already came*. Godot already came, but his coming was like the bottle of water for the thirsty old man, which only transformed the manifestation of his endless complaint. This is what psychoanalysis calls the persistence of the “drive” which is to be strictly distinguished from what is called “desire.” Instead of assuming the spontaneous Heideggerianism of Vladimir and Estragon and inscribing their waiting in the dimension of primordial future (for this is what Heidegger concludes in his analysis of Dasein: that the primordial temporality of our (human) existence is the future, we exist as our own coming-into existence), we should claim that the endlessness of their waiting points to its indestructibility, that its proper time has already and irrevocably passed, and that it somehow remains *after* the end, withstanding it.

Žižek's concept of catastrophe

There is an important political lesson to be drawn from the comic perversion of the everyday concept of the progression of time. First of all, the general political position of comedy is what we could call with Robert Pfaller its materialism, that is, its refusal of the alternative between noble ideas and poor applications. For comedy, it is extremely important how things appear—how ideas are applied—even to the extent that truth is merely a product of appearances. Pfaller refers to this as the principle of success (Pfaller 2005, 253). Furthermore, Zupančič essentially distinguishes between true and false comedy by detecting its political subversiveness or conservatism. Comedy is conservative if it points out that the noble power-figure is not only an ideal, but also a normal, corporeal, finite human being. It is subversive when it demonstrates that the noble power-figure is a normal human being precisely in believing it is truly a noble power-figure and acting like one. Paraphrasing Lacan, Zupančič writes: “It is not some poor chap who believes himself to be a king who is comical (this is rather pathetic), but a king who believes that he really is a king” (Zupančič 2007, 32). However, the curious post-catastrophic temporality of (some) comedies offers us a perspective on the political implications of the comic that can not be fully explained as materialism or subversiveness in the indicated sense.

In some more recent works by Slavoj Žižek we can detect a clear surge in the prominence of the concept of catastrophe, a concept that is almost absent in his earlier works but is at the same time closely related to the problematic of political comedy we are dealing with here. Whether we take *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008), *First as Tragedy, Then As Farce* (2009), or *Less Than Nothing* (2012), to name some books published in this period, the basic form of his argument remains the same. The world appears to be on the brink of ecological or social catastrophe; and the question, of course, is how to avoid or prevent it.

A critic may object even with this starting point, and claim that Žižek's estimation is weak and that there is no looming catastrophe for the humanity in the general sense; that it is all simply a matter of some isolated, unrelated "challenges" that need to be confronted and dealt with. It will have to suffice here to assert simply that Žižek does in fact deal with this possible objection and rejects it. He does so not only by pointing out the empirically quite evident capacity of humanity to annihilate itself (the bomb), and by listing other such data such as instable environment, dwindling resources, exponent population growth etc., but also, more importantly, by raising the philosophical argument that the human being cannot be thought independently from its capacity of the end. This is perhaps a trace of Heideggerianism in Žižek. But more to the point, Žižek explicitly refuses the solution of making small adaptations and improvements, of patching the most glaring holes in the (global) capitalist system. In *First as Tragedy, Then As Farce*, he describes such endeavors in the aftermath of the capitalist catastrophe as opting for a socialist future instead of a communist one (Žižek 2008, 95). Refusing corrections of the path that leads to catastrophe, what is Žižek's solution? Consistently, in each of the texts mentioned, he refers to Jean-Pierre Dupuy's "enlightened catastrophism" and proposes a paradoxical move, where the only genuine way to prevent the catastrophe is to accept its inevitability.

Dupuy [proposes] a radical solution: since one believes only when the catastrophe has really occurred (by which time it is too late to act), one must project oneself into the aftermath of the catastrophe, *confer on the catastrophe the reality of something which has already taken place*. We all know the tactical move of taking a step back in order to jump further ahead; Dupuy turns this procedure around: one has to jump ahead into the aftermath of the catastrophe in order to be able to step back from the brink. In other words, we must assume the catastrophe as our destiny. (Žižek 2012, 983-984, emphasis added)

The most important point for our discussion here is inscribed in the tentative line that I emphasized in the quotation: facing the catastrophic end, the true political move, or at least the beginning of such a move, can be described as "conferring on the catastrophe the reality of something which has already taken place." My claim is this: if one accepts Žižek's refusal of minor corrections within the political field and invests in a much more radical change, could one not say that what Žižek

proposes as the proper political move is ... a comic move? Could one not say that politics is, properly speaking, comedy?

Now, I am well aware of the dangers of such a claim. Politics, especially parliamentary and elections-related politics, politics of mass media, has in fact been called many things—farce, burlesque, circus, clown act, popularity contest and comedy—anything but serious business. And in most cases, rightly so: by performing in the many genres of instantaneous mass media like television and internet, a politician inevitably becomes at least one part entertainer; or rather, an individual who is not a good entertainer stands little chance of a long term success in official politics. But this has nothing to do with what I mean when I say that true politics is comedy. Firstly, because when I say politics, I am not referring at all to the contemporary parliamentary, entertainment-based politics. And secondly, because by comedy I do not mean something which is not serious, I do not mean something without any ethical relevance or social relevance or without ... well, political relevance.

By a political move, I mean something that precedes any parliamentary or non-parliamentary politics, something that belongs to a field prior to any form of reproduction of the political order, election-based or hereditary. By a political move, I mean the very instance of the formation of what “later” becomes a general political model for the (global) society. I put the word later in quotation marks because it is clear that such formative instance determines the entire history of that particular political model and is carried in that history. That instance is “prior” to the political model that it determines only in the logical sense, not in the temporal sense. In short, what I have in mind when I refer to politics is the very capacity to form or transform the political field. As for comedy, it should be clear that what I have in mind is what Pfaller calls the materialism of comedy and what Zupančič calls its subversiveness. It should be clear that by comedy I mean something that has a distinct political charge, something that helps to bring about the *formation* of the political field (and not to just mock it or impotently comment on it from the outside). In fact, if the lesson of Pfaller’s and Zupančič’s understanding of comedy is that true comedy is politico-formative, then perhaps all I want to claim at this point with regard to Žižek’s understanding of catastrophe is that his account of radical politics is an account of something profoundly comical. Insofar as it can be claimed that both politics and comedy belong to the curious temporality of the after-the-end, they also belong to each other.

The reader should be warned that Žižek’s precise formulation of the argument hesitates and varies. In the above passage, the entire problematic of dealing with a looming catastrophe is framed by the notion of believing: the reason why we must confer on the catastrophe the reality of something that has already taken place is because “one *believes* only when the catastrophe has really occurred” (emphasis added). This overarching theme of faith bears resemblance to and brings the discussion in the close proximity to what Alain Badiou has to say about the “event.” Indeed, Žižek sometimes refers to Dupuy and Badiou as practically saying one and the same thing: “For Badiou too, the time of the fidelity to an event is the *futur*

antérieur: overtaking oneself vis-à-vis the future, one acts now as if the future one wants to bring about were already here” (Žižek 2009, 151). Žižek points out that both Badiou and Dupuy evoke the paradoxical idea of future running ahead of itself, against the paradigm of hermeneutics which supposes the anticipation of the future in the present. However, for Žižek himself, it is not entirely clear whether the future that precedes itself, in the sense that one’s (political) action is conditioned by it, is supposed to be thought as the Event or the Catastrophe. By framing the problematic of the future-that-is-already-here with the notion of belief and therefore rephrasing, to an extent, the problematic of a looming catastrophe into the problematic of fidelity (which is fidelity to the uncertain, future rupture of continuity, called the event), it seems that Žižek pushes for the indifference between Event and Catastrophe. But is this really the only possible theoretical move? To answer the question somewhat indirectly, let me propose a provisional distinction: while the idea of existing in the extra-time, in the time *after* a terrible catastrophe has already taken place, is a comical one, this can hardly be said of the idea of the fidelity to the Badiouian event, or of the idea of the event already taking place, here and now. Fidelity to the event is not comical, while accepting the catastrophe is. Does not the “lesson of comedy,” separating between a politico-formative and a politico-conservative action, teach us that we should not underestimate the difference between Event and Catastrophe? Can a political stake that is not comical in the precise post-catastrophic sense even begin to contribute to the formation of the political field? If this is so—isn’t it quite legitimate to push Žižek’s political thesis away from the Badiouian framework towards the framework of comedy? This, in short, is what I had in mind when I emphasized in Žižek’s text the phrase that any politico-formative action must first assume that the catastrophe one is trying to prevent or avoid has already taken place.

The claim is that not only is true comedy immanently political, but also that radical politics in the formative sense must take the shape of a comical action, that is, of an action that is not proved futile in the process of its fulfillment as the result of this process, but rather perfectly futile or purposeless already in its inception. In other words, both the genuine political action and the specific type of comedy must assume that the worst already happened, that the game is already over. Regarding the suspense with which comedic plays work in general, Zupančič writes:

A prototype of comic suspense is not the question if and when the husband will discover the proverbial lover in his wife’s closet; rather, it is what will happen after he does. To be sure, comedy as a dramatic genre may well include the procedures of classic suspense, yet these are to be distinguished from comic suspense proper, which is in fact a paradoxical “suspense after the fact”: it starts only at the moment when the catastrophe (or some portion of it) has already happened. (Zupančič 2007, 93)

We should understand Žižek’s concept of the political through the lens of what Zupančič tells us about the comic suspense. It is not a question of believing, keeping faith or acting on faith—even though, of course, Žižek does not have in mind

what we traditionally and generally understand as religious faith but a variant of the Badiouian concept of fidelity. It has nothing to do with faith, hope, fear or any other concept that presupposes a duration of time in which it is possible to avert the inevitable. Rather, it is a completely free action, that is, an action free of the constraints of duration, because the worst already happened and there is nothing to fear and nothing to hope for, and to use Beckett's terms one last time, there is nothing to wait for. What remains is the pure timeless, not eternal, not immortal, but indestructible persistence. The political lesson of *Waiting for Godot* coincides perfectly with the comical lesson of formative politics: "we are the ones we have been waiting for."

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ALFIE BOWN

LACANIAN LAUGHTER AND BRAGGING IN 1598

In 1598, two of the most important plays in the history of English comedy were published. These are Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* and Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*.¹ Both plays have suffered critical neglect, and stand in their respective author's extensive works as two examples of their least studied plays, though this has recently begun to change, especially in the case of *Love's Labour's Lost*.² Both plays engage, perhaps more than any others, with a set of comic traditions dating back to Greek and Roman comic drama, meaning that they weigh directly into the history of comedy and impose themselves on issues that have been at the heart of comedy since its recorded dramatization began. It would seem then, that these two plays could be important for teaching us some essential "truth" about comedy.

Yet, to speak about comedy's "truth," or to think of the enduring characteristics of comedy, is to raise an issue that Mikhail Bakhtin foregrounded. Quoting Alexander Herzen's comment "it would be extremely interesting to write a history of laughter,"³ Bakhtin's work showed that speaking of laughter as something ahistorical, as something that has essential characteristics which have always been part of comedy and will remain part of comedy forever, risks making it apolitical, and even coming down on the side of an essentialism in believing (as Aristotle may have done when he started the enduring association between comedy and "the human") in an essential subject-who-responds in laughter.⁴ In other words, by speaking of comedy as "essentially human," or in thinking of it as something

1. All references to Shakespeare are from William Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (London: W. W. Norton, 1997). All references to Jonson are from Ben Jonson, *Complete Works of Ben Jonson*, vol 3, ed. C. H. Hereford and Percy Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927).

2. See for instance the Arden edition, William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, ed. H. R. Woudhuysen (London: Arden, 1988) 64-105.

3. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University press, 1984) 59.

4. Aristotle, *Clarendon Aristotle Series: Aristotle on the Parts of Animals*, trans. James G. Lennox, ed. L. J. Akrill and Lindsay Judson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 69. On this theory of laughter in Greek culture see Stephen Halliwell, "The Uses of Laughter in Greek Culture" in *Classical Quarterly* 41. 2 (Cambridge University Press, 1991): 279-296.

which has *fundamental* characteristics, we risk naturalizing the subject who responds in laughter, justifying the affect of laughter by a centralizing hypothesis of something which cannot be far away from “human nature.” It is the argument here that it is exactly this issue that appears in 1598, troubling the idea of laughter as the response of a pre-existing subject.

To think of a subject-who-responds is to suggest the analysand of psychoanalysis, and specifically the project of Jacques Lacan, whose work is the subject of this journal. As I hope to show in what follows, Lacanian psychoanalysis offers us a hypothesis which develops this relationship between the subject and his laughter. The potential impact of Lacanian theory on existing models and theories of comedy is something that has not been realized sufficiently until recent work by Mladen Dolar and Alenka Zupančič, and there remains much to be done here.⁵ Whilst popular mis-readings of psychoanalysis may suspect that it indulges in a privileging of the individual on the couch as a subject-who-responds, laughter in Lacanian psychoanalysis shows itself to have a much more complex relationship to the formation of subjectivity. Far from allowing the subject to indulge in laughter which can be seen as purely response and therefore affirms the pre-existing subject, Lacanian laughter explains how a part of laughter’s function is to produce a subject who seems to have already existed in order to respond, making it part of the way subjectivity is created though a trick. This idea of laughter as a subject-forming process strangely seems to have risen its head in 1598.

Love’s Labour’s Lost and *Every Man In* intersect with key elements of comic tradition at a number of points: they contain romance plots, servants and masters, suggestions of doubling, old kings, lovers and clowning, as well as puns, wordplay, jokes, and many more well-known comic tropes. This article, however, will focus on just one comic feature to illustrate its arguments, a feature much less studied and therefore much more suited to an article of this length, and yet a feature which has been a familiar trope since records of comedy began and remains familiar in comedy today. The subject of this article is the brag.

The figure of the braggadocio or “braggart soldier” may be traced as far back as Menander, the Greek playwright born around 341 BC. However, the character is only accessible via Terence’s play *The Eunuch*, written in the year 146 BC, as the Menander play from which Terence took the character is lost. Terence writes that his play is derived from an original Menander entitled *The Flatterer*, in which “there are a sponger who flatters and a soldier who boasts.”⁶ Plautus’s *Miles Gloriosus*, or “The

5. See Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Mladen Dolar, “Comedy and its Double” in *Stop that Comedy!: On the Subtle Hegemony of the Tragic in Our Culture*, ed. Rober Pfaller (Wien: Sonderzahl Press, 2005)

6. Terence, *The Comedies*, ed. and trans., Betty Radice (London: Penguin, 1976), 166. Earlier still, the character of the braggadocio is likely to be a derivation of the *alazôn*, an impostor who thinks himself as greater than he is. The *alazôn* is a typical figure in Greek Old Comedy, epitomized by *Aristophanes*. *Alazôn* was also the title of a Greek play from which Plautus says he took his *Miles Gloriosus*.

Braggart Soldier,” is a well-known starting point for discussions of the character, and a significant influence on the famous braggadocios of literature that were to follow.⁷ It seems clear, for example, that Plautus provided a direct inspiration for Shakespeare’s most famous braggart soldier Falstaff. The action of *Miles Gloriosus* takes place at Ephesus, and Falstaff’s followers at the Boar’s Head in *2 Henry IV* are described as “Ephesians” and the host at his lodgings in *The Merry Wives* describes himself as “Ephesian,” rare references to the location in Shakespeare, though Ephesus is also the setting for *Comedy of Errors* (*2 Henry IV*, II.ii.127, *Merry Wives*, IV.v.14). Moliere’s *Tartuffe* is a figure of braggartry indebted to the same tradition, and the character appears in countless other influential figures of European comedy from Goldoni through to Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, to Dickens’s Major Bagstock of *Dombey and Son* and Gogol’s braggart soldier in the comic tale *The Nose*, all the way to the fantastic “Concentration Camp Ehrhardt” of Ernst Lubitsch’s film *To Be Or Not To Be*. This article treats just two braggarts, Captain Bobadil of Jonson’s *Every Man In His Humour* and Don Adriano de Armado of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, arguing that between them they offer a new way of thinking about the role of the braggart throughout comic history. What may be one of the most famous statements from the most famous braggart of all time, Falstaff, is a key one:

Man, is not able to invent anything that tends to laughter more than I invent or is invented on me: I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in others. (*2 Henry IV*, Iii, 8-12.5)

Here many of the shibboleths that characterize existing theorizations of laughter are problematized. The age-old question of comedy studies has been that of why we laugh, or of what we laugh at, seeing laughter as the response of a subject who already exists to a stimulus that already exists.⁸ As Anca Parvulescu says of such theories, “they conceive of [laughter] as a response to something else, and it is this something else that they are after.”⁹ Such theories risk making laughter testify to a pre-existing natural subject who responds. On the contrary, here in *2 Henry IV* laughter is something invented rather than a natural response, and further, Falstaff indicates that it is perhaps employed more “on” man than “by” him, suggesting that laughter may be “the condition of ideology” in that the moment you feel you are responding naturally and freely is the moment you are most inside ideology, as Mladen Dolar has argued.¹⁰ As with ideology, laughter’s causes and effects are not consciously employed, often appearing to come from an unknown source. Further, Falstaff knows that laughter is not just a response but a cause; it is not only that he

7. Plautus, “The Braggart Soldier” in *Four Comedies*, ed. and trans., Erich Segal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 1-74.

8. The vast majority of comedy studies have been characterized by this approach. See for example Charles Gruner, *The Game of Humour: A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2000).

9. Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 4.

10. Mladen Dolar, “Strel sredi koncerta” in *Theodor W. Adorno, Uvod v sociologijo glasbe* (Ljubljana: DZS, 1986) 307.

is the cause of wit in others (making a laughter response, to Falstaff for example) but the cause “that wit is,” making laughter something productive and constitutive, formational of the relationship between subject and Other. To reach this conclusion though, one needs a much more detailed investigation into the connection between laughter and braggartry in these two plays of 1598.

The first significant comic moment of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* is one of its finest moments, and it comes immediately before the introduction of the braggart Don Armado. Costard, the young lover of the play, reveals that he has seen and fallen for the dairymaid named Jacquenetta. The conversation goes:

COSTARD: The matter is to me sir, as concerning Jacquenetta. The manner of it is, I was taken with the manner.

BEROWNE: In what manner?

COSTARD: In manner and form following, sir—all those three: I was seen with her ‘in’ the ‘manor’ house, sitting with her upon the ‘form’, and taken ‘following’ her into the park; which, put together, is ‘in manner and form following’. Now, sir, for the ‘manner’—it is the manner of a man to speak to a woman. For the ‘form’—in some form.

Costard has seen the dairymaid Jacquenetta and become “taken” with her “manner,” meaning that he has fallen in love with her. Berowne asks him to clarify “in what manner” he was taken with her “manner,” a straightforward pun. Costard’s answer is remarkable, and truly comic; it is an exercise in the creation of narrative. In answer to the question he states that he was taken with Jacquenetta “in manner and form following,” suggesting in line with his previous comment that her manner was the first thing which appealed to him, and following that, he became an admirer of her form. Alternatively, it could mean that he was taken by her “manner” and that in what follows he intends to describe how he was taken by her form, or in what form he was taken by her. Though already several puns are in play, the moment is yet to become properly radical. But then, perhaps in answer to a raised eyebrow from Berowne (as it is sometimes acted), Costard makes out that “in manner and form following” was in fact an abbreviated or condensed version of a narrative of events. He was “in” the “manor” house whilst she was sitting upon the “form,” presumably an item of furniture (although the word “form” could also refer to the act of sitting itself as it does in Ben Jonson’s play *The Sad Shepherd*, a meaning retained by the OED). Then he “follows” her into the park, which “put together” is what was meant by the initial statement “in manner and form following.”

Discussing a Lacanian model for comedy, R. D. V. Glasgow comments that whilst “functional discourse can work by provisionally nailing down words onto meanings, giving an illusion of stability (as if a particular word ‘belonged’ to its meaning),” comic moments can show us “the radical separation of signifier and signified” which forces us to recognize the dynamic potentiality for language to undermine our sense of order. For Glasgow, Lacan’s suggestion that the unconscious is “a per-

petual sliding of the signified beneath the signifier” is particularly relevant, and indeed it does connect to Lacan’s argument that language always has the capacity “to say something altogether different from what it says.” Costard’s comment shows something of this; that whilst we like to see language as referring to a reality which exists prior to that language, as if each thing or event has a language “belonging to it,” in fact no such stability can be maintained. But this is a common reading of comedy as a destructive force, as something which destroys the illusion of stability in language, and there is much more to this comic moment that such a reading allows.

Lacan’s own statement of intent in “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious” essay is to say that he is interested in the role of “the letter in the *creation* of signification” [my emphasis], rather than in the destruction of stable signification. This comment looks to another, the famous Lacanian statement that “a letter always arrives at its destination.” Barbara Johnson has provided the important gloss here, commenting that a letter always arrives at its destination since its destination is wherever it arrives.¹¹ Lacan’s interest is in the letter as something which produces destinations, the subject-positions of the sender and the recipient. Thus whilst Glasgow’s argument is on the side of the slipperiness of the letter and language as that which undermines otherwise stable signification, here the emphasis is on the creation of signification out of nothing.

Žižek has pointed out that this process of creating subject positions is never complete (which is indeed something that Derrida has drawn attention to), remarking that the phrase “a letter which always arrives at its destination” points at the logic of recognition/misrecognition. The letter creates its recipient, just as language creates its signified, but this recognition is also misrecognition; there is nothing to govern the process, so sense is always created out of nonsense. It is not so much that language cannot help turning to nonsense (though this may be true) but that language cannot help producing sense, sense which has nothing to guarantee it. It may be that this is all sense is: language’s production of something to which it appears to refer. Glasgow’s description explains the functioning of a normal pun like that of Berowne, where a slip between the manner of the girl and the manner of the love points to language’s arbitrary tendency to slip. Costard’s joke requires far more theorization—it shows the creation of narrative sense out of nothing but language—the words come first and then accidentally create the events that the language refers to, pointing not to the fact that comedy undermines the attempt of language to be representational but that comedy shows how language succeeds in creating a reality which it immediately appears to be representational of. This moment, then, is not a comic nonsense in which the source of humour is undermining sense but rather a comedy which shows sense coming into being based on nothing.

11. Barbara Johnson, “The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida” in *Yale French Studies* 55/56, “Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise” (1977): 457-505 (502).

Immediately following this comic scene, which reverses the usual reading of comedy as a breakdown of sense into nonsense and instead frames comedy as the production of sense out of nonsense, the braggart, Don Armado, enters the play. He enters via a letter, and since the braggart is always on the side of rationality, this may be seen in the terms of the Lacanian letter discussed above, as an attempt on his part to constitute the subject-positions involved as the sender and the receiver. And the subject matter of the letter itself is rationality: the rationality offered by Galen's humoral theory. The humour, as in ancient and medieval physiology, is the medical theory of the makeup and workings of the human body which holds that a system of fluids in the human body drive individual behaviour. These humours dictate behaviour and create characteristics, thereby explaining identity by the hypothesis of natural phenomena, supporting interior subjectivity. Don Armado's letter reads:

So it is, besieged with sable-coloured melancholy, I did commend the black oppressing humour to the most wholesome physic of the health-giving air; and, as I am a gentleman, betook myself to walk.

Before Don Armado begins his story we are told to associate him with humoral theory, with a rational explanation that is on the side of internal subjectivity. The theme is at the heart of Ben Jonson's comedy, as the title *Every Man in His Humour* testifies, and the issue is raised directly in its sister play, *Every Man Out of His Humour*:

Some one peculiar quality
Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw
All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,
In their confluents, all to run one way. (*Every Man Out* I.i. 105-8)

The issue being raised here through the connection between "humour" and "humours" and through the connection between such internalizing ideas of medical science and comedy, is that of whether laughter is a response from within. Jonson's definition here already seems to trouble this, with a humour described as something which "doth so possesse a man," indicating a possession from the outside rather than a part of interior identity, just as was suggested by the quote from Falstaff with which we began. But the point here is that the braggart is on the side of explanations for behaviour that centre the subject around its internal subjectivity, in his case seeing his melancholy as the result of internal processes; in such a reading Don Armado would be blind to what Falstaff knows—that what seems like an internal response is produced "on a man" from without. After establishing his affiliation with hypotheses of essentialist internal identity, Don Armado's letter continues into the story which he is to tell, another of the play's remarkable comic moments. The event it tells instigates that entire subplot of the play: his quest for Jacquenetta and rivalry with Costard. The letter tells that Don Armado has been walking in a park where he saw Costard, "sorting and consorting" (meaning following and then talking to) the dairymaid Jacquenetta (*LLL*, I.i. 230-66). The moment marks another incredible turn then, in that the event he describes is the same

one which Costard describes to Berowne in the lines previously discussed, as the completely constructed source of the comment “in manner and form following.” Thus, what initially appeared to be a joke that Costard plays on Berowne because Berowne might have failed to understand the phrase “in manner and form following” as “I liked her manner and then her form”—turns out to create a reality on which the entire play is structured. The arbitrary narrative that Costard’s language has constructed out of nonsense turns out to be the most serious reality in the play, which Armado describes as “that obscene and most preposterous event.” The event is indeed both obscene and preposterous; preposterous because it was borne only out of an arbitrarily uttered set of signifiers, and obscene because by showing reality to be constructed out of nothing but this, it shatters everything that Don Armado believes in, the idea that language represents internal pre-existing processes like the humours of the body, the very thing which allows him to be naturally superior and to brag.

There may be differences between Shakespeare and Jonson in the way that their comedy is concerned with displaying the way that “humours” and the natural world construct individuals, and how comedy can be a part of this process. When Romeo leaps over the garden wall of the Capulet’s orchard, Mercutio shouts “Romeo! Humours! Madman!” (*Romeo and Juliet* II.i. 7). As such, the language is at times on the side of humoral theory; one needs to regulate their internal drives in order to be socially successful. On the other hand, in Jonson’s play *Every Man In* humours become allegorical. The characters can only repeat their behaviour patterns which are already prescribed by their names; Brayne-Worme worms his way into everyone’s favour and Kno’well can only act as if he knows all. The names seem to be restrictive, as if we are not born with characteristics but are imprinted with them by naming. Jeremy Tambling has suggested that whilst Shakespeare may ultimately affirm the natural order of things, Jonson’s city-comedy challenges this. He writes that that “one difference between Shakespearean and Jonsonian comedy is that the former relies upon a hidden organic unity existing between the characters, making everything grow together towards a resolution of apparent contradictions [...] there is no such unity for people in Jonson.”¹² Indeed it is interesting that Jonson does not re-visit humours often outside the two plays (*Every Man In* and *Every Man Out*) that mock their attempt to explain behaviour, as if, once discounted, they are no longer central to his worldview. On the other hand, Shakespeare makes over a hundred references to humours, always retaining the specific sense of internal bodily functions that dictate desires which are explicitly articulated by Don Armado in the passage quoted above (I.i. 235).

Thus, from the start of the play we have a comedy which is against the logic of the braggart, but more must be said about this centralizing drive of the brag, since laughter can be on the side of bragging as well as against it. If the original Menander play from which the braggart is taken was called *The Flatterer*, then this is something also retained through the chain of appearances that the braggart makes

12. Jeremy Tambling, “Dickens and Jonson” in *English* 61.232 (Spring 2012): 4-25.

in literature. Plautus's flattering servant figure is called Artotrogus, which means "bread gobbler," a phrase that also serves perfectly as a definition of Traffaldino, Goldoni's figure of the harlequin in *A Servant of Two Masters*. Tartuffe relies on the flattery of the blinded Orgon, and Mel Brooks's character Professor Siletsky takes the same tack with Colonel Ehrhardt in *To Be Or Not To Be*. Braggartry and flattery are connected concepts, they are two sides of the same coin.

In *Love's Labour's Lost*, flattery (whether false or not) precedes the introduction of Don Adriano, since the King and his attendants sing the praises of this "most illustrious wight" even before his appearance (*LLL*, I.i, 160-75). Similarly, in Jonson's *Every Man In*, flattery anticipates Captain Bobadil's introduction, with Bobadil's landlord Cob speaking somewhat ironically of Bobadil: "o, my guest is a fine man" (*EIHH*, I.iii. 69). When Bobadil is first introduced, lying on a bench due to his severe hangover, he is accompanied by the flattering Matthew, who indeed may or may not be sincere in his remarks such as "I have heard it spoken of divers, that you have very rare, and un-in-one-breath-utter-able skill, sir" (*EIHH*, I.v. 120-1). Bobadil boasts of his swordsmanship but makes excuses when it comes to proving it. Matthew seems to indulge Bobadil, at least not directly showing that he has found the braggart out. Whether Matthew is sincere in his flattery is unimportant. He may be taken in by Bobadil's boasting, or he may not. It is even possible that Bobadil himself believes his own braggart at times, as indeed in Plautus's *Miles Gloriosus*, Pyrgopolynices is most certainly taken in by the appearance of his own brilliance. But whoever is taken in and whoever isn't, a fundamental component of comedy is the imaginary other who is wise to the reality of the situation. This other, which can be thought of as the Big Other as Žižek terms it, an "other, obscene, invisible power structure [that] acts the part of the 'Other of the Other' in the Lacanian sense, the part of the meta-guarantee of the consistency of the big Other (the symbolic order that regulates social life)."¹³ Whether the bragging deceives the flatterer or the flatter deceives the braggart, both imply another subject in the staging, albeit an imaginary one, who sees the reality behind the performance, and laughs at the individuals who are fooled. As Robert Pfaller has argued, if there is no individual present who is being fooled then we may construct an imaginary "naive observer" to fill this role, a kind of counterpart to the Big Other; we imagine a force who knows and a force who doesn't, in order to guarantee an order beneath whatever chaos might be apparent to us on stage.¹⁴

So the braggart and the flatter are on the same team, both believing in the existence of something outside which guarantees the existence of a social reality, or an order outside of their performance. As Zupančič has argued, we may even enjoy being the "naive observer"—being taken in by appearances—precisely to guarantee that

13. Slavoj Žižek, "The Big Other Doesn't Exist" in *Journal of European Psychoanalysis*, Spring-Fall (1997). Available at www.lacan.com.

14. Robert Pfaller, "The Familiar Unknown, the Uncanny, the Comic" in Slavoj Žižek (ed.) *Lacan: The Silent Partners* (London: Verso, 2005).

we can step back out into the fixed order of reality.¹⁵ This applies to every possible formulation of the situation; whether the braggart or flatterer is fooled, whether both are fooled, or whether neither truly believe in the flattering and braggartry that is taking place, they can still believe in a “truth” of the situation underlying the performance. In other words, they either believe that the braggart is as good as he says, or they believe that he isn’t, both of which rely on the existence of a Big Other who guarantees the structure of good and bad which the braggart is to be judged against and the possibility of perceiving the true place of the braggart in relation to his claims. Another common argument about comedy is countered here; the idea that laughter brings the high and mighty down to the base human level. Recently Simon Critchley has followed this line to some extent, commenting that “if humour tells you something about who you are, then it might be a reminder that you are not the person you would like to be.”¹⁶ Zupančič’s work has troubled this notion, pointing out the conservatism of this position in that if we talk about comedy bringing you down or forcing you to recognize that you are not who you thought you were, then we assert a concept of who you really are now that your performance of perfection has been thrown off. She even makes this point relevant to braggart soldiers, mentioning Falstaff as an example of a comic character who is constantly slipping on banana peels, but rather than being “grounded” and taken down, he simply gets up again and continues to arrogantly swagger.¹⁷ This laughter which sees itself as perceiving the reality behind the illusion is in fact not against the braggart at all. There is a laughter, then, which operates not against the braggart, as one would traditionally frame it, not a laughter, which brings the braggart down for the ideal he has sold for himself and to himself, but instead the brag and laughing at the brag share a quality. If flattery and braggartry are to be thought of as two sides of the same process, then laughter—which would usually seem to oppose them—can turn out to be a third participant in the same game. Whether we believe the braggart, flatter him, or laugh and bring him down, we participate in the same process of consenting to a belief in a reality underneath the illusion, an order which might be temporarily turned into nonsense but which returns, structuring and guaranteeing our world. To modify Critchley’s terms, humour may show you that you aren’t what you thought you were, but at the same moment it can create a sense of who you “really” are.

As an aside, the point made out of 1598 may bring to bear on modern bragging. Take a particular example of bragging and flattery in contemporary culture, the modern covering letter which one is asked to write when applying for a new job. The job applicant is expected to write something along the lines of “I am outgoing, hard-working, honest, trustworthy, organized.” Here we have a kind of braggartry where what is important is not that I should actually be any of these things,

15. Alenka Zupančič, “Reversals of Nothing: The Case of the Sneezing Corpse” in *Filozofski Vestnik*, 26.2 (2005): 173-186 (181).

16. Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002) 75.

17. Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 29.

nor even believe myself to be. Nor is it necessary that the recipient of my letter, interviewing me for my job, should be taken in by any of these brags. Rather, the applicant is merely asked to consent to a system in which the Big Other exists. If I fail to address the demand to speak in this language, and resist using these keyword brags, then I appear to be somehow unusual or radical, and I will probably be deemed unsuitable for the job. By conforming, I simply make the gesture: I agree to a system of guaranteed order, and I agree that I can be situated in relation to this secure system. Bragging and flattering are a part of establishing order, and laughter, which has often been seen as against these processes, as a force which brings down illusions, can in fact be part of the same process of ordering.

But, as with the comedy with which we began, from *Love's Labour's Lost* which produces reality rather than reacts to it, another wonderful comic scene from *Love's Labour's Lost* throws off the idea of laughter as only serving to affirm the positions of pre-existing subjects. In the scene, Armado calls for Costard to deliver a letter for him. Costard enters with a broken leg, and Mote comments, "A wonder, master! Here's a costard broken in a shin." Armado, wrapped up in himself, does not notice Costard's broken leg, and comments "Some enigma, some riddle. Come thy l'envoy—begin." He thinks Mote's news about the broken shin is an allegory or riddle and demands a "l'envoy," an explanation for what Mote meant. Then comes Costard's turn to misread the situation. He assumes that Armado has seen the broken leg, and that Armado's comments "some enigma" (probably misheard as enema) and a "l'envoy" (connected to the verb "to lenify" meaning to purge) are offers of assistance for the broken shin. His response is to reject the help he thinks Armado has offered for the affliction Armado has in fact not even noticed:

No egma, no riddle, no l'envoy, no salve in the mail, sir! O, sir, plantain, a plain plantain! No l'envoy, no l'envoy, no salve sir, but a plantain!

Following this, Armado makes yet another misreading, commenting:

By virtue, thou enforces laughter; thy silly though, my spleen; the heaving of my lungs provokes me to ridiculous smiling! O, pardon me, my stars! Does the inconsiderate take *salve* for l'envoy and the word 'l'envoy' for a salve?

There is much to be said about this final misreading in the exchange. Firstly, it returns us to the question of laughter as connected to the humours of the body, of physiological and apolitical explanations for laughter. Armado is on the side of such a reading; just as he began by attributing melancholy to black bile, here he attributes laughter to the spleen and to the heaving of his lungs. The response is framed as a natural response to a social situation; "ridiculous smiling," laughter which ridicules Costard, has erupted naturally from Armado's imagined superior person. For Armado, a natural superiority justifies the assertion of himself over Costard, as if their positions in the hierarchy already exist and laughter merely reflects them. Humours as justification for sadistic violence are something also reflected on in *Every Man In* where Stephen is glad that "no body was hurt by his ancient humour," suggesting that humours can be the justification for violence; by

naturalizing impulse those impulses can be justified, but this acting “on impulse” paradoxically provides the justification for those impulses in the first place by acting as evidence for their presence. This is what happens with Armado’s laughter here. Laughter, by appearing to be connected to the natural, makes it seem as though that which it produces has always been there, waiting to be laughed at. It makes it seem as though the Costard already existed and the intelligent Armado was always superior, and capable of laughing at the inferior Costard, but the text reveals both Armado’s desire to see things this way and the way that such a way of seeing can come into being through laughter. As such, laughter shows the moment of ideology at work; it produces something, and makes it appear as though that which it produces was always-already there.

In Lacan essay’s on “The Instance of the Letter” which has, as we saw, been associated with an argument that comedy is the undermining or destruction of sense and rationality, Lacan comments of metaphor that:

It is in the substitution of signifier for signifier that a signification effect is produced that is poetic or creative, in other words, that brings the signification in question into existence. [The crossover between the two signifiers is the] constitutive value [needed] for the emergence of signification.¹⁸

As for the “Instance of the Letter” essay in general, the interest is in the production of meaning rather than its destruction. A kind of trick is played here in which “the crossing expresses the condition for the passage of the signifier into the signified.” The process is creative and poetic, it produces a signified. The pun, then, which has been seen as a splintering of meaning, is in fact a pre-condition for meaning in the first place; the mistaken meaning, or the possibility of mistaken meaning, is what affirms the existence of a solid signifier, a correct referent. Comedy produces meaning rather than undoes it, but this meaning appears based on nothing, sense appears out of nonsense, or as Lacan himself writes “meaning is produced in nonmeaning.”¹⁹ What we see here is the laughter both enacting and revealing the production of the appearance of the Big Other. Just as with the laughter at the bragging/flattery, the laughter, by appearing to be directed at error, asserts truth.

And these moments show that such an argument, that comedy is ideological in that it produces truths or that it creates something which it makes it appear as though it has always existed, is also where the true radical edge of comedy is found. If we can say that in this way laughter is ideology coming into being, then this shows us that what ideology brings into being is based upon nothing, or that it has nothing behind it, at least nothing stable. The radicalism of laughter is not that it transgresses ideology but that it shows us ideology at work. If with laughter we see ideology coming into being, then we undermine ideology’s claim to have a basis in something natural or in some organizing principle, showing that far from being the response of a pre-existing subject, laughter is part of the production of the

18. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (London: W. W. Norton, 2006) 429.

19. Lacan, *Écrits*, 423.

subject who can only then appear to be responding in laughter. If you tell me I have no right to laugh at you, your comment appears futile, because it is the fact that I have laughed at you which qualifies me to laugh at you.

Thus, with the figure of the braggadocio we have a comic tradition which shows there is nothing traditional about comedy—that it is political and not everlasting, that rather than being a natural response, laughter can play a trick which establishes or imposes an idea of the natural. The braggart is on both sides, desiring to believe in laughter as a response, an affirmation of his superiority perhaps, and he wants to assert that ideology. And yet his performance, even if he succeeds in fooling everyone, enacts the very thing that he wants to deny, that any ideology he brings into being has nothing permanent or originary to anchor itself in.

IZAR LUNAČEK

A COMEDY OF HORRORS

On humor, escapism, despair, the uncanny and comedy's happily horrible hierophany

One of Hollywood's recent releases titled *This Is The End* stars a group of young American comedians as exaggerated versions of themselves facing an apocalypse of biblical proportions complete with heavenly ascensions and abysses opening straight into the depths of Hell. If this is the first ever entry into the genre of disaster movie spoofs what should surprise us about it most is that it had not come about earlier. Throughout history humor has always thrived on disastrous circumstances. Think about it: have you ever seen a comedy about a stable relationship, a quiet family life or a thriving career? While comedies often tend to start and end in blissful circumstances, what actually makes us laugh in between is the hilarious way it all unravels in the blink of an eye.

But why do comedies make us laugh at catastrophes while the same set of events could bring us to terror or tears if it happened in real life or was presented to us in a more somber tone? Is the equation really as simple as Carol Burnett's famous "comedy is tragedy plus time" quote or Mel Brook's equally notorious comparison between the tragedy of cutting one's own finger and the comedy of someone else walking into an open sewer and dying? Is that really all there is to it or does this dissent between comedic and tragic or horrific attitudes toward catastrophe run deeper than mere dosage of empathic distance? Why, finally, would we find the predicaments of other people funny at all, even if we don't actively empathize with them? Do we secretly enjoy other people's suffering or is it merely a case of relief at being spared ourselves? Or is there something entirely different going on when we actually do laugh at someone walking into an open sewer and dying?

It was Henri Bergson's *Essay on Laughter* published in 1900 that laid the most thorough conceptual ground for a philosophical account of comedy understood as a lack of empathy so an engagement with this famous text promises to provide as with a solid starting point for tackling our dilemma. To put it very concisely, the basic point of Bergson's theory is that a comic character is one that has become absent minded, not full aware of himself and has consequently allowed mechanical processes to take over where plastic, flexible and lively responses would have been called for.¹ From its external vantage point, the audience spots his blunders

1. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (London, New York: Mac-Millan Publishing Company, 1911) 9-12.

and punishes them with a humiliating laughter that in real life supposedly has the aim of reminding the involuntary comedian to regain full consciousness of himself and return to flexibly adapting to the world around him.² Thus, if we were to rely on Bergson for the answer to our question regarding comedy and disaster, his explanation would probably go along the lines of our laughing at disaster in order to avoid it. The point of our laughter would be to jerk a comic blunderer from the quagmire of his disastrous decisions and back into a sober, external view of the predicament so he may rationally analyze and escape it.

Concerning the dilemma of the two radically divergent—terrified vs. hilarious—reactions to catastrophe, Bergson states his case plainly by insisting on the negative role of empathy as “laughter’s greatest foe.”³ Once we understand a character’s predicament from inside his own head and heart, we are presumably, according to Bergson, prevented from laughing at him. Furthermore, were we to follow Bergson all the way, we would have to admit that our laughter at another person’s tragedy is not even really as cruel as it sounds. It is merely there to inform the sufferer of the preference for an external, distanced and rational viewpoint on the problem since it would give its victim a better chance of resolving it. It should thus come as no surprise that Bergson’s book also includes explicit comparisons between the spectator of comedy and the cool, objective attitude of a natural scientist.⁴

While Bergson’s argument is rather convincing in its elegant simplicity it tends to provoke at least two obvious questions. Namely: number one, why are physicists and chemists not perpetually rolling on the floors of their labs in laughter at the hilarity of their scientific insights? And, number two, why does a comedy’s audience not walk out on the show after ten minutes, when it should already have become clear to it that the cast have no intention on paying any heed to its laughing admonitions? As for the first question, Freud promptly provided an answer to it in his 1905 book on *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* by defining laughter as an immediate dispensing of energy saved by a psychologically economical insight.⁵ From this and other remarks made by Freud on the relationship between science and comedy as well as between the expression of a joke’s enjoyment in its maker and its audience, we might risk the proposal that serious contemplation binds the energy conserved by its insights by investing it in further investigation. To put it differently, we could understand psychoanalysis as claiming that in comedy, the surplus enjoyment ever implicit in all objective observation is suddenly revealed, expressed and thus truly “enjoyed” for the first time in the proper sense of the word. The energy that is bound and transmitted along the line of scientific progress is, in comedy, spent along the way implying a refreshingly careless attitude of laughter toward asceticism in the name of long-term goals.

2. Bergson, 18-20.

3. Bergson, 4-5.

4. Bergson, 128

5. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (London, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1960) 180.

What this addition of enjoyment to Bergson's equation changes in his account of laughter is, however, that the spectator of comedy has now ceased to be a mere rational promoter of self-conscious reflection but, when compared to the wisely investing scientist, appears to behave as a foolhardy spendthrift spraying valuably conserved psychic energy all over the place. Presumably, it is precisely the enjoyable nature of this energetic spending spree that not only keeps him from leaving the theater after five minutes but even makes him keep coming back for more from time to time. Furthermore, the inclusion of enjoyment into Bergson's conception also radically changes the nature he proposes for the relationship between comedy's actor and spectator. Abandoning all thought of rational energy handling, the laughing audience has now become very similar to their own comic butt: forgetful of the values of self-reflection and possessed by physiological spasms and jerks. The audience of comedy can now be seen as left willy-nilly at the mercy of comical mechanics whose buttons are being manipulated by agents beyond the viewer's control: the comedy's playwright and his accomplices playing dumb on the stage.

Finally, this overhaul of Bergson's theory gives us a very changed picture of comedy's stance on disaster. Namely, rather than being an instructive demonstration of how things can go wrong if improperly reflected—a demonstration aimed at preventing such disasters in our own lives—, comedy has now begun to take on the image of an underhanded promotion of disaster as something to be enjoyed. And it comes complete with tiny disasters planted in its audience's minds: bursts of laughter momentarily forcing open cracks in their psychic edifices. While comedy really does abhor empathy between the spectator and his comic butt, this strategy apparently lets it achieve something much more radical: the very structural identity of the two.

Before we continue this line of thought, however, let us approach the topic of comedy and disaster from yet another angle. Regrouping our conceptual troops on the comfortable plane of apparently self-evident truths, we would like to continue our investigation by tackling the widely-recorded phenomenon of humorous attitudes flourishing in stably critical situations. Continuously downtrodden and marginalized ethnic groups like the Irish in the UK and Jews all over Europe and the US have historically been known for a superior sense of humor and old Yugoslavia, the country of my birth, was no exception there. The inhabitants of Bosnia, the federation's habitually poorest republic, proved successful not merely as the traditional butts of the best Yugo jokes but also as their most prolific authors. When the Balkan wars started in the early 1990's with Bosnia bearing the brunt of the horrors, the republic's locally produced jokes not only failed to dwindle but multiplied, gaining an even sharper edge by tackling the unlikely comic subjects of murder, famine and life on the front.

Now, it would be tempting to explain this phenomenon via the simple version of comic theory outlined at the beginning of this article: by stating that a humorous attitude towards a terrible situation enables its victims to survive it by transcending the horrible circumstances and isolating the laughing subjects in a lofty realm

beyond their overbearingly real surroundings. The latter is, in a nutshell, the point of Freud's theory of humor proposed in an article written more than twenty years after his monograph on jokes, where the father of psychoanalysis claimed the essence of the humorous attitude to be narcissistic. The argument goes that humor's function is to enable its author to preserve her ego untouched by transposing it into the safe position of a disembodied observer laughing at the predicaments of its infantile remainder still stuck in the material world. According to Freud, in short, humor lets our ego attain the intangible status of an idealized parent privileged to smile benignly at what seem like unsurpassable horrors to the short-sighted half of its own subjectivity still embedded in the struggles of mortal life.⁶

If you think this formulation rings very close to Bergson's comparison between the comedic spectator and the natural scientist above, you are right on the mark, but one has to admit that it the concept is perhaps really better fitted to humor (in Freud's particular sense of the word) than to theatric comedy where it had been applied by Bergson. Humor as Freud understands it is no laughing matter. It is an attitude bent on producing not chuckles or guffaws but a calmly smiling acceptance of one's material life as an unimportant and fleeting comedy that, too, will eventually pass. The smile of humor is the self-contained, unperturbed smile of angels and can rightly be deemed a metaphysical view – on virtue of which, incidentally, Simon Critchley's book *On Humor* praised it far above what he saw as its tactless and sadistic counterpart of loud laughter.⁷

It is probably obsolete to point out that our own sympathies still lie with the latter and not merely because laughter is not necessarily cruel to its butt but may unwittingly be in cahoots with it, as we have partly tried to already demonstrate above. To get back to our current subject of laughter in the face of adversity, however, what needs to be accounted for first is that the Irish, Jewish and Bosnian jokes mentioned above tend to produce not the blissful smiles that had earned Critchley's nod but precisely the loud guffaws of his abhorrence – and this holds true even though the author and the butt of these jokes are by rule entrenched in the same predicament. What my suggestion in explaining this would be is that jokes flourish in catastrophic circumstances for the simple reason that their authors have nothing left to lose. Their world has been stripped down to its very essentials, with the bare bones of paradoxical mechanics exposed that are allowed to remain hidden behind propriety in more stable times.

Now, laughing at humanity reduced to this minimal state is definitely more beneficial to its victims' mental health than being petrified by it. But I believe the psychic relief they gain through these jokes does not stem from their being able to flee from reality into a realm beyond the material but, rather, from a shift in their perspective still planted within the material. And this shift, I would further argue – the shift that makes their circumstances suddenly seem comically absurd rather than hor-

6. Freud, "Humour," in: *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 9 (1928): 1-6.

7. Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 102-5.

ribly oppressing—is attained by performing the very opposite of an escape into the beyond: a radical eradication of any transcendent realm whatsoever.

To be more concrete, the conception of our circumstances as threateningly horrible still implies beliefs in entities that transcend these circumstances—on one side, our own human dignity, or justice, or a world that makes sense, that are being violated, and, on the other, a demonic, all-powerful villain orchestrating this violation. Once we abandon these transcendent concepts, however, and get a glimpse of ourselves as something other than dignified carriers of elevated humanity and of our torturers as similar fools caught in an impersonal web of mechanical phenomena, well, such a radically absurdist and nihilist view of the world suddenly begins to burst with comic potential. It was Slovenian philosopher Alenka Zupančič who perhaps put it most succinctly when, in a Lacanian re-examination of Hegel's accounts of comedy from *Lectures on Aesthetics* and *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, she claimed that comic characters are immune to castration not because they are so compact as to be invulnerable but because they have always already come to terms with their own inevitable castration. When they encounter disaster they only lose what they had never possessed in the first place.⁸ And by laughing at them, to pour my own Bergson overhaul into the mix, we also concede to our own castration being enjoyably cut into us by side-splitting laughter.

This conclusion might seem at first sight like a sad one since it appears to imply the dark joker's loss of what is precious in humanity through complete cynical disillusion, but I would argue things are not necessarily as bad as that. Cynicism is always a lurking possibility in extremely dire circumstances, but it is not an attitude that produces particularly funny jokes. Rather, what happens in extremely dark humor is that the trap of cynicism is precisely avoided by showing that, so to speak, nothing does not really amount to nothing; that nothing is, let's say, *more and less* than nothing at the same time. In dark jokes a literal *creatio ex nihilo* is taking place. All that is transcendental is annihilated, all that is left is pure mechanical interactions between fragments of senseless materiality, but it is as if, out of the seemingly empty gaps between these devastated material fragments unexpected new things start emerging and producing the surplus enjoyment embodied by our laughter.

And, what's best of all, our emptied humanity, stripped of its dignity, seems to find a place for itself precisely at this surplus' origin, in these very vacant places between the shattered fragments of the world. In a way, what we could say is happening in dark, catastrophic humor is that, instead of our subjectivity making a break for it to an imagined beyond where it will no longer have to suffer the indignity of being subjected to a lacking and imperfect world, subjectivity suddenly finds itself becoming passively identified with the very lacks and imperfections in the world—

8. Alenka Zupančič, *Poetika – Druga knjiga*, Ljubljana: Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo, 2004) 208-11. I cannot, unfortunately, quote the English version of the book here (*The Odd One In*, London, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), because the particular reference to Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* has been left out in the translation.

and it is these lacks and imperfections, these pieces of non-sense, that, in a very Deleuzian way,⁹ turn out to be the unconscious, masterless source of all surplus sense and enjoyment in our world. In dark humor, thus, the subject ceases to be the victim of a cruel world, but also fails to turn into its master. Rather, it becomes identical to the creative vacancy that ultimately orders our worlds in a poetically-mechanical, subjectively uncontrollable way.

If all this sounds a bit too abstract, let us consider two darkly humorous examples: one from a catastrophe of socio-political and one of merely personal proportions. We will start with a popular joke from wartime Bosnia that begins with Mujo and Haso (the two eternal Bosnian comic characters starring in these jokes since times immemorial) fighting in the trenches. All of a sudden, Mujo gives out a loud yell. Haso asks him: "What's the matter, Mujo, why are you yelling?" Mujo answers: "A sniper! He hit me in the leg!" And Haso: "In the leg? And that's what you're complaining about? You know, Suljo got hit right in the forehead yesterday and he didn't let out a peep!"

On the face of it this is a terribly politically incorrect joke that should probably only be allowed to be laughed at by people who have ever found themselves in such a horrifying situation. And that was exactly what happened – the situation and the laughter—all over Bosnia, for several years. It is a joke that taunts death and laughs off a nation's fear of it by demystifying it through casual mention. But what it also does is to conflate the ideological image of the ideal soldier—a war hero not giving out a peep even in the direst of circumstances—with a dead man, a vacant place in the chain of living that behaves like a hero for purely mechanical reasons of needing an intact brain to do the complaining. The ideal of human dignity imperturbable by any physical lack, and death as the embodiment of the absolute lack have been short circuited into a single figure and the results, at least for people living their daily lives strung out between the two, proved to be hilarious.

My second example is far more banal but also easier to relate to, both for myself and for the readers of this article who probably lead relatively comfortable lives with other worries on their mind rather than getting shot by a sniper. The joke comes from the career of Louis CK, currently the hottest stand up comedian in the US who, however, spent years in virtual anonymity due to his fear of radical experimentation. According to his account, Louie was already pushing thirty and still reciting his repetitive one hour routine to bored Vegas gamblers. Bitterly unsatisfied with his professional achievements he was, to top it off, laden with substantial personal problems since the arrival of a new baby had put additional strain on his marriage. In an interview, Louie recounts sitting alone in his car after a particularly crappy performance listening to a radio interview with his idol, George Carlin, and being dumbfounded at the report that the big man would come up with a whole hour of new material every single year. Louie, in contrast, was desperately

9. See, particularly, Deleuze's entire *Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

clinging to an equal running time of half-baked jokes painstakingly accumulated during more than a decade. He made a decision then and there to set himself the Carlin challenge: after all, he figured, he had nothing to lose, this was a make or break situation, and if he could not make any progress, he would sack the standup career altogether.

Louie describes having exhausted all the obvious material fairly quickly and needing to dig deeper and deeper into his own tortured self for additional cannon-fodder. When he finally let go of the reins, his shows slowly but surely began to shock and delight viewers with desperate, disillusioned rants featuring, among others, statements such as the one about his baby being a f****g asshole because it won't let him f**k its mom anymore. Louie's routines are hard to capture in text because their magic lies more in the attitude than the wording but they are beautifully funny and have resounded with people across the globe in the decade that has passed since Louie's momentous decision in that solitary car session.

The point is, CK became truly, groundbreakingly funny only when he gave up trying to live up to the image of a stable, surefire family provider and risked it all by being brutally, no-holds-barred honest with both himself and his audience. He succeeded, financially and artistically, by throwing away all veils of decency, dignity and propriety and becoming what he ultimately was and what we all are: a nobody, a stain, "a professional asshole," as he himself puts it (a filthy lack, that is, if we take the term at face value), and the resulting vacancy beneath the façade proved an infinitely rich source of surpluses in terms of enjoyment, creativity and finance. And that is, as they say, *quod erat demonstrandum*.

That is, of course, not to say that reducing oneself to a filthy lack is a surefire recipe for success, either artistic or financial. The point is that there are no recipes for success, there is only a recipe for a risk of either spectacular success or failure, and there is surely something logical behind the fact that so many comedians tend to be "sad clowns," often suffering from chronic depression and occasionally even ending their lives at their own hands. Because of its radically disillusioned outlook on life great comedy always balances the slippery slope between dark despair and comfortable, crowd-pacifying jokes that refrain from challenging basic human beliefs. But when comedy does manage to tread that narrow path well, it quite possibly gets closer than any other art form to the core truth of that fascinating plexus of lack and wealth making up human existence.

Since we are already on the topic and to cover all our bases, this might be a good time to say a word or two about the difference between the comic and the uncanny as well. Comedy and horror really do share many common themes and it was Alenka Zupančič who first noted the similarity between Bergson's list of comedic phenomena and Freud's enumeration of uncanny motifs in his own short text on *Das*

Unheimliche: the themes of mechanical life, strange coincidences and doppelgängers are shared by both genres but generate very divergent emotional responses.¹⁰

What is additionally interesting here is that Freud's explanation of both sensations engaged the same concept of infantile pleasure: in his book on jokes comedy is reduced to a revival of infantile pleasure (pleasure in nonsensical word and concept play as well as in egotism, unbridled sexuality, aggression etc) that effectively bypasses our adult censor via smoke screens of sophisticated poetics or similes of logical operations,¹¹ while his text on the uncanny explains our feelings of horror at witnessing dolls come alive or our selves redoubled in hellish doubles as anxiety at having our own infantile desires suddenly fulfilled in the real with our internal censor still on guard.¹² The difference between the two, then, would lie in comedy succeeding where the uncanny fails: in managing to build infantile pleasure into adult life without the censor punishing us with anxiety. Comedy would thus be a reconciliation of infancy as the source of all pleasure with the adult mechanisms of castration and asceticism that are able to upgrade it into full-scale comic enjoyment, while the uncanny merely taunts our unchallenged adulthood with ghostly visions of infantile pleasure ominously haunting us from beyond the grave. While comedy sees infantile pleasure practically, as innocent mechanics useful for enhancing the experience of adult enjoyment, the uncanny injects the suppressed domain of infantile pleasure with a sinister, grown-up subjectivity; a tempter modeled on the image of the rational ruler of the adult psyche; the devil as God's dark doppelgänger.

Thus, another way to approach the problem would be via the difference between funny and oppressive views of war we have already described above. The same motif can switch its atmosphere from funny to frightening as soon as the suspicion arises that there is a sinister puppet-master hidden behind the curtain. A comic coincidence is scary if it is conceived as more than a mere coincidence but not yet an orchestrated ruse by an identifiable trickster (Jerry Palmer here gives a very nice example of how a certain Central African tribe would fail to find comic coincidences in Charlie Chaplin movies amusing since they invariably conceive all coincidence as evidence of witchcraft¹³); a comic double becomes an eerie doppelgänger when he is understood as a devilish copy sent to replace the original from some sinister domain; living dolls scare the feces out of us if they are hinted to be possessed by spirits of dead murderers while people acting mechanically stop making us laugh when they give the impression of being controlled by some dark force of unknown origin. All these examples, however, also demonstrate how necessary it is for the uncanny sensation to arise for the sinister force to remain as mysterious

10. Alenka Zupančič, "Reversals of nothing: the case of the sneezing corpse," *Filozofski vestnik* 26.2(2005): 175.

11. See Freud 1960, e.g. 151-60.

12. Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Books, 2003) 147-51.

13. Jerry Palmer, *The Logic of the Absurd* (London: BFI publishing, 1987) 47.

as possible and not be, for example, simply reduced to a banal old man from Kansas pulling the strings from behind a wizard's mask.

When Mikhail Bakhtin analyzed the difference between essentially funny motifs from medieval carnival and their uncanny resurrection during the Romantic era, he simultaneously stressed two very divergent points about the split: on one hand, the uncanny version is more foreign to the viewer than the homelier comic one ("*Our world suddenly becomes a strange world*") but it is also more endowed with psychology (the strange coincidences conceal the plan of a dark, hidden subjectivity).¹⁴ A good way to turn a scary scene into a funny one is thus to engage the sinister force in conversation where it proves to be just as banal and preoccupied with daily problems as ourselves. This strategy is employed, for instance, in the recent animated feature *Paranorman*, starring a kid who can talk to ghosts who, however, turn out to be not very scary, just slightly more transparent and greenish versions of the living, and they happily chat to Norman on his way to school. Similarly, when Norman inadvertently awakes four zombies in the same film these stop being threatening the moment he talks to them and they explain the whole business of having to get up from the grave to be a great nuisance to them as well. The same logic could be used to analyze the confrontation between Sosie and Mercury masked as his double in Molière's *Amphitruon*: the scene is saved from being uncanny by Sosie's failure to, as a typically unreflective comic character, recognize his double as such, resulting in Sosie, rather than running away from his ominously approaching spitting image, engaging the doppelganger in conversation and thus demystifying his dark quest into a mere horny escapade ordered by the latter's boss, Jupiter.¹⁵

In short, the paradox we are dealing with in the difference between the comic and the uncanny is that comedy simultaneously injects its key motifs with more and less personality than a horror film: a coincidence is just a coincidence with no dark subject behind it, but a zombie is a full-fleshed person and not simply a vacantly marching living corpse. I would thus venture the conclusion that the difference between the two lies in the fact that the uncanny still believes in the spirit as an immaterial entity capable of exerting full control over excessively physical matter (horror genres forever swing between glimpses of barely visible but powerful ghastly apparitions and gory details of their victims' blood and guts) while for comedy matter is just matter, relieved even of its ideological *Blut-und-Boden* status (blood holds no fascination for comedy and its characters habitually appear to be made of rubber) while the subjectivity that inevitably animates it usually has to hand over the wheel to the masterless mechanics of headless interaction between material fragments that produces surplus, authorless sense. Incidentally, this theory is also compatible with Alenka Zupančič's comparison between the two concepts from a few years ago where she assigned comedy to the register of drive

14. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 37-42.

15. Scene quoted but analysed differently in Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 73-7.

and the uncanny to the register of desire.¹⁶ The object of desire is always precisely a ghastly, unattainable and idealized apparition in the name of which every concrete object offered as its fulfillment is rejected as disgustingly insufficient; while drive always achieves its aim by happily orbiting a lack inhabited by a practically and contingently chosen goal. Thus, comedy and drive are both simultaneously indifferent to specific objects which they neither idealize nor demonize but use pragmatically in order to milk enjoyment from their unchanging, circulating distance to the lack-occupying incidental object; while horror movies and desire forever strive to reach a substantial ideal whose all too lacking, all too material approach in the real never fails to give them the heebie-jeebies.

I want to conclude this investigation of comedy and catastrophe by one last referral to a commonly observed phenomenon that has already been listed near the beginning of this essay. Namely, the fact that while most comedies start and end with a stable state of things, their plots are universally made up of that very state's near-catastrophic unraveling. Although the theme can take any form from the downfall of a personal economy through professional failures to troubles among friends it is a format that has been perhaps applied most often to the theme of love. Throughout history comedies have often ended with one or multiple weddings, but the central bulk of their plots has perpetually focused on the frantically mounting troubles the couple or couples have had in finally getting together. Prevented from seeing each other, the lovers hear or mishear information leading to doubts in their partner's fidelity, and even when they do manage to arrange a rendezvous to clear things up, they are usually met there by the wrong person, sometimes of the wrong sex and sometimes in drag. Things are of course by rule cleared up in the end (let us not forget one of the most traditional definitions of comedy is "a story with a happy ending," hence the forever confusing title of Dante's classic epic), but the couple's (re)union is never left untouched by the consequences of the preceding mix-ups.

This holds true for examples from Shakespeare's classic pieces all the way to 2000s sitcoms like the excellent BBC production *Couplings*. If we take an example from the former first, one of the two main subplots of the great bard's *Much Ado About Nothing* revolves around a guy and a girl who initially can't stand each other but are driven to love via a cunning trick of transference by their friends: they tell each that the other has a secret crush on them and is merely trying to hide it behind the dismissive facade. At the end of the play the pair uncovers the ruse but it is already too late: they have fallen in love and no amount of conscious knowledge can undo the results of the preceding psycho-mechanics. Here, again, we are faced with a classic example of how an utterly cynical plot based on disillusioned insights is able to produce purely transcendent effects; how a new and genuine affection can emerge from nothingness obscured by an illusion-producing notting (which is to say *innuendo* in old Shakespearean: the title of the play is a play on the notting-nothing homophony).

16. Zupančič 2005, 183-6.

If we examine an example from the latter show next, let us take an episode from the final season of *Coupling* entirely focused on a four-way phone conversation between two girlfriends and their eavesdropping boyfriends. The episode starts with Susan phoning up Sally to complain about Steve not finding her attractive anymore since she's been pregnant. Sally tries to console Susan by assuring her that a future mom is still more than desirable but things take an awkward turn when she inadvertently reveals her own unspoken wish for a baby to her boyfriend Patrick listening in on the other line, while he, in turn, shocks her by too eagerly assuring Susan of the sexiness of girls in the blessed state by boasting on having had spent a wild night with "a full blown preggie" during his single years. As the conversation and episode draw to an end, the future parents' relationship is patched up by the sight of the other couple's bickering while the latter's relationship ends the show in much more dire straits.

The plot of this episode succeeds in showing us how the idyllic stability of the latter's relationship was necessarily based on a strategic concealment of certain aspects of their personality. Sally had kept silent about her nesting tendencies while Patrick refrained from flaunting the full extent of his unabashed sexuality, enabling them to meet in the artificially constructed middle ground of compatibly sizzling young lovers. As the shaken up couple returns to bed after the traumatic conference call, all thoughts of continuing the snogging interrupted by it having been abandoned, Sally sighs loudly in desperation: "God, a guy with a pregnancy fetish and a woman who wants to have a baby! How will we ever make it?" Slowly absorbing the full meaning of Sally's exclamation, both lovers simply stare in shock at the bedroom's ceiling as the credits are cued in.

Again, what we had just witnessed was an effective demonstration of how, yes, the fragile stability of a couple is always sustained by certain concealed bits of truth, but how, at the same time, the radical disclosure of the hidden agenda inadvertently makes them perfectly, perhaps even too perfectly, obscenely perfectly compatible on the level of pure, cold logics – and the conclusion leaves them laying there shattered but still not broken up. We could go on endlessly with analysis' of similar examples but let these two suffice as paradigms of comedy's ultimate stance on chaos and mix-ups when it comes to love—and the latter effectively reads as follows. All stability, including the stability of an erotic relationship, is based on fragile illusion that can be inadvertently shattered in the blink of an eye if the right elements are let loose into the equation. There is no such a thing as an utterly compatible, harmonious sexual relationship lacking any jagged edges sticking out here and there at the seams of the partner's connection. But, and this is a big "but," it is precisely these jagged edges and cracks at the core of every erotic union that, if mercilessly uncovered, are liable to break up a couple, that are also the sources of novelty, of Reality with a big R, of surplus enjoyment and of surplus sense, and are thus also in sole possession of the ability to revitalize and spice up that same amorous union.

In short, it is not as if love is only possible if crucial bits of reality are concealed to enable us the illusion of perfect compatibility: that would, in the long run, more likely result in a stale marriage focused on maintaining a pretty façade while suppressed desires and unexpressed doubts bubble dangerously beneath it. Erotic attraction as such is fueled by incompatibility that challenges us to both attack and adore the strangeness in the other, while constantly also struggling to somehow include it into the dynamically stable structure of our coupling. Or, to put it another way: a popular view on love holds that its main two stages consist of 1) an initial enamoration characterized by the illusion of perfect compatibility with an idealized partner and 2) an inevitable facing up to the reality of our partner's failings and our mutual incompatibilities. We believe, however, that a more accurate description would probably follow this scheme: 1) an initial attraction to someone complete with all his or her strangely alluring incompatibilities with us, all presented in the beautiful yet brutally honest (artistic, in other words) display he or she puts on for us during our initial meetings, and 2) the facing up to both of us inevitably failing to maintain this stage-play indefinitely and being pulled down by the gravity of the banal, routine, empty façade of meaning that takes so much less effort to maintain; a facing up that leads to either a breakup or a sort of comfortable truce of routine compatibility in terms of knowing what to respond to certain problematic phrases of the other to keep the boat from rocking.

Rather than seeing love as progression from illusion to reality, then, I think is much more appropriate to present it as a regression from an art motored by the Real to an illusionary view of everything as "banal, finite, dying reality" covered by a blanket of shorthand phrase compatibility; a situation that needs to be continually spiked back into the state of art by kicks from the Real lurking precisely in our incompatibilities. Initially, we are attracted to each other precisely by our defiantly staged differences and they have the sole power to shake up the ensuing banal façade into a more passionate display of affection, even if threatening to crumble the former altogether. As Robert Pfaller puts it in his lovely book *Das Schmutzige Heilige und Die Reine Vernunft* (*The Dirty Holy and Pure Reason*), we both fall in love and break up over the same odd, undomesticable characteristics of our beloved; peculiar, unplaceable traits that, much like the tabooed holies of old, acts as the source of both transcendent meaning and peril (particularly for stable social establishments) at the same time.

To sum up, the basic points of this article on comedy and catastrophe would be the following. Firstly, comedy thrives on catastrophe not so much because it would offer it a way to transcend or abolish disaster, but rather because the latter provides it with a medium of generating surplus enjoyment and sense which, in the case of viewed comedy, are transmitted via a back-handed loop from comic character to comic spectator. Secondly, even though comedy usually begins and ends its storyline by steering clear of full scale disasters, this is not a sign of its half-hearted commitment to the chaotic but rather a consequence of its tendency to work with disaster as a productive and not merely destructive force—as a gap yawning in

any given structure that also holds the latter together as an adhesive, intermittently infusing it with surplus sense and meaning. Thirdly, because comedy sees catastrophe as a permanent and necessary rather than occasional and contingent state of the world—one that can only hope to be temporarily covered up with just enough fleeting illusion for a brief period of fragile stability –, it is sufficiently disillusioned to forfeit hopes of permanently stable states projected into an unattainable future, but still idealistic enough to work with catastrophe as a dynamic engine of transformation. Fourthly, the comedic view on catastrophe does not differ from its tragic counterpart merely in a more advanced state of detachment from reality but, rather, in a more complete acceptance of reality's status of fragmented materiality crisscrossed by productively-shattering gaps, while rejecting any loftier realm to escape to beyond it.

Fifthly, comedy also differs from the uncanny's take on disaster in its conception of both structural cracks in any given situation and the contingent emergence of surplus objects emerging from them not as ominous omens from a spectral beyond but as purely superficial, non-mystical generation of miraculously banal sources of transcendence from pure and simple lacks. While the uncanny sees the material world as a gory victim of forces from a world of otherworldly enjoyment, comedy knows that the material plane is the only one there is and that all its surplus sense and enjoyment stem from its own internal, empty, essentially bloodless lacks. The difference is similar to that between the romantic and the structuralist view of the unconscious: while romanticism saw the latter as a deep, unfathomable dark ground bubbling below the thin surface of cultured life, structuralism, and comedy with it, understand the unconscious as a source of sense and enjoyment that is always already there, in the gaps and double meanings between the signifiers making up the cultured world.

In the atmosphere of amorous relationships, to link up that final theme to our theory as well, this is expressed in the difference between the romantic idealization of love as a seamless union forever tragically plagued by worldly obstacles that can thus only be fully consummated beyond death, while comedy pragmatically finds love to be interesting precisely inasmuch as it is plagued by cracks, fissures, friction and misunderstandings that prove to be the sole providers of amorous transcendence in a relationship's here and now. In short, if serious genres see catastrophe as an evil intrusion into harmony that makes our world so sadly insufficient, comedy sees it as the prime platform for the only possible enjoyment there is, at once perilous and wonderfully exciting.

Finally, since this issue of *S* has obviously chosen its thematic thread due to its timeliness in an epoch of economic, ethical and cultural crisis, *and* a renewed consumer and theorist interest in comedy, I believe it is not the least bit inappropriate to close our text with a pointed referral to the spirit of our times. We live in an era when hitherto reigning empires are beginning to crumble; when the geographical centers of power are gradually shifting their locations; and when old ways that had until recently held the status of history's final word have proven to be in rapid need

of exchange for a new model. Simultaneously, however, our era is also marked by a prevailing spiritual attitude that is much too disillusioned, fatigued and cynically entrenched in post-modern ennui to seriously believe in, much less come up with a serious contender for a convincing vision of a new world order.

Now, if we are to learn anything from quality comedy in times such as these, it is that cynicism is not the only way to react to disillusionment, as well as that if something new is going to emerge from anywhere, it is the nothingness that surrounds us that is our best bet. Comedy would, I believe, currently advise us to, but of course, “conceive crisis as an opportunity,” as the currently popular business maxim goes, but not as an opportunity for selling instant cures for or weapons against the crisis nor for buying up cheap stock to sell with a profit after the storm has passed. Rather, we should conceive of crisis as an opportunity to stop waiting for the old order to reestablish itself and to instead change something radical in the world’s clockwork that has temporarily been laid bare. A crisis never fails to disclose the normally concealed paradoxes at work in the grounding of our worlds and this provides us with a unique chance to influence and inject something new into the latter. The more potent, intelligent, creative and revealing the ensuing comic chaos will turn out to be, the better chances we stand for a happy marriage that will sooner or later put an end to our lively period of comedic existence. And the better the closing wedlock, the more we can expect from the children born and raised into it who will inherit and rule the temporarily stable state before our next opportunity for a hilarious revelation of life, the universe and everything as implicitly catastrophic.

BEN GOOK

TOO EARLY, TOO LATE: FETISHISM,
MELANCHOLIA AND MOURNING THE GDR IN
GOOD BYE LENIN!

The imago of the time immediately preceding the catastrophe is invested with everything spirit nowadays is felt to be denied.

—Theodor Adorno¹

In this essay, I argue cinematic comedy has the potential to convey complex, difficult narratives that may be beyond the reach of self-serious tragedies and melodramas. Our case study will be *Good Bye Lenin!* (Becker, 2004), a film about the late East Germany (GDR) which narrates the end of the socialist state in a tragicomic mode. In particular, I want to pause over the way the film deploys fetishism and melancholia to switch between temporalities of the too early and the too late. We will come to this in the essay's second half—but to summarise: what links these two operations is a desire that at once denies and affirms its object, entering into relation with something it otherwise would not have been able to appropriate or enjoy.² The "object" in question is the declining GDR state as it moves towards erasure in the German re-unification of 1990. In the essay's first half, we will note how this film was entangled in a set of debates about the East German past, largely to do with the "truth" of comedic and sentimental representations of that past. These debates concerned affect and what the proper affective orientation should be towards the GDR past—positive or negative, happy or sad, joy or desolation, hope or fear. We will first discuss, briefly, film and affect to orient the final discussion of comedy. I will also provide a quick contextual overview of German cinema at the time of *Good Bye Lenin!* and the other two films already mentioned. *The Lives of Others* (Donnersmarck, 2006) will be discussed here because its (director's) relation to *Good Bye Lenin!* clarifies the distinction between tragedy and comedy.

1. Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

2. Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) xvii-xviii.

As an internationally successful film, *Good Bye Lenin!* brought representations of the former East Germany to new audiences. Within Germany, a revived awareness of the GDR was visible in the cinema five years earlier with the domestic success of *Sonnenallee* (Haußmann, 1999), a comedic teen romance set in 1970s East Berlin. *The Lives of Others* came two years after *Good Bye Lenin!*, registering the effect of *Lenin* and *Sonnenallee* on German culture. The popularity of all three films stands as evidence for the moment's concern with the GDR—and as a reminder of cinema's effect on memorial processes. *Lives*, however, was an attempt—an Oscar-winning attempt—to correct the apparently charmed image of the GDR propagated by *Lenin* and *Sonnenallee*. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, the director and screenwriter of *The Lives of Others*, positioned himself as a critic of a false, dangerous remembrance. In the publicity materials, Donnersmarck addresses himself to *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye Lenin!*, calling them “dangerous” and revisionist, “portraying the GDR as a place of humour and humanity.”³ His film would set memories and history right. Donnersmarck, in other words, promoted his film as a corrective to the popular but apparently troubling revisionist view of fun in the former East: *Lives* was to be the antithesis of these two comedies. Donnersmarck stressed in the marketing and promotional paraphernalia that his was a “truer than facts” story, unlike, by implication, the fanciful comedic fabulations of *Lenin* and *Sonnenallee*. Donnersmarck conceived of—or, at least, promoted—his film as a historiographical intervention to correct the popular affective portrait of the GDR.⁵ This fiction was positioned with the aims of a documentary, but historians questioned Donnersmarck's strong statements about verisimilitude, authenticity and the historical reality of the GDR in *Lives*: he failed to meet the standards he had set for himself.⁶ Nevertheless, his comments proposed true/good representations in opposition to the false/bad representations of *Good Bye Lenin!* and *Sonnenallee*.⁷ In *Lives* we get an abject GDR—one of privation, prying and melancholy—positioned as a return to “truth” via a simplistic understanding of historical representation in the two earlier films. This rhetorical move and ideological gesture keys us into the fact that, given Donnersmarck's promotional stress on his film's righteous truth, *Lives* is a film of “stultifying teaching,” as Rancière would put it; a film which approaches its spectator not as an equal but a passive subordinate, lectured to by Herr von

3. Quoted in Gareth Dale, “Heimat, ‘Ostalgie’ and the Stasi: The GDR in German Cinema, 1999–2006,” *Debate: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 15.2 (2007): 155–175 (157).

4. Judy Dempsey, “The Lasting Damage of East German Rule,” *The New York Times* 11 May 2006.

5. Damian McGuinness, “Cinematic Confrontation with East Germany's Stasi: ‘I Remember an Atmosphere of Great Fear’ (Interview with Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck),” *Spiegel Online* 12 May 2006.

6. Owen Evans, “Redeeming the Demon? The Legacy of the Stasi in Das Leben der Anderen,” *Memory Studies* 3.2 (2010): 164–177.

7. Although I do not discuss *Sonnenallee* directly in the present essay, I raise it here given its explicit relation in Donnersmarck's discourse.

Donnersmarck.⁸ This teaching took place in a still freighted atmosphere. As Jones observes,

understandings of the East German dictatorship remain highly contested in the German public sphere, with memories of social and financial security and nostalgia for the East (Ostalgie) competing with memories of repression and total control. Thus the struggle to present an image of this part of German history that is received as ‘authentic’, ‘true’ and therefore authoritative is central to efforts to promote acceptance of one version of the past over others.⁹

We have seen that Donnersmarck, for example, insists that cinema-goers have seen misleading images of the GDR until now. This argument considers “memory” and “nostalgia” as dangerous things—whatever “they” precisely are does not matter except for their rhetorical help in clearing a space for historical authenticity and truth. Memory (soft-headed, warm-hearted) interferes with the transmission of history (hard, cold, shocking).

The Lives of Others recirculates the lessons of the normative history of re-unified Germany, distrustful of other filmmakers and its own spectators. By contrast, *Good Bye Lenin!*, which features at its narrative heart a character dedicated to mocking up fake news and historical reports, differs distinctly from *The Lives of Others* and its director’s approach to film and history. *Lenin*’s foregrounding of how “realism” is itself constructed thus foregoes self-serving readings of history as transparent and accessible—an access apparently untied to the ideological demands of the present. Furthermore, comedy can offer spectators less rigid, less stable and more ambiguous approaches to the lives and existence of the GDR. Here we ask what resources films make available to their audiences. Film is not a mere representation but a productive object. Films instigate thinking, prompt knowledge and memory and feeling. They are texts that exceed context.

In thinking about these texts and their contexts, we should not be surprised that German cinema so readily put its recent history on the screen.¹⁰ Confino broadly characterises German national culture as a “culture of remembrance.”¹¹ Like other art forms in Germany, but perhaps more so, the national cinema has a long history of conjunctural political interventions, especially around memory and history.¹² Nevertheless, films about the GDR are not those that get most Germans to the

8. Jacques Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator,” *Artforum* (2007): 271-280.

9. Sara Jones, “Memory on Film: Testimony and Constructions of Authenticity in Documentaries about the German Democratic Republic,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16.2 (2013): 194-210.

10. On the general question of national cinemas see the essays in Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie, *Cinema and Nation* (London: Routledge, 2000).

11. Alon Confino, *Germany as a Culture of Remembrance: Promises and Limits of Writing History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

12. Stephen Brockmann, *A Critical History of German Film* (Rochester: Camden House, 2010).

cinema, but they do play well to international markets with only history on their mind when it comes to Germany. The decade after 1989 saw many mundane, diverting comedies and bourgeois dramas dominate the German domestic box office.¹³ The disavowal of antagonism in newly re-unified Germany is the most intriguing feature of these popular films—they were about the present and the future, not the past. Most of these films were the work of western German directors and producers. Industrial conditions were unfavourable for producing eastern cinema after re-unification. The marginalisation of state-contracted GDR filmmakers and the fire-sale of the GDR's film production studios at Babelsberg in Potsdam reduced the viability of non-commercial fare after 1991.¹⁴ Meanwhile, critical and public distaste for films made during the GDR period was total, with just a few recognised exceptions: the entire cultural tradition of the GDR was either neglected or erased, depending on perspective (Naughton, 72). In the early 2000s, however, this began to change. Besides critical reappraisal of GDR-era film, the GDR and east of the country featured in film more and more over these years. Nick Hodgkin has described how East Germany now figures in the cinema of re-unified Germany as a comforting place of *Heimat* and homeliness for western and eastern Germans.¹⁵

The historical *Gemütlichkeit* of *Heimat* suggests discussions of memory, while asking also that we consider the relationship of film and affect. Following Sinnerbrink, I explore in this essay “how our affective and emotional engagement with film is linked with the ideological treatment of certain themes, values, or ideas in a given narrative or genre.”¹⁶ We should pause over the link between ideological treatment and affective engagement. Affect can mean feelings, passions but also a modification. It often names the gap between emotion and feelings, where one is general and the other specific.¹⁷ Affect also names the distinction between feelings themselves, the “fuzzy” edges of what we feel. Just as we can never quite say what we mean—even the master orator is a master of only the social codes of speech, not of language, which she can never master—we can never quite feel what we feel, or at least we cannot be sure we feel what we feel. Subjects often find it im-

13. Eric Rentschler, “From New German Cinema to the Post-Wall Cinema of Consensus,” *Cinema and Nation*, eds. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London: Routledge, 2000).

14. Leonie Naughton, *That Was the Wild East: Film Culture, Unification, and the “New” Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

15. Nick Hodgkin, *Screening the East: Heimat, Memory and Nostalgia in German Film since 1989* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011).

16. Robert Sinnerbrink, “Review Essay: Cognitivism Goes to the Movies,” *Projections* 4.1 (2010): 83-98 (91).

17. Catherine Malabou, “How Is Subjectivity Undergoing Deconstruction Today? Philosophy, Auto-Hetero-Affection, and Neurobiological Emotion,” *Qui Parle* 17.2 (2009): 111-122. For more on how theorists like Bion and Laplanche have extended early psychoanalytic understandings of affect: Christine Kirchhoff, “Affected by the Other: On Emotion in Psychoanalysis,” *Habitus in Habitat I: Emotion and Motion*, eds. Sabine Flach, Daniel Margulies and Jan Söffner (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010).

possible to know why, how, or what they feel when they feel something.¹⁸ For the subject, this affective fluidity and inelegant language can make for a disorienting, intrapsychic discordance (Johnston, 41). “I don’t know whether to laugh or cry,” as the familiar phrase has it. The changeability of affects is thus crucial—they are only readable against a constant variation, lest they become indistinct against a droning, single-note background.¹⁹ These distinctions can be reified into named emotions, with language articulating previously unexpressed feeling and opening into new channels (Jameson, 29). Freud noted we become conscious of affects only if they are linked to a meaningful conception or representation.²⁰ Yet psychoanalysis insists on a troubled relationship between ego and world, between a feeling and its (re)presentation. Affect may resist language. The experience of being “lost for words” to describe how we feel should make us aware of the gap between affect and its mental or symbolic representation (Johnston, 22). Affect is, for the mature subject, often parsed by language and its attendant categorisations, meanings or significations. Linguistic codification of affective states will make them available to consciousness; those that have not been named are unavailable to consciousness or may be absorbed into subjectivity, rendered indistinguishable and inconspicuous (Jameson, 31-4). Naming some particular set of features becomes a construction, a bringing into being of what did not exist beforehand. “Nostalgia” is an excellent example here, moving swiftly into circulation to name a feeling that was—so to speak—on everyone’s mind.²¹

Aesthetic treatment of affect cannot be read off simply. Artists face the representational task of seizing affect’s fleeting essence to thereby force its recognition (Jameson, 31). Shaviro characterises cinematic works as “machines for generating affect,” for modifying their viewers and extracting value from affect.²² It may be difficult to say with a solid guarantee that an aesthetic work makes us feel “sad” or “elated” or “confused.” And, indeed, definitive affect-spotting is not what I wish to do here, not least because demanding that affects mean something in themselves misunderstands affect’s evocative nature and its often undefinable content. This may also overlook the ways that films may work to provoke affective or emotional responses through means other than narrative or audio-visual representation—a film such as Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, for example, is not about terrorised people in the narrative (or audience) space, but about conveying, across its running time, the abstract idea of terror.²³ Affect is thus strangely disembodied, separated from supports or bearers,

18. Adrian Johnston, “Affects Are Signifiers: The Infinite Judgement of a Lacanian Affective Neuroscience,” *Nessie* 1 (2009): 1-41 (23).

19. Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013) 77.

20. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), IV (1900): “The Interpretation of Dreams,” 460.

21. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); Johannes Hofer, “Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia,” *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* 2.6 (1934 [1688]): 376-391.

22. Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Hants: John Hunt Publishing, 2010) 3.

23. Slavoj Žižek, *Event: Philosophy in Transit* (London: Penguin, 2014) 97.

transmitted from place to place, given to contagion.²⁴ It is properly imaginary, floating at a distance from the support that represents and generates it (Žižek, *Event*, 97). The affect here can be on each side of the screen: film may extract affective value via its images and sounds of its participants, as in scenes of jubilation or sadness; film may also extract affective value from its audience, as expressed in the notion of the “weepy” genre. Film is thus especially well-equipped to make available mimetic and suggestive bodily sensations or intensities which may recall or indeed trigger affective states, the lived experience of body and consciousness. If we consider films to be affective maps, then, they “do not just passively trace or represent, but actively construct and perform, the social relations, flows and feelings that they are ostensibly ‘about’” (Shaviri, 6).

Affect is instituted in social-historical imaginaries, so it can be mapped and historically located. A repertoire of proper affects is made available in social formations, in the varieties of social significations—there is no zero degree of sensation or perception, all apparently pure data is haunted by some meaning and hence ideological connotation. Ideology masters affect through bodily training, manners, practice and stances (Jameson, 58). Williams would designate this “structures of feeling,” and he noted that works of art in particular may make available to us senses of the present—and past.²⁵ At the same time, as Castoriadis explicates, social significations “establish the types of affects that are characteristic of a society.”²⁶ For example, Marx describes the characteristic affects of capitalist society in his famous “all that is solid melts into air” passage: restlessness, constant change, anxious thirst for novelty, defensive wishes for stability and so on (Castoriadis, 88). Particular affects aid whole societies and individuals in the identification process, in the feeling of belonging, in fellow feeling. So with affect—instituted via representations and finalities (i.e., what is to be done and not done, what is acceptable and not acceptable, what to feel and what not to feel)—a particular type of subject is considered desirable in different eras and places.²⁷ Hence, East Germans and West Germans were seen as different, not just as a function of trivial differences but as a function of all they were, thought, wanted, loved, hated, felt and desired (Castoriadis, 88).

Distinct East/West German filmmaking traditions made people aware of such differences. Leonie Naughton (62) relates a post-unification anecdote about the meeting of a bureaucratic decision-making committee for subsidy and film qual-

24. Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

25. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 128–135. See also Geoff Boucher, “The Politics of Aesthetic Affect—a Reconstruction of Habermas’ Art Theory,” *Parrhesia* 13 (2011): 62–78.

26. Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Crisis of the Identification Process,” *Thesis Eleven* 49.1 (1997): 85–98 (88).

27. For a compelling sociological approach, Arlie Russell Hochschild, “Emotion Work, Feeling Rules and Social Structure,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 85.3 (1979): 551–575. For how we got here: Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society* (London: Verso, 2014).

ity ratings. They were uncertain how to evaluate films from the East. An eastern German reported in a trade magazine that committees of western Germans had “obvious difficulties understanding and interpreting the images, metaphors, emotions, meanings and montage sequences [of eastern films.] Emotional states and relations are recorded differently over here and there [in the west].”²⁸ This difference at the level of symbolic registration contributed to problems of “translating” eastern and western affective states in re-unified Germany. Taking this anecdote with the preceding theoretical characterisation—and without a further excursus on the discrepancies between affect theorists²⁹—we can settle on two linked notions: although a proposition about the body, affect is not (only) individual but deeply sociohistorical; cinema is to be understood in this essay as an affect-producing and affect-reproducing machine.

Good Bye Lenin!

Good Bye Lenin! begins by invoking and evoking an atmosphere of fear, confusion and elation, as the state-socialist crisis of late 1989 spills into the Berlin streets. As the film unfolds from this scene, an East German brother (Alex) and sister (Ariane) are shaken when their mother (Christiane) collapses into a coma at the moment the GDR itself heads for collapse. Christiane is comatose during the Wall’s fall, emerging from hospital into an unfamiliar GDR. Christiane’s doctor warns Alex that she rests precariously on the edge of good health. Alex knows his mother has a critical yet significant attachment to the GDR and goes to ever-greater lengths to keep her from realising the country has crumbled. As part of his ploy, Alex fabricates episodes of the GDR nightly TV news programme for Christiane to watch, invites former Young Pioneers to sing GDR songs in their apartment, asks visitors to shed new western outfits for familiar GDR tracksuits—and so on. Alex “manages” reality by extending the GDR’s life in staged events. In instances beyond his control, Alex uses the TV news to stitch contingent events back into the totality of GDR ideology: the unfurling of an enormous Coca-Cola advertisement outside the family apartment becomes a salute to the East German who, Alex’s unique interpretation reveals, had invented the successful formula for Coke. Alex also explains that the many westerners walking the streets of East Berlin are there because of a crisis in capitalism that has helped breach the Wall and make the capitalists curious about really-existing socialism. Those who aid Alex in these fabrications—such as the family’s elderly neighbours—do it out of care for Christiane, but also out of their need to mourn the GDR in their lives (Hodgin, 170). I argue that the truth of *Lenin* is the film’s display of both the joyous excess of the revolution for the children and

28. Naughton is here quoting and translating “Wessis über Ossis—Drei Beispiele,” *Film und Fernsehen* (1992): 42.

29. For an early overview, Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley, eds., *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). See also the sceptical work by Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique,” *Critical Inquiry* 37 (2011): 434–472.

the disorienting trauma for the mother. The film shows that each must confront the other: the mother faints at the sight of her son protesting; the children, when not enjoying their new freedoms, protect their mother by guiding her through the re-unification. The familial drama and comedy, then, stages a set of conflicts resonant across re-unified Germany but emerging from the catastrophic collapse of the Eastern Bloc.

Lenin is one of Germany's biggest film exports since re-unification, along with *Run Lola Run* (Tykwer, 1998).³⁰ *Lenin* is a pivotal work not only because of this popularity, but also for the role it played in propagating a history of the GDR: the film is on the German curriculum to teach schoolchildren about the GDR; the German Bundestag convened a screening for members of parliament; it inspired GDR-themed television series (Cooke, 128, 131, 144-177; Hodgkin, 171). Understanding that film produces more than it represents, we can notice the film's success had an impact in shifting the ways the GDR was thought about in Germany and beyond, including spurring another iteration of Ostalgie. GDR memorabilia—SED party medallions, consumer goods and old newspapers—adorned movie theatres. Producers encouraged cinema employees to bring souvenirs and wear Young Pioneer scarves, NVA uniforms or Free German Youth shirts. Some theatres even modelled an apartment living area with 10m² of GDR. One Berlin theatre accepted GDR currency during the first week of the film's season. People throwing GDR parties could hire out the film's set. And entrepreneurs countrywide sold books, games, mementos and music after the film's release. Others suggested constructing a GDR theme park in eastern Berlin, with grumpy guards, Trabis and socialist songs piped through the PA. Ostalgie, then, returned to visibility after *Lenin*, becoming a notable presence in the "actually existing postsocialist landscape."³¹

To understand the film's social life in Germany, I want to explore the ways *Lenin* maintains, largely through comedy, a distance from the various commitments it depicts. The film is not celebratory or dismissive of the GDR, nor of re-unified Germany, nor of the West. The film neither mocks nor praises its characters for their attachment to the regime. The film drops hints about the dictatorial operation of the late GDR in a family narrative, neither wholly about oppression nor resistance. Everyday life plays out in what appear to contemporary audiences as foreign, extraordinary conditions. This ordinariness and ambiguity makes the film an enigmatic text for those wishing to find in it resounding conclusions about politics, culture and society in (re-unified) Germany. This film captures, then, the ambivalence of some East Germans: it, at once, satirises Ostalgie while also indulging it; the

30. Paul Cooke, *Representing East Germany since Unification: From Colonization to Nostalgia* (Oxford: Berg, 2005) 129.

31. Daphne Berdahl, *On the Social Life of Postsocialism: Memory, Consumption, Germany* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010) 130.

film figures the embarrassed self-reflection of much nostalgic thought. The work's ambiguity makes it especially productive in considering the afterlife of the GDR.

Sadness and hope

Christiane's collapse and ill-health are responses to the crumbling of the GDR. This hysteric is registering in her body the uncertainties of the symbolic order, the changing desire of the big Other.³² Christiane's body registers an anxiety around the imminent withdrawal of the national consensus from the GDR as it existed. The withdrawal of consensus is the crisis point for any regime: "in spite of all its grounding power," Žižek writes, "the big Other is fragile, insubstantial, properly virtual, in the sense that its status is that of a subjective presupposition. It exists only in so far as subjects act as if it exists."³³ So the big Other—the invisible order that structures our reality, inscribed in the symbolic through a network of rules and meanings—substantially exists only because people recognise themselves in it, draw on it as the point of reference that provides the ultimate horizon of meaning (Žižek, Lacan, 10; *Event*, 75). The collapse of that order—that Other—is troubling and confusing, especially for a subject as invested as Christiane. In her case, witnessing the arrest of her son, Alex, at a rally in Berlin causes her collapse. The family drama begins here, with the intimate and national withdrawal of consensus. This implausible event triggers Christiane's coma—now without consciousness, Christiane will not register the passing of time.

Although the 1989 protests did not necessarily presage the GDR's end, they hinted at it in ways inconceivable months earlier: everything was forever until it was no more, to cite the title of an important book of post-socialist research.³⁴ Anti-SED rallies had few visible precedents after the quashed uprising of 1953. The 1989 protests represent a dangerous proximity to what Christiane finds unimaginable—the meeting of East and West Germany. As the film unfolds, we realise Christiane's attachment to the GDR may be instrumental, that she has made the best of a bad situation: she and her husband had planned to flee the GDR, but she lost her nerve and stayed with their children, confecting a story for them about their father meeting a new woman in the west. (Which, as it turns out, belatedly does become true—the husband remarries and has another family.) During those years of unplanned sepa-

32. "Conversion symptoms," as they are called in the clinical literature, are not always so neatly divided between hysteric/body and obsession/mind. See Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 115. There is an interesting connection to be explored with Christa Wolf's *In the Flesh*, trans. John S. Barrett (Boston: David R. Godine, 2005), a short and feverish novel about a woman who suffers severe abdominal pain—with high temperature, deepening distress and a resistance to medicine—shortly before the Berlin Wall falls. I leave this discussion for another time.

33. Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta, 2006) 10.

34. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

ration and surrogate attachment to the GDR regime, various negative affects would for Christiane be caught up in the East German system: shame, anguish, loss, melancholy, sadness, loss of trust; numbing, apathy, depression.³⁵ Indeed, Christiane is institutionalised after her husband's departure, shown mute and rocking back and forth in the film's opening minutes. These affects would later have coexisted with positive feelings about the regime, about her family, about the future. Taken together in their ambivalent admixture, these affects indicate what was "at stake" for Christiane in her identification with the GDR. Her collapse suggests the subjective truth of her symptom: the GDR's dissolution dissolves her identity.

In hinting at such affects, *Lenin* had dual functions in re-unified Germany: to afford East Germans an identification point through Christiane's conversion symptoms and West Germans an understanding of the traumatic end of the GDR for its subjects. Cultural works can offer "a wide range of affective responses to traumatic individual and historical experience" (Pinkert, 8). They do important work by presenting a spread of affective states; they are places "where these affective responses [are] not yet solidified into identifiable meanings" (Pinkert, 8). This is the case with a film like *Lenin*, which is ambiguous and ambivalent in its figuring of the "better" Germany. Its ambivalence affords space for sadness and hope. (I will discuss this again below.) In a sense, the film re-opens the affective moment of transition and allows a glimpse of the ambivalence many people endured during 1989-90. This fluidity of affective responses is made temporary as stability is sought: "public political and discursive practices [seek to] decisively shape notions of and responses to suffering and pain" (Pinkert, 8). Earlier in this essay, I suggested Donnersmarck and his *The Lives of Others* intentionally sought to do the normative work of shaping suffering by proscribing what is proper and improper. We can notice, in Donnersmarck's criticisms, a dismissal of grieving for the end of the GDR. These criticisms reject some affects as irresponsible while also marking subjects as bearers of suspect emotional pathologies. As I have described it, social imaginaries help establish what affects and activities—what structures of feeling—are considered proper. For example, different social imaginaries value different modes of mourning and melancholia as Wolf Lepenies has shown.³⁶ The question, which I will pursue here, is what work *Lenin* does with melancholia, mourning and fetishism.

Grieving *Lenin*

Freud's century-old distinction between mourning (healthy, public) and melancholia (unhealthy, private) remains difficult to resist. Freud distinguishes the unspeakable loss of melancholia from the declared loss of mourning. Mourning occurs when an object is lost that one had loved for its intrinsic qualities, an object distinct from oneself. Mourning names that period when reality-testing reveals a loved

35. Anke Pinkert, *Film and Memory in East Germany* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008) 8.

36. Wolf Lepenies, *Melancholy and Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

object no longer exists, even as the psyche prolongs its existence so as to withdraw bit by bit (Freud, SE, XIV, 243-4). The work of mourning (*Trauerarbeit*) brings with it an affective state; *Trauer* corresponds not only to mourning practices but also the state of mind (disposition, mood, *Stimmung*) typical of the mourning subject.³⁷ *Trauerarbeit* ends when the ego is uninhibited and free again. On completion, the ego can cathect or attach to new (love) objects. Melancholy, by contrast, occurs when the loved object fulfilled a different role in the psyche. The melancholic's lost other was a mirror of the self's own sense of power. The melancholic is full of self-reproach, representing his ego to others as worthless and morally despicable: "in mourning, it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (Freud, SE, XIV, 245). The subject in mourning is conscious of loss, while the melancholic has an unconscious and unknown loss. If what has been lost is unknown, then the self-criticisms and reproaches are really about someone or something else. This happens because the melancholic exhibits an inability to tolerate or even comprehend the reality of separateness.³⁸ The "you" and the "I" do not have edges for the melancholic psyche. The adult melancholic, then, is similar to the infant—the primary narcissist—who believes she can control and contain others via omnipotent thoughts. Like the infant, the adult melancholic must integrate knowledge of awareness of separateness; the melancholic has lost not (only) an object, but the narcissistic fantasy of omnipotence. "The paradox of this narcissism," Santner (*Stranded*, 3) writes, "is that the narcissist loves an object only insofar and as long as he or she can repress the otherness of the object." A continuum exists between the poles of infantile (melancholic) and mature (mourning) modes of feeling loss. A pure form of either mourning or melancholia is rare: for example, most relations to objects involve some narcissism, such as in love. Both modes share the shock of loss. The work after that shock is to re-establish the boundaries of the self-acknowledging definitive separateness.

The typology of "mourning" and "melancholia" remains valuable in recognising the distinctive position of the subject in each case. The melancholic is incapacitated by the enjoyment (*jouissance*) of symptomatic self-reproach, whereas the mourner feels grief with others who grieve likewise (Shepherdson, 89). Lacan, in his *Hamlet* lectures, describes mourning as a collective process.³⁹ Lacan means that mourning leans on the social repertoire, on cultural objects. No words can match the (imagined) sight of a loved one dead or dying, so mourners call on music and art as symbolic rituals in the wake of this loss. These cultural mediations form a series of attempts to fill the gap left by the missing object (Lacan, 38). The symbolic offers a repertoire of ways of labouring in mourning; Darian Leader describes the unconscious transactions between mourners at this level, a dialogue of mournings in the

37. Charles Shepherdson, *Lacan and the Limits of Language* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008) 81.

38. Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) 3.

39. Jacques Lacan, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*," *Yale French Studies*, 55-56 (1977): 11-52.

books and art dedicated to loss.⁴⁰ Subjects may be able to access their idiosyncratic losses and attachments when grieving with others, not only through identification but also analogy and metaphor. Subjects do not grieve in the same way, but the dialogue—the set of identifications and disidentifications—may trigger significant moments in mourning work. So, taking the film as an example, rather than read *Lenin* only at the level of narrative, where (female) GDR subjects may identify with Christiane as a cipher for their experiences of loss in 1989, we could see the film's cultural circulation as itself offering recognition of post-GDR mourning processes. Eastern audiences may relish the film as an objective route to their own subjective mourning work, another voice in the dialogue of mournings, another totem of the remembering community.⁴¹

Critical disputes about the cultural value of mourning or melancholia turn on the significance of losses in the present. For progressives, the positions of “mourning” and “melancholia” represent approaches to the question of which affective state offers the best resistance to the dominant reality principle. Santner has described a deconstructionist ethical turn, in which melancholia is proposed as the affective posture that best maintains fidelity to losses the predominant ideological formation would prefer to disavow.⁴² For these partisans of melancholia, it offers a way of resisting adaptation to the status quo, to the dominant reality principle. It achieves this by suspending the verdict of reality (Mladek and Edmondson, 211). Yet as Lacan teaches, following Kant's categorical imperative, the superego refuses to accept reality as an explanation for failure, hence the repetitive mania often shown by melancholics.⁴³ This melancholy posture retards adaptation, attaching to loss, indifferent to other frameworks or reality principles (i.e., a different reality, a different ideological formation). Such a line would propose that, against the culture of affirmative positivity favoured by good-humoured contemporary regimes, melancholia can offer forms of negation. Implicitly, this line argues mourning is the weaker position as it reattaches to new objects of desire or idealisation, hence proving itself mutable and adaptive.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, critics of this position claim melancholy is a mode of defence. Melancholia offers a strategy of passive or surreptitious adaptation to the governing reality principle. The melancholic withdraws from (social) life into an intense focus on psychic and somatic being. Melancholia confuses

40. Darian Leader, *The New Black: Mourning, Melancholia and Depression* (London: Penguin, 2009) 29–99.

41. The concept of the remembering community is pioneered in Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (München: Beck, 2006).

42. Klaus Mladek and George Edmondson, “A Politics of Melancholia,” *A Leftist Ontology: Beyond Relativism and Identity Politics*, ed. Carsten Strathausen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 210. Derrida sees value in retaining the other as other (as alterity) in melancholic modes of incorporation. See *Mémoires: For Paul De Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

43. Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London: Verso, 2012) 175–176.

44. Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006) 89. Henceforth cited in the text as *Creaturely*.

an impossible possession (structural lack) with a determinate loss (a contingent occurrence) (Santner, *Creaturely*, 83, 90). It reckons that a particular lost object could answer the general lack of the subject. Likewise, Comay criticises “the ideological versatility of melancholia: an uncompromising rejection of the existent (nothing short of total transformation is tolerable) coupled with an easy accommodation to whatever happens to be the case (everything is equally terrible, so why bother...).”⁴⁵ So the question here, inherited from Freud, remains the one about the desirability and efficacy of substitution for the lost object, a substitution that can be read via the melancholic position as a capitulation to the reality principle.

With this conceptual terrain arrayed before us, I want to draw in another valuable concept—fetishism—in thinking about *Lenin* and its cultural resonance. Fetishism and melancholia are inverted versions of one another. Both entail an attachment—to a belief, to an object—that one does not want to give up (Freud, SE, XXI, 152). In melancholy and fetishism “the epistemic split between the affirmation and the denial of lack inevitably reproduces the very antithesis it seeks to neutralize: the split ... functions simultaneously both as catastrophic fissure and as stabilizing partition.”⁴⁶ Fetishistic disavowal, analogous to melancholia, entails a conflict between perception of reality (which forces renouncing the object in melancholia and fantasy in fetishism) and desire (which leads to the denial of that reality-perception). The subject repudiates perceptual evidence and only recognises reality through assuming a perverse symptom. The fetish—the symptom—is simultaneously the presence of some nothingness and sign of its absence, a symbol and its negation (Agamben, 21, 31). So in both fetishism and melancholia, the result is a substitution and attachment to “things” as prosthetics—a relation neither countenanced nor repressed. Subjects retain, in Freud’s phrase, a “cathectic loyalty” to the lost object. Again, this loyalty does not preclude but requires the (secret) construction of a substitute. This substitute is “the remnant of the object incorporated within the empty interior of the subject.” This functions, then, as a screen memory with an opaque quality—a quality both refractory and teasing (Comay, *Sickness*, 94). Memory itself may become the ultimate fetish-object, a veil that seduces as it covers what is behind or beneath.⁴⁷ This suggests the paradoxes of recuperation: melancholia becomes a fetishistic proxy for a lost object, overshadowed by the clamorous grief it occasions. In this way, melancholia furtively stages substitution by insisting on substitution’s impossibility (Comay, *Sickness*, 94). With fetishism, synecdoche and metonymy are poetic models of the fetish as a mental process: the substitution of part for whole (at once negated and evoked by substitution) or the substitution of one thing for another (in metaphor), “not so much ... to reach the second, as to escape from the first,” an object that should not be named (Agamben, 32).

45. Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011) 120.

46. Rebecca Comay, “The Sickness of Tradition: Between Melancholia and Fetishism,” *Walter Benjamin and History*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2005) 93.

47. The title of Freud’s 1899 article (*Deckerinnerungen*) was translated into English as “Screen Memories,” but could be literally translated as “covered-up memories.”

The melancholic and the fetishist build substitutes through part-objects whose fragmentation at once prolongs and occludes the loss it commemorates. In the “sadomasochistic theatre of grief,” the subject flagellates the lost object, inflicting upon it a second death (Comay, “Sickness,” 94). Comay (“Sickness,” 95) writes in appropriately Gothic terms of the object’s second death: “reduced to a part-object within the hollow crypt of subjectivity, the object persists as living corpse, at once congealed remains and extruding surplus, whose death accretes like so much cellular efflorescence.” In melancholia, the death produces an enjoyable fixation on and commitment to the past. We might also read, dialectically, the melancholic’s struggle to shed some opaque object of ambivalence as a substantive practice of unmaking and making, de- and reattachment; this is the destruction of the drive as its repetitions clear away the old to make space for the new (Dean, 177).⁴⁸ In melancholia, the ego is always engaged in a “pitched battle around the object,” as love and hate coexist and reconcile into an ambivalence. This battle at once separates the libido from the object and defends the libido from attack (Agamben, 21). The fetish’s temporal logic, however, is akin to ritualised suspense: the trauma is belated, perpetually siphoned into the next moment. The fetish forestalls disaster by deferring to some “beyond,” some receding horizon. “I turn back the clock so as to forever relive the very last flicker of an imaginary innocent anticipation.” Hence, the fantasy of abeyance—a permanent not-yet—reassures the fetishist (Comay, “Sickness,” 95). That fantasy comes to structure the psychic experience of the present. The fetish is a paradox: “an unattainable object that satisfies a human need precisely through its being unattainable” (Agamben, 33). In melancholia and fetishism, one lives in the present as if the worst has already happened, and as if the catastrophic insight had never occurred. In melancholia, “the object is neither appropriated nor lost, but both possessed and lost at the same time,” a revolt against the loss of an object; in fetishism, as we know, the fantasmatic object is sign of something and its absence. In sum, the object is simultaneously real and unreal, incorporated and lost, affirmed and denied (Agamben, 21). The object has an allusive quality, pointing beyond itself to something impossible; as presence and absence it is the sign of two contradictory realities (Agamben, 37). The fantasmatic dimensions of both melancholia and fetishism—attested to by the contradictions and paradoxes—are crucial here, for they outline why and how Alex must fabricate reality on his mother’s behalf. The medical request that Christiane be kept away from any shocks grants Alex license to create an imaginary, fantasy frame for the unfolding of life in the late GDR: this initiate’s Alex’s mock scenarios which make his imaginative fabulations impossible to differentiate from real perceptions.

A jar of gherkins for the GDR

Alex, with his ploy, moves into a position of valorising the regime in ways he never would have expected, while also ridiculing and mocking the failed state we

48. See also Mladen Dolar, “Freud and the Political,” *Theory & Event* 12.3 (2009).

sense he has never truly respected.⁴⁹ In the film's narrative of loss and grief, Alex dramatises this set of ideas around melancholia, mourning and fetishism. This will become clear through two further theoretical expositions, concerned first with temporality, then, returning to some earlier points, with (commodity) fetishism. The claim here is that Alex embodies Christiane's defences—or, we might say, that Alex performs an ego role for his ailing mother. Alex embodies melancholia and fetishism, whose psychic processes produce an illusory present, immune from past and future threats. Melancholia's postponement of death coincides with fetishism's pre-emptive fantasy of an already accomplished death. Alex, then, is a switching station between the too early and the too late, between the fetishistic "before" and melancholic "after," both postponing and pre-empting the future.

Lenin is a film in which Alex cushions his mother from the loss of the GDR. Alex engages in evermore ridiculous attempts at "reality management," to stave off shock and loss. Alex's actions ensure Christiane's ignorance, so processes of mourning and melancholia seem irrelevant for her—but this is only because Alex is objectively "working through" the loss in a manner illustrative of all melancholia: "melancholia offers the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object" (Agamben, 20). Alex holds his mother, I argue, in a state of penultimacy. Christiane, first in the coma and then cosseted in her apartment, exists in a state of incompleteness, holding off the mortifying conclusion. The film depicts Christiane finally touching the hard kernel of the Real: Christiane dies when the falsity of Alex's "endless" GDR is no longer sustainable. In seeing behind the veil of Alex's fabricated reality, Christiane is released from the reassuring stasis—yet this encounter will be the death of her, as Alex has surmised. Until that deadly conclusion, Alex's various machinations have produced for Christiane an illusory intact present. As Agamben points out, in melancholia there is a "triumph of the object over the ego," meaning that "the object has been, yes, suppressed, but it has shown itself stronger than the ego" (Agamben, 20). In other words, the GDR's real absence must triumph over Alex's ploys to veil reality.

Alex's chief method of veiling reality is to pretend that various GDR goods still exist. Alex pulls from cupboards otherwise cast-off everyday items to resume life in the banality of commodity culture. Alex re-bottles Dutch gherkins in the "Spree-wald" jars of German-grown GDR gherkins. His mother savours this "taste of home" with no awareness of the sleight of hand. Here, the film presents the commodity at its most starkly fetishistic. Recall that Marx described the commodity as a "mysti-

49. Indeed, we might also read the entire film as a melancholic gaze on the era of revolution and re-unification—a whole set of (inevitably failing and inevitably unsatisfactory and so lamentable) attempts to control the historical unravelling of the Eastern Bloc. After all, this story is told from the vantage point of 2004, by which point the—subjective and objective—disappointments of the transition to capitalism and re-unification were well and truly out in the open. In this reading, we might associate the melancholia with a harried western left who have faced defeat after defeat in the wake of 1989 as neoliberalism bedded down in national and international institutions.

cal” object with “theological niceties,” substituting its use-value for exchange value (i.e., social relations of value). Commodities have social meanings, not only private uses—even in nominally socialist nations like the GDR, which did not manage to escape the commodity form.⁵⁰ “The products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social,” Marx writes.⁵¹ The relationship between people and things becomes complex. Otherwise, the Dutch gherkins could have appeared in their original guise—but the commodity fetish exists in a social structure, in this case that of the apparent GDR. The superimposition of the fetish occludes the reality of the western labour and materials—and this sequence of the film makes overt how they take on nationalist niceties.

Alex and Christiane embody the split in fetishism: Christiane believes in the object; Alex knows about the substitution. Together, Alex and Christiane can sustain the mechanism. Substitution defines the “fetish” quality of commodities, for Marx as much as Freud. The commodity reifies social relations, thereby taking on the role of reflecting those relations as a substitute, a partial stand-in: “it is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Marx, 164-165). The commodity substitutes for the totality of relations, including those nominally outside the market and exchange. A jar of gherkins becomes the GDR, just as the GDR becomes the jar of gherkins. In Alex’s ploy, the commodity is, taking Marx with Freud, freezing time at the moment before the catastrophic insight: castration in fetishism; loss in melancholia/mourning; the withdrawal of consensus from the GDR for Christiane. “The animation of things both reflects and veils the mortification of persons and thereby provides the compensatory phantasm of unity in the face of an irredeemably fractured social world” (Comay, “Sickness,” 97). As in the sexual fetish, these parts of the GDR (gherkins, tracksuits) stand in for the whole of the GDR. Conveniently for Alex, he can signify a world through its things. But Christiane’s dawning consciousness of the shift in the totality, in the changed social and cultural reality of her country, finally results in death. Christiane escapes Alex’s postponements and pre-emptive holding patterns, confronting the trauma of loss, traversing the fantasy of an intact present.

The best GDR, ever

We should notice too that Alex gains enjoyment through his wilful fantasy of the present. Melancholia has long been associated with artistic activity, a commonality that clusters around an intensified fantasmatic practice that furnishes love, dreams and cultural creation (Agamben, 25). Alex may also master through artistic means what would otherwise be impossible to seize: “the lesson of melancholy is

50. On the question of commodities in the GDR and so on, see the excellent essays in Katherine Pence and Paul Betts, *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

51. Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976) 164-165.

that only what is ungraspable can truly be grasped" (Agamben, 26), thus affording a last chance to know the GDR as it slips into history. If Alex's ploy is apparently for his mother's benefit, it also allows him and his accomplices to occupy themselves at this moment of change. They slow time for Christiane—but Alex and accomplices also live under the shadow of a radical change, thus perceiving Alex's choreographed present under the aegis of a catastrophe to come.⁵² To cloak shared devastation and disruption, they jointly sort through heaps of quickly amassed GDR rubbish and rubble (as Benjamin would endorse). Alex's "loyalty to the scattered 'things' only prolongs a commitment to imaginary unities—the phantasm of the revolutionary collective, of the golden age[—]whose persistence inevitably assumes a consoling or ideological cast" (Comay, "Sickness," 98).⁵³ Alex lingers on the GDR's end, fetishistically postponing its fall, dwelling in the moment before the catastrophe he knows is coming. Alex, an everyday Benjaminian, constructs "a retroactive 'before' of missed opportunities, the moment before the final congealing of capitalist social relations, the flickering of possibilities rendered legible only from the perspective of an irredeemably damaged present day" (Comay, "Sickness," 101). Alex authors a GDR better than the really-existing one. This instils a "hope in the past," a counterfactual construction fabricating an anterior future, a hope retrospectively awakening a blocked possibility of a better GDR (Comay, "Sickness").

Through this plot, *Lenin* foregrounds processes of political ideology and belief. Alex falls for the ideals of the GDR: he authors a GDR more harmonious and positive than it was, more in line with the on-paper ideals of socialism than their repressive reality. Alex says in his voice-over narration that he creates the GDR he would have wished for—the GDR described in its banners and slogans. Alex valourises what Lefort would call the GDR's "ideological enunciation" over its "ideological rule."⁵⁴ Director Wolfgang Becker can retrieve this, as Thompson explains:

because the GDR itself, as both concept and reality, was not what it claimed to be, indeed was not, even, one might argue, what it was.... The SED's description of the GDR in the 1970s as a system of *real-existierender Sozialismus* (really-existing socialism) is actually a very clear admission of the non-existence of what they thought of as concrete and pragmatic socialism (a sort of reverse-vampire syndrome in which there is a reflection but no reality), beneath which a generally intact desire for a real real-existing socialism, in the form of a not yet-existing socialism, played its utopian role.⁵⁵

52. Žižek, *Event: Philosophy in Transit* 17. I paraphrase this section of Žižek, where he is talking about *The Age of Innocence*. This may equally be said of the film's production and audience reception in 2004 and beyond.

53. Comay is writing about Walter Benjamin and his disaggregated surrealist method of history, as critiqued by Adorno.

54. Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 181-235.

55. Peter Thompson, "'Die Unheimliche Heimat': The GDR and the Dialectics of Home," *Oxford German Studies* 38.3 (2009): 278-287 (284-285).

Thompson means utopia in the sense theorised by Ernst Bloch: the not-yet-conscious and the not-yet-become. In Bloch's understanding, *Lenin* might present a retrospective "wishful image" of the GDR. (And it is not tangential to note that anti-Stalinist Bloch decided not to return to his adopted GDR on the day the Berlin Wall was built—Germany's chief theorist of utopia left the GDR behind while holidaying in Munich.⁵⁶) Thompson has called this the *unheimliche Heimat* of the GDR: a homeland "uncanny, unknown and essentially unknowable, because it both is and isn't, was and wasn't the GDR" (Thompson, 284). The film makes clear that Ostalgie is "not simply a sense of a lack of something missing which one once had, but the lack of a lack, the sense of missing something which one never had but looked forward to" (Thompson, 284). The GDR was lived as utopia deferred, while Ostalgie retrieves those utopian impulses.

Productions like *Lenin* "allow people to move closer toward a model of the GDR as it wasn't but rather as those who founded, fought for, believed in, opposed, resisted and ultimately destroyed it, wished it had been. Ostalgie thus becomes nostalgia for somewhere we have never yet been" (Thompson, 285). *Lenin* ostensibly enacts an individual and cultural send-off for the past—for an object to which they were always ambivalently attached. The film mourns the absence of a true GDR before the nation's total disappearance—this is why Alex can fall in love with it for the first time. The GDR-object in the film is ungrievable because it was never an empirical object. For its audiences, I would argue, one of the film's attractions is its relatively sympathetic portrayal of the GDR as an alternative political system. Alex's actions mimic those of GDR leaders at their most wilfully misleading and obtuse. Nevertheless, Alex finds optimism in this system, a hope he had not seen there before its end: we may idealise lost objects in ways that we never idealised them while they were alive or existed.⁵⁷ We may feel compelled to defend the object on its own terms, nullifying our previous ambivalence. So Alex renders the GDR as the alternative which—in its empirical reality as clapped-out socialism—it had not been for many years. This may be an idealisation fuelled by guilt, "remorse for a past of not loving the object well enough and self-reproach for ever having wished for its death or replacement" (Brown, 55). Freud identifies this surrender of identity upon the death of an ambivalent object as the suicidal wish of the melancholic (Brown, 55). In the film's second half, Alex seems dubious about his protest actions, given the effect this seems to have had upon his mother; he questions his identity as GDR antagonist. Perhaps the loathed object was not so bad? Nevertheless, Alex's narcissistic and omnipotent attempts to control reality ultimately fail; he cannot hold his mother—or the GDR—away from their traumatic and mortifying ends. His melancholia shades into mourning as he sends her ashes afield on a toy GDR rocket, one last idealised childhood token of a nation that no longer exists—and may never

56. Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988) xxiii.

57. Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 55.

have existed in the form it believed itself to embody. The paradox of the film is that Alex's protest against his mother's "GDR" puts Alex in a position to take care of her and learn about the state's virtues via her identifications.

Family ties

The family narrative in the film is easy to diminish when we look to the "bigger picture" of the GDR's collapse. But the family is important for both the artistic and commercial success of the film. If the ideological exoticism of the party slogans and polyester tracksuits provide the comedy in the film, its central drama concerns family relations. Why does "the family" work in a narrative about political, social and cultural change? The family in the film is split between the mother whose day-to-day actions support the GDR and the son protesting against it. This allows the film to open onto a democratic polyphony of voices—a multiplicity often reduced to univocality in standard historical accounts of the late GDR (i.e. a uniformly passive population came together to demand capitalism and force re-unification). This polyphony thankfully does not take the form of melodramatic distribution of characters into good and bad types (cf. *The Lives of Others*) but into forms of ambivalence. Christiane sometimes challenges the state too—but via the approved means of writing letters noting inconsistencies and unfair actions, maintaining the idea that some Other is accounting for and remedying injustices.

Family relations can capture history's movement. "As a structure persisting yet changing through time," Elizabeth Boa argues, "the family serves as a controlled but quite complex prism, bringing together the more remote, parental past history as communicated to the younger generation and the more immediate remembered history of the child/parent relations."⁵⁸ In the stories and shared experiences of families, "cultural and social memory, mediated in many ways, feeds into and modifies the familial and personal memory stores, so that remembering is a constantly evolving process subject to revaluation under the impact of current events" (Boa, 68). This insight is like the *Nachträglichkeit* present with all memory and history—but here applied to a domain often held apart from socially-motivated historical revision. Families are often thought of as external to social and political change—as if the ahistorical family unit were over here and the crumbling of the GDR were over there, as if the historical process did not place families and "the family" under stress.⁵⁹

58. Elizabeth Boa, "Telling It How It Wasn't: Familiar Allegories of Wish-Fulfillment in Postunification Germany," *Germany Memory Contests: The Quest for Identity in Literature, Film and Discourse since 1990*, eds. Anne Fuchs, Mary Cosgrove and Georg Grote (Rochester: Camden House, 2006) 68.

59. Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Love, Sexuality and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (London: Polity, 1993); Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Reinventing the*

As an institution predicated on future reproduction, the family can be a site for competing visions of the future. Becker's film shows a clear understanding of the family under pressure. *Lenin* captures the GDR "family unit" dispersing as opportunities drew young East Germans to jobs, careers, relationships and education in the west. The generational distinction in the film, between Christiane's ostensible support for the regime, and Alex and Ariane's displays of excitement for its end, are different ways of figuring a belief in the future. Christiane had put trust in the party slogans ("the country my mother left behind was a country she believed in," Alex narrates shortly after his mother's death, "a country that never existed in that form"). Alex and Ariane put trust in the rhetoric of re-unification as a "growing together," and the immediate pleasures of sex, drugs and western fashion (Hodgin, 170).

Alex suffers the loss of two fathers (biological and ideological) and a mother during the film's running time. The film is truly a tragicomedy. All his amusing strivings to get his mother back to health, which often escape his control, come to naught when she dies in the final stretch of the film—a death fated by history's movement. If Christiane had substituted the patriarchal state for the absent father of her children, the title of the film gives us a sense of the way the events of 1989 drain the efficacy of this substitute father figure. One of the poster images for the film takes the crucial scene in which Christiane stumbles across the removal of an enormous Lenin statue from her Berlin neighbourhood. Hoisted by a helicopter and hovering in a blue sky, the frozen Lenin moves away and gestures to her with an outstretched hand. The father figure leaves the historical stage—marking an end of an era.⁶⁰ (Societies have bidden Lenin adieu before, only for him to return; it may be an *Auf Wiedersehen*, a "see you soon," rather than a final goodbye.⁶¹) This send-off is one of several in the film, but it is a defining moment in all postsocialist societies. The removal of old symbols and icons is one of the foundational acts of new states. With Lenin disappeared, the biological father can now re-enter the family frame. Alex visits his father and his new family in western Berlin. The father attends the small ceremony to mark Christiane's death, where the rocket heads into the sky carrying her ashes. If Alex's love for his mother at times threatens to entangle him in the past, her passing enables him to mourn the loss and negotiate historical change.

Good Bye Lenin! sympathises with Christiane, idealising her socialist perspective by placing her at the film's narrative and affective heart. She personifies a genuine socialism (Hodgin, 171), even in her ambivalence. Christiane is, like GDR intellectual and writer Christa Wolf, "a reform socialist, who, although critical of the

Family: In Search of New Lifestyles (Oxford: Polity, 2002); Mark Fisher, "The Privatisation of Stress," *Soundings* 48 (2011): 123-133.

60. German authority in the GDR was largely overseen by Soviet authority: hence, after de-Stalinisation, Lenin was returned to the "head of the family."

61. Katherine Verdery reports in *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 6 that "in 1991, the Tadjikistan parliament had voted ... to re-erect Lenin's statue and force those who had dismantled it to pay the costs." See also Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

[party], has not lost faith in its original ideological project” (Cooke, 132). Nevertheless, to enter re-unified Germany, Alex must abandon old loyalties and detach from his mother; he must find new substitutes, adapt to the new reality. As he mourns her and moves into the future, the maternal will be associated with the homely, the familiar, the comforting, the past—*Heimat* (Boa). Alex journeys with others in this regard—another dialogue of mournings. Concern with *Heimat* has seen a revival in the period since the Wende. Hodgkin (7-8) argues that the *Heimat* film returns to prominence after 1989 because it aids sorting identities and attachments:

In a period in which the Germans’ notion of home has (once again) been destabilized by political and historical events, *Heimat* surfaces as one of the key themes in postunification film, frequently providing a context for the conflict between east and west, a clash of cultures in which the *Heimat* that is defended represents “something more elementary, more contingent, and thus more real than life seen in a larger scale perspective.”

This is how *Heimat* has historically functioned. “The discourse of *Heimat*,” Boa notes, “dates back to the decades following the first unification of Germany, when it mediated between older local loyalties and a unified Germany” (Boa, 79). Historically, *Heimat* has been useful for subjects in maintaining a local identity against the onrush of change; some in the former GDR have taken up the term for this reason.⁶² *Lenin*, then, may be read as a *Heimat* film—or perhaps a post-*Heimat* film—in which Alex must relinquish what he knows while re-unification and market forces remake his familiar region of Germany.

Reconstructing *Lenin* in a comedy of identity

As I have described it, *Lenin* came into a world where Ostalgie was an established and discussed phenomenon. If, during the first stage of re-unification, the former citizens of the GDR were denied agency as historical actors and were marginalised by the crude public disavowal of their previous lives (to which the teen comedy *Sonnenallee* responded), then in the second stage, material culture purportedly came to normalise them (as in *Lenin*).⁶³ The Ostalgie of this second stage is registered in forms of irony, parody and cynicism: a *Lenin* bust used widely in the film’s advertising, for example, was not controversial, even if all the statues had been removed from German cityscapes. The second stage of Ostalgie entails a “naturalisation” of capitalism—although Ossis (Ostdeutscher, eastern Germans) accept this with resignation and outcrops of symbolic resistance (Berdahl, 131). With this normalisation came some measure of retrospective humility from the former West,

62. Jason James, “Retrieving a Redemptive Past: Protecting Heritage and *Heimat* in East German Cities,” *German Politics and Society* 27.3 (2009): 1-27.

63. Dominic Boyer, “Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany,” *Public Culture* 18.2 (2006): 361-381.

but also a raft of (continuing) assumptions and power relations arranged around the East/West divide.

In this mutually suspicious atmosphere, some eastern Germans were willing to view Wolfgang Becker, the film's western German director, as an "honorary Ossi" (Berdahl, 129). This was a significant gift of identification in a mediascape full of easy ridicule and given to stereotypes of the backward Ossi. Nevertheless, *Lenin* is a western production, a fact which in part generates its ambivalence and ambiguity. Becker pursues a few cheap pot shots about consumerism while also seeming to register that Ostalgie is not so much about the past as about the present and its foreclosures, about the future and its possibilities. *Lenin* demonstrates the ways nostalgia may work as a form of political engagement in the present, by expressing utopian desires to imagine new possibilities via old materials. Less speculatively, we could say with Berdahl that as "one instantiation of socialism's social life, *Good Bye Lenin!* as a mass-mediated history of the present has contributed to the construction of cultural realities that themselves are a function of the political landscape they inhabit and reproduce" (Berdahl, 133). As a cultural work, the film does more than represent the GDR, it also produces a shift in the idea of the GDR, while allowing subjects access to forms of mourning for its loss, in part by modeling within the text modalities of how to negotiate loss.

Even so, in focusing on its tragic and grieving dimension, we should not marginalise the comedic aspects of the film. Eastern Germans are typically seen in the mournful mode, so there's something novel in the tragicomic pairing; it does not discount either humour or mourning, rightly holding them together, against a culture which prefers the simplified affect (positive or negative, preferably positive) over ambivalent affects (positive and negative). In other words, we should not miss the link here to jocular complaints about "whiny Ossis." Contemporary ideology incorporates varieties of "the comic" and comedy as a sign of its fundamental rhetoric of happiness and being positive.⁶⁴ The stress on positivity casts as improper those affects, emotions and feelings which we might consider other than happy: lack, negativity, dissatisfaction, unhappiness. These are perceived as moral faults—or, worse, corrupted being. "There is a spectacular rise of what we might call a bio-morality (as well as morality of feelings and emotions)," Zupančič argues, "which promotes the following fundamental axiom: a person who feels good (and is happy) is a good person; a person who feels bad is a bad person."⁶⁵ Criticisms of Ossis in re-unified Germany claimed they are never satisfied, they are always negative. We should further extend this bio-morality to the role of affect and communication in the post-Fordist economy.⁶⁶ In their over-represented numbers as workers in the low-paid service industry under German neoliberalism, Ossis must present

64. Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 5.

65. See also Barbara Ehrenreich, *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World* (London: Granta Books, 2010).

66. Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Affects: The*

a friendly face, service with a smile and so on: we see this in *Lenin* when Ariane gets a job at a western Berlin Burger King, a recognisable symbol of globalising American capital and its customer service ethos. Ariane knows that to not present a friendly face would be to fail to grasp the subject she is supposed to become in today's "emotional capitalism."⁶⁷ German cinematic comedy—as in the broad, slapstick *Go Trabi Go* series—has traded on the inability or unwillingness of Ossis to acknowledge and act upon the imperatives of emotional capitalism. Dissatisfaction is pathologised. The emergent bio-morality, attached to an imperative of happiness, has led to an effective racialisation of the Ossi. "The problem," Zupančič writes, is "that success is becoming almost a biological notion, and thus the foundation of a genuine racism of successfulness. The poorest and the most miserable are no longer perceived as a socioeconomic class, but almost as a race of their own, as a special form of life" (6). As anyone acquainted with sociological studies or ideology critique could conclude, this "symbolic" racialisation, stigmatisation and denigration then has the material effect of increasing marginalisation, poverty, dissatisfaction, angst. (Which "objectively" confirms the label's correctness and so on.) In Ossi/Wessi relations, certain features of West German and East German approaches to life are reified into inalienable differences.⁶⁸ This set of hard distinctions presents an emerging form of racism that codes social traits as racial: "If traditional racism tended to socialise biological features—that is, directly translate them into cultural and symbolic points of a given social order—contemporary racism works in the opposite direction. It tends to 'naturalize' the differences and features produced by the sociosymbolic order" (Zupančič, 6). This suggests why Ostalgie is viewed through habits, customs and lifestyle, of consumer choice—idiosyncratic differences in private life are raised to the point of natural features at the core of being. Comedy of all stripes can have subversive effects only when it escapes this logic of "positive feelings," of positive psychology, of having a laugh, mandated cheerfulness.

In its generic deployment of comedy and tragedy, *Lenin* displays an awareness of its critical intervention into constructing a national past, its status as a site of memory and remembrance, of creating a GDR *en miniature*.⁶⁹ This film is "already informed by the subsequent failure of re-unification to meet people's hopes and expectations, a failure that points to a deeper void in the present."⁷⁰ Re-unification delivered yesterday's promised "tomorrow"; it turned out to be less than expected, so yesterday

Politics of the Language Economy, trans. Giuseppina Mecchia (Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2011) 149-150.

67. Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

68. Greg Eghigian, "Homo Munitus: The East German Observed," *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics*, eds. Katherine Pence and Paul Betts (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

69. Jennifer M. Kapczynski, "Negotiating Nostalgia: The GDR Past in *Berlin is in Germany* and *Good Bye, Lenin!*," *Germanic Review* 82.1 (2007): 78-100 (82).

70. Anthony Enns, "Post-Reunification Cinema: Horror, Nostalgia, Redemption," *A Companion to German Cinema*, eds. Terri Ginsberg and Andrea Mensch (Chichester: Blackwell, 2012) 120.

is reconfigured by the “tomorrow” it produced. Even so, in the film we see eastern Germans prolonging the life of the GDR in the present by extending it into an imaginary GDR of tomorrow.

MATTHEW SHARPE

BETWEEN GENET'S BORDELLO AND HOLY
COMMUNION: LACAN ON COMEDY IN *SEMINAR V*

Jacques Lacan comes to the subject of comedy at a crucial moment in his thought in *Seminar V*, in which he famously reframes the Freudian Oedipus complex. The crucial stake in this ontogenetic moment of the subject's ascension to the symbolic, Lacan argues here at length, is not the biological organ, the penis. It is the phallus, first as the fantasmatic object which the child supposes would satisfy the desire of the mother; then, with the resolution of the complex, as a repressed signifier of this forbidden desire. In order to frame his understanding of the phallus as signifier, though, Lacan refers his auditors to ancient sources from the West's pagan past (specifically Herodotus and Aristophanes) wherein the phallus, precisely as a signifier, had a specific cultic signification, particularly in the mystery religions. What we learn if we look at what we know about these cults, Lacan comments, is that:

It [the phallus] is always employed in connection with a simulacrum, with an *insignium*, whatever the mode in which it is presented, whether it is a question of a raised staff from which the virile organs are appended, or the question of an imitation of the virile organ, whether it is a question of a piece of wood, of a piece of leather, or of a series of varieties in which it is presented, it is something which is a substitutive object [...] it has all the characteristics of a real substitute.¹

As Lacan develops in the important, contemporary *écrit*, "The Signification of the Phallus," the phallic signifier had a series of senses. The phallus was pre-eminently in the cults of Demeter and Dionysus a signifier of natural potency or fertility, associated with nature's seasonal bounty and "vital flow."² However, Lacan argues that the phallus also functioned in the cults as a signifier of such primordial *Jouissance as lost to us* (or "struck by the signifier") as speaking animals—a fact reflected in the mystery cults' surrounding of the phallic signifier with a series of veils and

1. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar V: Formations of the Unconscious*, trans. C. Gallagher (London: Karnac, 2007) 23/4/1958, 12. Hereafter Sem. V.

2. Lacan, Sem. V 23/4/1958, 12.

prohibitions. Finally, Lacan claims a status for the phallus as the signifier of the effects of the signifier on the field of the signified:

[...] the privileged signifier of that mark where the share of the logos is wedded to the advent of desire. One might say that this signifier is chosen as what stands out [...] in the real of sexual copulation, and also in the most symbolic [...] sense [...] since it is the equivalent of the relation of the (logical) copula. One might also say that by virtue of its turgidity, it is the image of the most vital flow as it is transmitted in generation.³

In the ancient comedies, Lacan however notes, the phallus that was usually veiled—indeed, surrounded at the heart of the mysteries by the ritual *asceseis* depicted in Pompeii's Villa of the Mysteries⁴—was put on open display, worn in lewdly exaggerated forms by the comic actors. As Lacan would later observe in *Seminar VII*:

The sphere of comedy is created by the presence at its centre of a hidden signifier [...] that in the Old Comedy is there in person: namely, the phallus. Who cares if it is subsequently whisked away?⁵

For Lacan, an investigation of the nature and function of comedy as a literary art hence emerges as a fruitful source for understanding both, firstly, the signification of the phallus and secondly, because of the decisive place of this signifier in the symbolic constitution of the subject, the wider Freudian field. As we might say, it is not contingent for Lacan that the ancients thought it apposite to place in public display in the comic theatre this totemic signifier access to which itself was usually prohibited,⁶ and which invoked the field of the *Jouissance* prohibited to subjects as the price of acceding to symbolic Law. The literary and theatrical genre of comedy is for Lacan, as for other theorists of the form, not idle play set aside for any kind of senseless enjoyment, “just for laughs,” as we say. Comedy for Lacan is a cultural sublimation given over to the public revelation of what is usually repressed. It is a cultural form of the highest order, beneath whose surface of ribald and frivolous play we can glimpse the highest truths concerning our condition as *parlêtres*, speaking animals subject to the laws of the signifier.

In this context, it is not surprising that we find Lacan devoting several sessions of *Seminar V* to Moliere's comedy *The School for Wives* (the session of 18/12/1957) and Genet's comedy, *Le Balcon* (*The Balcony*) (5/3/1958), on top of a series of enticing remarks on the ancient comic Aristophanes' *oeuvre*. Comedy, Lacan specifically argues, traffics in revealing and making play with the subject's most ancient wish which “in the last analysis every process of the elaboration of desire in language” evokes: “that after all this detour is made [though culture, law, language] in the

3. Jacques Lacan, “The Signification of the Phallus,” in *Ecrits* trans. Bruce Fink (London: W.W. Norton, 2006) 582 /Fr. 692.

4. Lacan, Sem. V 23/4/58, 13.

5. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. D. Porter, edited by J-A. Miller (London: Routledge, 2002) 314.

6. Lacan, Sem. V 23/4/58, 12.

last analysis [we could] get back to *Jouissance* and its most elementary form.”⁷ In what follows, we aim to draw out what Lacan says concerning comedy in *Seminar V*, and how it relates there to his thinking at this stage of his oeuvre concerning the signification of the phallus. Lacan himself laments in *Seminar VII* the “little time” that his wider concerns have allowed him to devote to the manifold registers and phenomena of comedy. Alenka Zupančič’s extraordinary work *The Odd One In: On Comedy* shows the rich potential Lacan’s thought as a whole has as a means to theorise these phenomena in the dimensions of subjectivity, temporality, repetition and the drive.⁸ Here, focussing centrally on Lacan’s (itself quite hilarious) analysis of Genet’s *Le Balcon*, we will draw out four particular claims Lacan makes concerning comedy in *Seminar V*. Taken together, we will hope to show, they represent a typically remarkable contribution to the theory of comedy, its motives and nature, as “linked in the closest possible fashion to what can be called the connection between the self and language,” and hence to the Freudian field as reconfigured by Lacan.⁹

I. The comic hero and the desire to be the imaginary phallus

For Lacan, the figure of the comic hero is there to put on stage before us the single-minded pursuit of some desire with which we can all relate, but in an unconditional manner that we cannot pursue. At its base, indeed, Lacan discerns in the comic hero a figuring of the scoundrel or would-be tyrant in each of us to relate to language, law, political life as a “rational” instrument to attain *Jouissance* (power and illicit pleasure), and fulfil our most basic, “natural” needs. Lacan’s preeminent example to illustrate this first thought concerning the meaning of comedy, interestingly, is Aristophanes’ famous spoof on the philosopher Socrates in his comedy, *Clouds*. For how else is Socrates presented to us in the *Clouds*, Lacan asks us, if not as the subject who would “take advantage of language”—in Aristophanes’ artful terms, by learning to make the weaker or unjust argument appear the stronger, and by worshipping goddesses who teach rhetoric and can imitate all things? As Lacan comments:

Aristophanes shows Socrates to us in this form: that all that lovely dialectic will serve an old man to try to satisfy his desires by all sorts of tricks, to escape from his creditors, to arrange that he is given money; or for a young man to escape from his commitments, from all his duties, to complain about his ancestors, etc.¹⁰

7. Lacan, Sem. V 18/12/1957, 13.

8. Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), respectively 61-108; 28-47; 48-81.

9. Lacan, Sem. V 18/12/57, 13.

10. Lacan, Sem. V 18/12/1957, 13.

Yet the phenomenon of the comic hero single-mindedly devoted to pursuing his own *Jouissance* is not peculiar to Aristophanes—whose heroes nevertheless do include a man so committed to achieving peace that he breeds a giant dung-beetle to fly to Olympus to set the gods straight concerning the Greeks' warring, and Athenian and Spartan women so devoted to the cause of peace that they withhold all sexual favours until their men return to sanity and make peace. In the new comedy of the later Greek and Roman worlds, Lacan observes—in a way Zupančič has brilliantly associated with Hegel's comments on comedy in *The Phenomenology of Geist*¹¹—a series of characters are presented to us “committed in general in the most fascinated and stubborn fashion to some metonymical object,” an object which stands in for them for *das Ding*.¹²

All of the human types of every kind are there. There are the lustful, the characters that one will later rediscover in Italian comedy, characters defined by a certain relationship to an object, and around whom pivot all the new comedy, that which goes from Menander to our own day, around something which is substituted for the eruption of sex which is love, then there is love named as such, the love that we will call naive love, ingenuous love, the love that unites two young people who are generally rather dim-witted, which forms the pivot of the plot; and when I say pivot, it is because love really plays this role, not of being comical in itself, but of being the axis around which turns all the comic of the situation, up to the *époque* that one can clearly characterise by the appearance of Romanticism.¹³

What is at stake in the desire of comic characters like Strepsiades or Dikaiopolis, Lacan specifies, is “the return of need in its most elementary form.” And which needs in particular? There can be no question. Comedy involves:

[...] this emergence to the forefront of what originally entered into the dialectic of language, namely in a special way all sexual needs, precisely all the needs that are usually hidden. This is what you see being presented on stage in Aristophanes, and this goes very far, I would particularly recommend to your attention the plays concerning women and the way in which this return to the character of elementary need as underlying the whole process, [and] what special role is given in this to women.¹⁴

In Aristophanes' remarkable oeuvre, this function of the comic revelation of eros is closely related for Lacan to what is particularly evident in Aristophanes' work, namely the political function of his comedies. We know that in Aristophanes an almost visceral outrage at the follies of the Peloponnesian war, matched only by

11. Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, chapters 1-2 (13-40).

12. We are evoking, of course, Lacan's definition of sublimation per se in *Seminar VII* (112, cf. 101-114) as an object raised to the dignity of the Thing.

13. Lacan, Sem. V 18/12/1957, 14.

14. Lacan, Sem. V 18/12/1957, 14.

his aristocratic disgust at the vulgarities of the Athenian democracy,¹⁵ represent the kind of constant centre around which the *Acharnians*, the *Lysistrata*, the *Assembly of Women*, and the *Peace* all turn. But war is a phenomenon of civilization. Far from the recursion to barbarism which as often depicted, it is pre-eminently in war that the full scope of the claims the symbolic order lays upon us as subjects of the signifier—so we can even be called upon to kill and to die—is fully displayed. One thinks in this connection of Joseph Heller's comic masterpiece *Catch 22*, which is one hilarious complaint animated on every page by a kind of outraged wonder at the absurdity of asking men to risk their lives in far-away places by killing men they have never met, as if this were the most natural thing in the world. Just so, Lacan—here joining theorists of comedy from Francis Hutcheson to Agnes Heller¹⁶—sees in comedy a kind of heightening and showing up of the minimally unnatural status of the symbolic order, and its “castration” of us from simple, animalic bliss:

Of course it is always in [...] the supreme moment of distress for Athens [...] because of a series of bad choices and by a submission to the laws of the city that seem literally to be leading it to destruction that Aristophanes sets off this alarm. It consists in saying that after all people are exhausting themselves in this pointless war and there is nothing like staying at home nice and warm in one's own house and going back to one's wife. This is not something which is properly speaking posed as a morality. It is a restatement of the essential relationship of man to his condition [...] without our having to know, moreover, whether the consequences are more or less salutary.¹⁷

II. The Comedic “As if”, and Sovereign Enjoyment

Following on from this thought, a key element of comic dramas as Lacan reads them involve the playful presentation to us of individuals who, impossibly, would directly *enjoy* their social or “phallic” power, thereby *living* out an answer the all-too-human question: “what can it really mean to enjoy one's state of being a bishop, a judge or a general?”¹⁸ This second claim is analytically separable from the first: here we are not concerned with how the base, usually repressed “natural” desires that undergird social intercourse are paraded on the comic stage, like the *phalloi* of the ancient comic actors. Instead, this Lacanian point speaks to the near-inescapable, and tendentially neurotic, fantasy of subjects of the signifier concerning the Others who wield symbolic or phallic power, beginning from the father. This is the

15. Aristophanes, thymotic friend to all that was old and venerable (“the generation of Marathon,” as it were), was several times sued for defamation because of his strident criticism of contemporary democratic politicians, including by the infamous demagogue Kleon.

16. See. Agnes Heller, *Immortal Comedy: The Comic Phenomenon in Art, Literature, and Life* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005).

17. Lacan, Sem. V 5/3/58, 13.

18. Lacan, Sem. V 5/3/58, 13.

fantasy, which becomes explicit in clinical paranoia and conspiracy theories, that these Others must enjoy, immediately, in and because of their *being*, the power and the *Jouissance* denied to us. What is implied is that all the *politesse* of civilized life is actually a front, a mere means for those bold or fortunate enough to attain this *Jouissance*. The real men and women can and do directly attain It.

It is to illustrate this second point that Lacan turns in *Seminar V* to his telling, and itself hilarious, analysis of Genet's *Le Balcon* (*The Balcony*). The play is set, *à la* Aristophanes, in a time of political upheaval and crisis: the French revolution. There is a bordello in Paris, our setting. We note straight away that this setting is itself one, like the comic stage, in which real elements of human life which are usually off-limits are given a kind of luminal public sanction. Certainly, the brothel provides Genet with a setting to directly ask the comic question concerning the supposed enjoyment or *Jouissance* of figures of symbolic, phallic authority. For the girls at the brothel report that many of the men who come to enjoy their services, regularly ask that they be dressed up as—what? Exactly figures of the most august symbolic authority: the bishop, the judge, the general, or the statesman. The chief of police, who is Genet's comic hero, is charged with keeping the bordello safe in these times of crisis. However, the chief has a somewhat aberrant relationship to his symbolic role. Lacan hones in on his concern, when it comes to talking with the girls, not with the prosecution of his civic duties, but with asking specifically: whether any of their clients happens to have come in to the bordello asking to be dressed up in his role, as the Chief of Police? In Lacanian terms, that is, the hero of *Le Balcon* wants to know exactly whether he has or is It, the phallus, the font of sexual *Jouissance* and symbolic power—almost as if Genet must have read Lacan *avant la lettre*. In Lacan's words, his Chief in *Le Balcon* represents "... simple desire, pure and simple desire, this need that man has to rejoin his own existence in a fashion that can be authenticated and directly assumed, [and so to give] his own thought, a value which is not purely distinct from his flesh [...]"¹⁹

Beneath the ridiculousness, there is some important conceptual work to do here to understand why the scenario is so paradigmatically comic, given the perspective Lacan is developing at this point. The police are, truly, a public authority. However, that said, they are also the point of last resort: a compelling force which operates in what Lacanian theory calls the Real of violence, not the symbolic. As we know, it is only when the order of symbolic authority and of subjects' respect for the words of the powers-that-be have failed that the Police are called.²⁰ This is why we should not be surprised that, for the larger part of the comedy, Genet has it that no one *has* asked to be the Chief of Police, in order to illicitly enjoy as a real man. If real enjoyment, *per* neurotic fantasy, is to directly, consciously *enjoy* holding a position of symbolic authority,²¹ then playing the policeman (which speaks to a more per-

19. Lacan, Sem. V 5/3/58, 17.

20. See e.g. Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do* (London: Verso, 2002), 250-252.

21. As, of course, per the fantasy of the masculine subject-position, in the formulae of sexualisation developed by Lacan in *Seminar XX*.

verse bent) does not fit the bill. In Lacanian terms, the Policeman does not have the phallus, unlike the judge whose words by themselves can strike fear into people's hearts; or the statesman, whose words can move a nation; or the bishop, whose blessing it is agreed can confer peace, grace, even the forgiveness of sins.

However, *per impossible*, and because *The Balcony* is a comedy, at the decisive *peripeteia*, everything seems to fall into place for Genet's hero. What is usually off limits to human beings, as civilized subjects of language and law, falls in his lap. The revolutionary situation is so dire that the Chief of Police is asked to form a kind of paramilitary police state, tyranny, or dictatorship. The question thus emerges: what symbol would the regnant Chief like to have on his new uniform, to signify his new power for Public Safety? Here is Lacan's own, comic gloss on what transpires:

[...] the chief of police consults his entourage on the subject of the suitability of a sort of uniform, and also the symbol which will be the symbol of his function. He does so not without shyness [...]: indeed, he shocks the ears of his listeners a little: he proposes—a phallus. Would the church have any objection to it? [he asks]—and he in fact bows his head a little [...] to the bishop who shows some hesitation. The bishop for his part suggests that after all if the phallus is changed into the dove of the Holy Spirit, it would be more acceptable. In the same way the general proposes that the figure in question should be painted in the national colours, and some other suggestions of this kind follow, which make us think that of course we are going to come pretty quickly to what is called on such occasions a *concordat*.²²

If this happy issue were not enough, at this very moment Genet has one of the girls burst in and, in the *coup de theatre*, recount that one of her regular clients, albeit a lowly plumber, has in fact come in and asked to be dressed as the Chief of Police to prosecute his business at the bordello! Here, that is, we have the comic hero's supreme apogee; and behind it, a kind of tellingly ridiculous staging of the impossible fulfilment of the neurotic fantasy to be or to have, in the Real, the phallic Thing, crux and guarantor of all sexual enjoyment and political power. Culture has stooped to nature, or an exception has been made to the founding prohibition of culture: that no one man—as against a beast or a god—can usurp and command the primordially repressed, phallic Thing.

III. Falling in the Soup ... (the impossibility of the direct possession of the Phallus)

Lacan's further point, which stands over the entire analysis as we have seen, is however that the final, dreamt of union or harmony of civilised subjectivity with simple, animal-like, natural enjoyment is impossible. As beings of *nomos* and of *logos*, we can only dream of directly being or having the fully satisfying Thing,

22. Lacan, Sem. V 5/3/58, p. 17.

or dwelling in the Isles of the blessed, in Plato's image in the *Republic*.²³ Thus, no sooner has the Chief in Genet's *Balcony* attained his apogee, than he is made by the laws of comedy—and beneath them, per Lacan, the laws governing our being as *parletres*—to fall from grace. Lacan comically recounts the moment when the Chief is about to assume his phallic mandate as sovereign protector of the peace in these terms: “generalised emotion. Tightness of the throat. We are at the end of our troubles. We have everything, up to and including the wig of the chief of Police—which [however] falls off.”²⁴ In other words, at that very moment when “the chief of police was just ready to reach the peak of his happiness,” what Lacanian theory calls his symbolic castration, his being a subject of the signifier and law, is comically displayed. “How did you know?” he asks the girls, who seem not to be surprised at this demeaning spectacle that the Chief is bald, and has all along been wearing a wig. And they answer: “you were the only one who believed that no one knew that you wore a wig.”²⁵ To underline the metaphoric significance of the moment with which he is playing, Genet even has another prostitute simulate castrating the Chief, and throwing in his face “[...] that with which, as she says modestly, he will never de-flower anybody again.”²⁶

The Balcony's end, that is, shows again the problematic situation of human subjectivity, torn between *nomos* and *physis*. In Lacan's words, “comedy manifests by this kind of inner necessity this relationship of the subject, from the moment that he is signified, [...] the fruit of the result of this relationship to the signifier [...]”²⁷ In this way, the Chief of Police in Genet can only return to his former symbolic legitimacy:

[...] when he has passed the test, on condition precisely that he is castrated, namely [in an action] which ensures that the phallus is once again promoted to the state of a signifier, to this something which can or cannot give or take away, confer or not confer authority.”²⁸

IV. A Feast in the Agora: the Ends of Comedy

What then is the end of comedy, and why should it set out to stage the rise and fall of comic hero's ignoble *erota*? In *Seminar V*, Lacan somewhat enigmatically suggests that we need to understand comedy as having a “ceremonial value” as a species of “imaginary communion.”²⁹ It is a commonplace of theorists of comedy to point to the happy ending or resolution as decisive to the meaning of the genre, as Lacan concurs in his passing, but beautiful, remarks on comedy in *Seminar VII*:

23. Viz. “μακάρων νήσους,” Rep. 540b4.

24. Lacan, Sem. V 5/3/58, 17.

25. Lacan, Sem. V 5/3/58, 17.

26. Lacan, Sem. V 5/3/58, 17.

27. Lacan, Sem. V 5/3/58, 11.

28. Lacan, Sem. V 5/3/58, 18.

29. See Lacan, Sem. V 5/3/58, 11; 18/12/57, 13.

One must remember that the element in comedy that satisfies us, the element that makes us laugh, that makes us appreciate [comedy] in [its] full human dimension [...] is not so much the triumph of life as its flight, the fact that life slips away, runs off, escapes all those barriers that oppose it, including those that are the most essential [...] the phallus is nothing more than the signifier of this flight. Life goes by, life triumphs, whatever happens. If the comic hero trips up and lands in the soup, the little fellow nevertheless survives.³⁰

The end of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for one instance, sees the rightful couples which the comedy had displaced restored to each other, and their marriages sanctioned by no less a symbolic authority than that of the throne itself, at a royal feast that ends the entire play. We are familiar with how many comedies end, if not at the altar, then with the kiss of the hero and heroine: sexual rapport or its semblance regained. In a similar vein, Lacan draws our attention in *Seminar V* to the place of ancient comedy in the Greek religious festivals like the Panathenaia, which was to come third, after the satyr play and the tragedy. Its ceremonial place, Lacan comments, is comparable to that of the mass in Catholic Europe. Indeed, in phenomena like the "*risus pascalis*"—ribald, sometimes ludicrous tales introduced into the Easter services in Christian Churches—Lacan claims that we can see the "trace and shadow" of comedy in Christendom, after the decline of the classical stage. Comedy itself, Lacan specifies:

[...] is something like the representation of the end of the communion meal by which the tragedy itself had been evoked. It is man, when all is said and done, who consumes what was made present there in terms of its common substance and flesh, and it is a question of knowing what will result from this.³¹

It can also be a question for the reader of *Seminar V* to know exactly what Lacan's full meaning is here, for the seminar's discussion quickly moves to his reading of the Genet comedy. Earlier, taking as his object Aristophanes' *Assembly of Women*, which ends in a great feast in the agora to celebrate the comic, new order of absolute *égalité* between the sexes, Lacan proffers a comment which however anticipates what seems to be at stake here:

Aristophanes invites us [...] to perceive something that can only be perceived retroactively, that if the state exists, and the city, it is so that one can take advantage of it, it is in order that a feast, in which no one really believes, can be set up in the *agora*, it is so that one can come to be astonished at the contradictions to common sense brought out by the perverse emotions of the city which is subject to all the pulling and dragging of a dialectical process;

30. Lacan, Sem. VII, 314.

31. Sem. V 5/3/58, 11.

in order that one should be brought back through the mediation of women,
the only ones who really know what men need, [...] to common sense [...]³²

Comedy *per se*, Lacan is claiming here, is akin in its religious signification to the festive staging and eating of a banquet. At such a ceremonial feast, the community—however divided by competing political, ethical, and religious demands in ways ancient tragedy dramatised—is brought back to a kind of lived, enjoyed sense of harmony. The position here then is very close to that of the Cambridge School of Anthropology's views on the origin of the comedic genre: amongst these that the Dionysean, phallic parade associated with the great festivals in which the theatre came to be staged ended originally in a circular threshing floor, where a goat was sacrificed on an altar.³³ Lacan himself comments that "[...] we are told [that comedy] came from a kind of orgy or banquet [...] where man [...] says "yes" to the same meal that is constituted by offerings to the gods."³⁴ However, Lacan of course interprets the meaning of this ritual origin of comedy in his own, psychoanalytic terms. In particular, what Lacan says here seem to link this collective aspiration to social harmony and peace operating in comedy as a dramatic genre, to the immoderate desire we have seen he thinks operates in comedic heroes like Genet's police chief, or Aristophanes' Strepsiades or Lysistrata. It is as if, Lacan is specifically suggesting, that the wish which the comic hero's inevitable humbling shows to be impossible for any individual is given a kind of substitute satisfaction *by the comic work as a whole*—in the vicarious enjoyment it gives us, and in the kind of lived sense of reconciliation with others, with fate, and with our conditions comedies' happy endings intimate.

It is significant in this connection that Lacan's comments on the literary genre of comedy here immediately following on from his earlier comments on jokes and the *Witz*, and the source of the pleasure they afford us. From the earliest "peekaboo"-type games³⁵ wherein young children are drawn to laugh, to the punch-lines in jokes,³⁶ Lacan has argued that humour involves the building up an imaginary anticipation that a particular thing or sense will transpire—which anticipation is retroactively shattered in the final moment of *pas-de-sens* (nonsense or without-sense) or *peu-de-sens* (little sense) of the gag. "It is always through something that is a liberation from the image" that laughter explodes, Lacan comments. This is why Lacan even associates the advent of laughter with the first manifestations of the

32. Lacan, Sem. V 18/12/57, 14.

33. See Francis Cornford, *The Origins of Attic Comedy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993); and, for a critical account, Eli Rozik, "The Ritual Origins of Theatre—A Scientific Theory or Theatrical Ideology, *The Journal of Religion and Theatre* 2.1 (Fall 2003): 105-140, esp. 108-116; at www-site http://www.rjournal.org/vol_2/no1/rozik.html, accessed July 2011.

34. Lacan, Sem. V 5/3/57, 13.

35. See Lacan, Sem. V 18/12/57, 10

36. See Lacan, Sem. V 11/12/57, 9

symbolic Other in the life of the infant.³⁷ As in the literary genre of comedy, so Lacan claims that what is thus evoked in this work of witticisms:

[...] by a kind of forcing, by a sort of happy shadow of an astonishing success, conveyed purely by the signifier, of reflection of ancient satisfactions, [is] something [...] that has very exactly as an effect the reproduction of the primary pleasure of the satisfied demand, or the same time as it [the joke] accedes to an original novelty. It is this something that the witticism essentially realises [...]³⁸

However, for the joke to be funny and to yield up its peculiarly human pleasure, Lacan notes, it must also be told to an Other: "I cannot even fully appreciate the pleasure of the joke, of the story, unless I have tried it out on another [...]" ; the witticism is only complete [...] insofar as the Other takes it on board, responds to the witticism, authenticates it as a witticism, namely perceives what in it conveys as such the question of the *peu-de-sense*.³⁹ What is involved in the comic, then, is a peculiar "transmutation, transubstantiation, [or] subtle operation of communion," whereby what usual signification "leaves behind" or is consigned to the unconscious is nevertheless miraculously recognised and sanctioned by the Other.⁴⁰ This is what, as we all know, jokes as jokes always can possible misfire. And when they do, this is exactly because the Other "does not see *that* as amusing"—where that "that" in question is the usually more or less sexually, politically, or culturally transgressive *pas-de-sens* of the joke's punch line. All comic phenomena are not simply intersubjective in this way, for Lacan. They are also, as it were, minimally "utopian," aiming at and momentarily bringing about both a symbolic redemption of the repressed, and a "kind of harmonising of desire and of judgment" between subjects which cannot but remind us directly of Kant's famous *sensus communis* at play in aesthetic judgments,⁴¹ but which Lacan does not hesitate to situate on a continuum with the phenomenon of love⁴²:

Love, this is the point at which the summit of classical comedy is situated. There is love here, and it is very curious to see the degree to which we no longer perceive it except through all sorts of partitions that stifle it, romantic partitions. Love is an essentially comic motive.⁴³

37. See Lacan, Sem. V 18/12/1957, 10-11.

38. Lacan, Sem V. 4/12/57, 12.

39. Sem V 11/12/67, 2; 4/12/57, 14.

40. See Lacan, Sem. V 4/12/57, 2.

41. For celebrated accounts of the implicit politics in Kant's aesthetics, turning around the *sensus communis*, cf. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (London: Blackwell, 1990), 93-98; also Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

42. See Lacan, Sem. V 11/12/1957, p. 16; 18/12/57, 12.

43. See Lacan, Sem. V 18/12/57, 17.

But Lacan's developed reflections on the complex phenomena of love, which notably turn around his reading of Plato's great, comic dialogue *The Symposium*, are another story.

Concluding Remarks

Lacan's would himself in *Seminar VII* reflect, with evident regret, that he had been unable to fully draw out his thinking concerning comedy. Nevertheless, we have seen now here that what he did manage to say in *Seminar V* represents already a remarkable contribution to thought on this topic. What is so fascinating about Lacan's thought, here as elsewhere, is how he is able to enter into, engage with but always reshape a long-established field of cultural or philosophical reflection, on the basis of his peculiar, para-structuralist reconfiguration of Freudian teaching. Lacan comments on comedy at different times approach the "incongruity theory" of comedy, or Hegel's fascinating account of comedy in the *Phenomenology of Geist*, as Zupančič has elaborated. They also skirt the anthropological work done on comedy, its religious origins and signification, at the beginning of the 20th century. Yet Lacan's theory of the signifier, and the relation of the imaginary to the symbolic, is able to give him unique purchase into the retroactive working of jokes and the Witz. Then there is the work Lacan is able to do in this field on the basis of his re-configured conception of the Freudian Oedipus complex on the basis of his notion of desire as desire of the other, and thus of the phallus as signifier of this desire. In the context of attempts to understand comedy, Lacan's situation of the phallic signifier as the pivotal stake in the decisive anthropogenetic episode in subjects' lives allows him to cast light on the function of the phallus in ancient comedy, one which many commentators altogether pass over. Comedy becomes for Lacan not simply an exercise in what one 20th century commentator on Aristophanes has called "the publicisation of the essentially private."⁴⁴ It is at once a revelation of the ways our identities (public and private) are configured, decentred, and reconfigured by the symbolic order, and a kind of replaying of our fondest Oedipal wishes and their civilization—the whole all ending in our reconciliation and that of the hero with the big Other, albeit a reconciliation in which "no one really believes."⁴⁵ This, as we might put it, is the unlikely, comic lens in which in Lacan's fifth seminar the flipside of Genet's bordello turns out to be the *risus pascalis*, if not the Holy Communion. It is also the extremely rich framework Lacan was able to bequeath to his audience to think the comedic in *Seminar V*, however little the time he was able to devote to it there.

44. Leo Strauss, "The Problem of Socrates," in T. Pangle ed. *The Rebirth of Classical Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 111; 121.

45. Sem. V 18/12/57, 14.

ORIT YUSHINSKY

JOURNEY TO THE END OF IDEOLOGY

Ideology and Jouissance in Céline's Journey to the End of the Night

The sensational publication of L.F. Céline's novel, *Journey to the End of the Night*,¹ in 1932 was accompanied by a vigorous dispute regarding the "political leaning" "ideology" or "worldview" of the novel and its author. Some critics, including Jean-Paul Sartre, identified socialist and communist elements in the novel; some, such as Léon Daudet, regarded it as tending towards right-wing, whereas others pointed out the dreadful tone and the dehumanization, specifically of the proletariat in the novel.² This dispute was not renounced, even with the publications of Céline's pamphlets, beginning with *Mea Culpa* (1936), which disappointed some of the critical evaluations and hopes for a new socialist writer, and continuing with the atrocious lyric of his subsequent pamphlets,³ which, for some critics (Godard; Murray; Butler)⁴, stained the reading of Céline's first novels: are there fascist or anti-Semitic elements in *Journey*? Can, or should, one discern between the anti-Semitic author and his literary text? From the mid-nineties of the twentieth century, studies on Céline tend to concentrate on his intrinsic anti-Semitism and racism and connect between the political ambiance in France in the twenties and thirties and Céline's personal life, political pamphlets and literary texts.⁵ A recent study by Sandrine Sanos anchors Céline's racism and anti-Semitism in a new configuration of French virility which, claims Sanos, Céline constructs in his writings.⁶

Conversely, in the eighties and nineties, some critics tried to go beyond the political reproaches against Céline, as well as the attempts to gentrify and defend the author and his literary texts in the name of what they termed an "anti-idealistic" and anti-ideological approach allegedly found in Céline's texts. As one critic asserts:

The overall theme of Céline's early novels, *Journey to the end of the Night* and *Death on the Installment Plan*, is that the struggle of human life to realize itself reveals the deadly, dominating nature of the idealistic claims of society, culture, and civilization. In their common forms, these claims assert that human life must be directed by abstract values as expressed in moral, intellectual, political, economic and community standards; that such values

are necessary for the proper organization of society and, subsequently, for the full realization of human life. All these claims for the necessity, rationality and desirability of social domination, Céline's novels undercut. What is exposed is not only the fact of human domination and its full meaning in terms of the individual human being, but equally all the domination's claims to legitimacy.⁷

Céline himself denigrated ideas as false and misleading and ideologies as deceitful formations, useful and lethal tools for realizing the sovereign interests and whims. As he declared, "I have no ideas, myself! Not a one! There's nothing more vulgar, more common, more disgusting than ideas!"⁸

This essay differs from both approaches—the "ideological" approach, which focuses on Céline's infamous ideas to be found in his writings, and the "anti-ideological" approach, which claims to an apparent anti-idealism in Céline—in that it deals with the way ideology structures Céline's *Journey*, not as a manifest content of particular ideas and beliefs, but as an unconscious formation that produces speech-acts, acts and practices. What this essay looks for is the way in which ideology structures and functions in Céline's *Journey*, in spite of the claims against the legitimacy of ideologies as domineering and oppressive structures, and before focusing on the author's racism and anti-Semitism. Moreover, the recent researches on Céline's political views in the context of his contemporaries may benefit from an analysis of the form of the ideological fantasy which supports reality in Céline's texts and the way his protagonists retain this fantasy. A relation between the interwar period in Germany, National Socialism and cynical reason had already been established by Peter Sloterdijk.⁹

As to the "anti-idealistic" approach, it refers to a specific definition of ideology, one that, following Žižek, I will criticize hereafter, while proposing a more updated and steadfast definition. The "anti-idealistic" approach regards ideology as a set of ideas and beliefs that underlie a social structure, a set which may be endorsed, opposed or denied. Yet this approach fails to acknowledge, while at the same time testifies to the way that ideology unconsciously structures the social reality, that "in ideology 'all is not ideology (that is, ideological meaning)', but it is this very surplus which is the last support of ideology."¹⁰ That is, what the anti-ideological critiques of Céline and, even more significantly, Céline's disgust with "ideas" deny and at the same time attest, this is the way this denial itself, this misrecognition of ideology, is what constitutes ideology.

By ideology I mean, following Althusser, Lacan and Žižek, an unconscious formation attached to the fundamental fantasy of the subject and to the way this fundamental fantasy organizes the enjoyment (*jouissance*) of the subject. The subject disavows the fantasy that organizes enjoyment, and this disavowal of the fantasy and enjoyment enables the functioning of ideology and, at the same time, protects and sustains the fantasy and enjoyment.¹¹ This mechanism of disavowal enables subjects to uphold certain ideological theoretical claims, while, in practice, maintain their

disavowed beliefs. The acts and practices of subjects in ideology attest to their adherence to ideology as an unconscious fantasmatic formation, without which they will be engulfed by the ghastly and senseless Real.¹²

I propose to view *Journey* as a case study of the connection between ideology and (surplus) enjoyment, and to consider Bardamu, the hero-narrator, as the epitome of this connection, that is, an embodiment of ideological *jouissance*. I will analyze the way ideology and enjoyment maintain each other in the novel, so that enjoyment is the last support of ideology and ideology functions as both a protection against enjoyment and a source of it. In addition, I will examine the way Bardamu is formed as a cynical figure and outline the connection between Bardamu's cynical reason and perversion as a clinical structure, according to Lacan. This essay will hopefully shed some light on the way ideology functions in Céline's *Journey*, against the background of Céline's critique, in which the discussion of ideology in the novel was discarded or, alternatively, dealt with from a specific conceptual standpoint.¹³

I will begin with the analysis of Bardamu as a cynical / kynic subject, according to Žižek's definitions of cynicism and kynicism, which are based on Sloterdijk's work, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983). Žižek defines the kynic as a subject who consciously undermines the apparatuses of the dominant ideology, in order to expose the corrupt interests that lie behind the ideological statements. Conversely, the cynical subject is well aware of the particular interests that underlie the ideological truisms, and yet, practically, he sustains and reproduces the ideological apparatuses, as if unaware of their deceitful meaning. I will claim that Bardamu holds these two contradictory approaches simultaneously and raise the questions, (1) of the possibility of a subject retaining cynical and kynical reason at the same time, and (2) what brings the cynical subject to maintain the very same ideological practices that he dismisses in his statements and conversations?

Subsequent to my attempt to settle the contradiction in (1), I will rely on Žižek's answer to (2) and try to extend his explanation with Lacan's and his followers' definition of the perverse structure. Thus I will discuss ideology in the novel as both a defense and a source of surplus enjoyment, and Bardamu as a cynical and perverse subject of ideology.

The first chapter of Céline's book, which is a microcosm of the text as a whole, delineates Bardamu's journey to the heart of the bourgeois ideology. This journey exposes the dreadful shame of the bourgeois ideology. The belief in progress, in rationality and science, nationalism and patriotism, the family, capitalism and the distribution of work—this is revealed as a collection of mad human inventions whose single aim is to reinforce the position of the rich and strong, beef up the full, and abuse unto death the resources of the poor.

And yet the disclosure of the contrasts of ideology does not mean a way out of it, and Bardamu's rejection of the dominant orders does not lead to a replacement of ideology with a new order. Conversely, every disclosure and rejection of ideology

leads Bardamu into the darkest heart of ideology. The journey to the end of the night is a journey to the heart of the night.

Bardamu is, on the one hand, what Žižek calls the kynical subject, that is, the subject who undermines the dominant ideology, reveals its apparatuses and suspends or rejects them. While, as a cynical subject, Bardamu is caught in the net of the dominant ideology and its practices—as a soldier, an agent of French colonialism, a worker at “Ford” (an agent of Capitalism), an extra in the Capitalist entertainment industry (in the Tarapout cinema) and finally, as a doctor, an agent of the modern institutions of mental health—as a kynical subject—Bardamu acts according to the ideological apparatuses only in order to “go and find out if that’s what it’s like!” (*Journey* 4). That is, Bardamu acts as a subject of the ruling ideology so as to undermine the ideological apparatuses and neutralize their power from within.

How is it possible that Bardamu is simultaneously a cynical subject who is not aware, as Žižek writes, of the ideological fantasy that lies in the heart of his everyday practices, and a kynical, rational subject who is aware of the falsehood of ideology? As Žižek explains, the gap between the kynic and the cynic resides in the place of fantasy and in an interpretation of the concept of ideology.

Following Žižek, we can think of the kynic as a figure who lives in the ideological world, sometime between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, with the sprouting of capitalism and the growth of rationalism as a dominant philosophy. Marx defined ideology as “false consciousness,” naïve misrecognition of the presuppositions which construct social reality. Some of Marx’s followers (for example, The Frankfurt School) added that this false consciousness is indispensable; reality itself is structured and reproduced as “ideological”: “The mask is not simply hiding the real state of things; the ideological distortion is written into its very essence” (Žižek, *Sublime* 28). In any event, these two conceptions refer to ideology as knowledge which one can discard and convert, or as a symptom, the awareness of which may dissolve.¹⁴ The kynic mocks and satirizes the ruling ideology, and thus exposes “the egotistical interests, the violence, the brutal claims to power” (29). He acts as an enlightened consciousness which is aware of the ideological mystification. As I will show hereinafter, Bardamu uses kynic practices—irony and sardonic sarcasm—in his conversation with Arthur Ganate in the first chapter and throughout the novel.

In contrast to that, the cynic lives in a “post-ideological” era. As Žižek explains, our time is not an indication of the end of ideologies, but a desperate disavowal of them. That is the time of the cynical reason. The cynic is well aware of the ideological lie, but acts as if he believes in ideology. As Žižek writes:

Cynical reason is no longer naïve, but is a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it. (29)

And he later adds:

It is clear, therefore, that confronted with such cynical reason, the traditional critique of ideology no longer works. We can no longer subject the ideological text to 'symptomatic reading', confronting it with its blank spots, with what it must repress to organize itself, to preserve its consistency—cynical reason takes this distance into account in advance. (30)

Consequently, we can no longer interpret ideology as a symptomatic formation, but turn to the level of ideological fantasy, that is, the way in which ideology structures the social reality itself. In this respect, ideology is no longer conceived as knowledge that can be transferred or demystified, but as "actions inserted into practices," as Althusser put it.¹⁵ Ideology is an unconscious fantasy, inscribed in the very daily material practices of the subject. This unconscious fantasy is in fact what is termed by Lacan *le phantasme* (the phantasm or fundamental fantasy), that is, the scene that stages an unconscious desire and in which the subject finds its idiosyncratic way to relate to the big Other. The big Other, the representative of symbolic order—parent, priest, president, or any other position to which the subject himself has given the mandate to function as an authoritative agent of ideology¹⁶—is the support of the subject's reality, without which the consistency of the subject would not be possible. Ideology as an unconscious fantasy is what enables the cynical subject to retain his ironical distance from ideology, while in practice acting according to it. Without this reality-supporting fantasy the cynic would have to confront reality in its ghastly disintegration, as the impossible-Real. In the light of this, I will analyze Bardamu as a cynical and kynical figure.

Bardamu as a Cynical and Kynical Subject

At the beginning of the first chapter of the novel Bardamu is interpellated by his friend, Arthur Ganate: "It all began just like that. I hadn't said anything. I hadn't said a word. It was Arthur Ganate who started me off. [...]. He seemed to want to talk to me. So I listened" (*Journey* 1). But the Other who compels Bardamu to speak does not interpellate him into the dominant ideology, but provokes Bardamu to resist it. On first reading Bardamu seems to be portrayed as a kind of secular leftist anarchist who scorns the grandiloquence of the right wing-nationalistic-conservative ruling ideology, while Arthur appears as a naïve patriot who supports the existing order. Bardamu appears to be Arthur's kynic rival:

'Now there's a really great paper for you [*le Temps*]!' said Arthur, trying to get a rise out of me. 'There isn't another paper like it for defending the interests of the French race.'

'And I suppose the French race needs it, seeing that it doesn't exist!' said I promptly, to show that I knew what I was talking about.

But of course it exists! And a very splendid one it is too!' he insisted. 'It's the finest race in the world, and don't you believe any fool who tells you it isn't!' He had started in to harangue me for all he was worth. I held my ground, of course.

[...].

'You're right, Arthur, you're right there. Venomous yet docile, outraged, robbed,

Without guts and without spirit, they [our fathers] were as good as us all right. You certainly said it! Nothing really changes. Habits—ideas—opinions, we change them not at all, or if we do, we change them so late that it's no longer worthwhile. We are born loyal, and we die of it. Soldiers for nothing, heroes to all the world, monkeys with a gift of speech, a gift which brings us suffering, we are its minions. We belong to suffering; when we misbehave it tightens its hold on us.

[...].

'Talk about yourself ; you are nothing but an anarchist !' Always the little devil, you see, and just about as advanced as possible.

'You said it, fathead! I *am* an anarchist! And to prove it here's a sort of social prayer for vengeance I've written.

[...].

'That little piece of yours doesn't make sense in actual life. Personally I'm for the established order of things and I'm not fond of politics. Moreover, if the day should come when my country needs me, I certainly shan't hang back; it will find me ready to lay down my life for it. So there.' That was his answer to me. (1-3)

There are, nevertheless, clues that the conversation between the two is no more than an intellectual game, well aware of the political *Zeitgeist*. These clues lead to Bardamu's acting out of volunteering for the army marching off to war, while his patriot friend remains seated in the café.

In the beginning, before the argument between Arthur and Bardamu starts, Arthur pronounces an "opinion" later conveyed by his rival during the argument. It describes how "nothing has really changed" (1); how the French people remain the same, despite the widespread view of the industrial revolution turning society on its head. Acknowledging that these phrases are themselves common truisms, borrowed from the current ideological reserve, Bardamu says, "very proud at having come to these important conclusions ["ces vérités utiles" (*Voyage* 7)], we sat back feeling pleased with life and watched the ladies of the café" (*Journey* 1). Subsequently, Arthur incites Bardamu to negate him, in what turns out to be false piety for the sake of the ruling ideology, proving ironically that nothing really changes: Arthur "trying to get a rise out of [Bardamu]," and Bardamu answers him "to show

that I knew what I was talking about.” Then, when Arthur accuses Bardamu of anarchism, the latter remarks, referring to Arthur, “always a little devil, you see, and just about as advanced as possible.”

These phrases indicate that Bardamu and Arthur are aware, not only of the function of the bourgeois ideology apparatuses, but primarily of the discourse which applies to them and uncovers them. Bardamu knows well that his “opinions” prove nothing other than he is well informed, (“documenté” [*Voyage* 8]), familiar with the discourse that uncovers ideology, and Arthur is “a little devil” with the most advanced opinions. This theoretical game of uncovering ideology leads Bardamu to the heart of the ideological practices –recruitment to the army, the colonial apparatus, the capitalist industry and the medical establishment. In other words, Bardamu (and Arthur) know well that their arguments are not their own, but commonly held “opinions,” part of the prevailing public discourse; they also know well that they are, as Bardamu says, “singes parlants” (*Voyage* 8)¹⁷ who do not change either their masters or their opinions, and yet, they all but stick to their unconscious beliefs: The “patriot” Arthur adheres to his chair, and the “subversive” Bardamu joins the regiment that marches to war. That is why the ineffective argument finally tires out both of them, so that “I made it up with Arthur so as to put a stop to all this nonsense, once and for all. We agreed about almost everything, really” (*Journey* 3). Bardamu seals the argument with the slave ship parable. It vividly portrays the class struggle in the French society and the manner in which the ideological presuppositions and fabrications are “poured into [the] ears” of those located in the bottom of the social food chain (3). Likewise, it satirically describes the puerile yet effective techniques of martial interpellation summoning the masses to war:

“They have you up on deck. Then they put on their top-hats and let fly at you as follows: ‘See here, you set of sods!’ they say. ‘War’s declared. You’re going to board the bastards on *Country No.2* yonder and you’re going to smash them to bits! Now get on with it. There’s all the stuff you’ll need aboard. All together now. Let’s have it—as loud as you can make it! ‘God save *Country No. 1!*’ You’ve got to make them here you a long way off. There’s a medal and a cough-drop for the man who shouts the loudest! God in Heaven! And if there’s any of you who don’t want to die at sea, why, of course, you can go and die on land, where it takes even less time than it does here.’”

‘You’ve just about hit it,’ agreed Arthur, who’d certainly become very easy to convince.

Whereupon, damn me if a regiment of soldiers didn’t come marching past the café where we were sitting, with the Colonel in front of his horse and all, looking simply fine and as smart as you make them. I gave just one great leap of enthusiasm.

‘I’ll go and find out if that’s what it’s like!’ I cried to Arthur, and off I went to join up, as fast as my legs would carry me. (4)

How is one to understand Bardamu's act of enlisting in the regiment? From one aspect, the proclamation, "I'll go and found out if that's what it's like!" is part of Bardamu's cynical reason, an attempt to put his slave galley speech into practice, to expose the opportunism and crude interest lying behind the nationalistic slogans. But at the same time, and from another angle, this phrase reveals Bardamu's ideological fantasy. That is to say, Bardamu knows well what he is doing; that enlisting will put him in the third class of the galley and wreck his life, and yet, off he goes and straight away.

There is, however, a third aspect. Bardamu's enlisting turns about to be a whim, an acting out directed to the big Other (personified in Arthur). The meaning of this acting out is that there is something Arthur *qua* Other missed, "deaf" to Bardamu's discourse, and on account of which Bardamu sends his non-verbal message to Arthur, while being himself unconscious of the meaning of that message. We can assess that the message encrypted in the acting out was that Bardamu was not exactly what he claimed to be, that he is not necessarily an anti-nationalist anarchist. Yet, later on, Bardamu realizes that he made a mistake when enlisting and does not stand behind his acting out. What, then, is Bardamu's belief? Apparently, Bardamu does not know what he believes and the *Journey*, from its beginning to its end, appears to be a quest for an inalienable belief, for a signifier that will be the subject's own:

And yet I hadn't gone as far in life as Robinson had... I hadn't made a success of it, that much was certain; I hadn't acquired one single good solid idea like the one he'd had, to get himself bumped off like that. An idea as large as my own clumsy great head, greater than all the fear that was in it, a beautiful idea, some splendid, some really comfortable idea to die with... [...]. It was all no good. My own idea, the ideas I had, roamed loose in my mind with plenty of gaps in between them; they were like little tapers, flickering and feeble, shuddering all through life in the midst of a truly appalling, awful world. (538-39)

For the (both neurotic and perverse) cynic, there are always "others" who believe, while the pervert cynic himself "knows" (the neurotic is not usually sure that he knows, and he casts doubt). As I have pointed out, Bardamu and Arthur "know" the widespread popular opinions and can, therefore, play with them without, allegedly, being tricked into them, whereas "others" actually believe in these opinions. Žižek writes about:

[T]he tension of knowledge versus the disavowed belief embodied in external ritual—the situation often described in the terms of cynical reason whose formula, the reverse of Marx's, was proposed decades ago by Peter Sloterdijk: I know what I am doing; nonetheless, I am doing it...." This formula, however, is not as unambiguous as it may appear—it should be supplemented with: "...because I don't know what I believe."¹⁸

As we shall see, Bardamu's ambiguity regarding the war persists as our non-duped narrator is captured in his own trick / acting out.

When the festive parade of the regiment subsides and the cheers become silent, Bardamu comes back to his senses and says, "It's not such fun, after all. I doubt if it's worth it" and is about to leave (*Journey* 5). But unfortunately, it is too late. "They'd shut the gate behind us, quietly; the civilians had. We were caught, like rats in a trap" (5). Later on, throughout the whole section on the war, Bardamu continues to express his repugnance towards the war and what it represents: inherent hatred, violence and cruelty of men toward their fellow beings; self-interest and self-preservation; mad competitiveness and conceit. He describes the war as the arena where, in Freud's language, the death drive and the pleasure principle take part in a jumble.¹⁹ He emphasizes his will to escape, to evaporate from this madness and repeats incessantly his "cowardice" as the only sign of sanity in a furnace of lunacy. As the war advances, Bardamu's reactions of physical, as well as moral and psychic repulsion increase and he finally collapses and is admitted to observation (*Journey* 58-59), suffers from what seems to be post-traumatic stress and is hospitalized (60), and, later on, is dismissed from the army (114).

Nevertheless, the war yields in Bardamu mixed feelings of repulsion and attraction. These affects call to mind Kristeva's concept of abjection, the vertigo of hovering borders and collapsed meanings. The abject points at what were cast away from the body as a secretion, yet it keeps alluring and repelling. It undermines identities, systems and orders, and transgresses borders and laws.

At first glance, it seems that Bardamu's reaction to the war, as well as other later occasions, for example, examining his patients, has to do with abjection, the feeling of loathing and fascination. According to Kristeva, the symbolic agency in Céline's oeuvre is "a fleeting, derisory, and even idiotic illusion, which is yet upheld."²⁰ Instead of the symbolic father, there is an imaginary clownish, ridiculous one. Auguste, the father in Céline's second novel, *Death on the Installment Plan*, is an absurdly mad figure.²¹ This flaccidity of the symbolic may pertain to the disavowal mechanism of the pervert, in which the subject knows well the law of the father, and yet does not act according to it. In contrast to the psychotic, whose foreclosure rejects the law completely, the pervert acknowledges the existence of the law, but denies his own submission to it, or, according to Fink's version, the pervert endeavors to bring the law into being in order to delimit *jouissance*.²²

Yet, Kristeva's analysis cannot be integrated with this study for at least two reasons. Firstly, Kristeva does not necessarily locate Céline in the perverse structure. Rather, her analysis of Céline's hallucinatory language and his "delirium" suggests the latter is a borderline more than a pervert. Although abjection is related to perversion—the abject distorts the law, uses it in order to deny it,²³ the phenomenon of abjection, according to Kristeva, appears essentially in borderline, that is, psychotic rather than perverse, subjects. Kristeva describes abjection as an intersection of phobia, obsession and perversion. The symbolic authority is not met with denial or

disavowal, but with a hallucination which makes it both ideal and dreadful (Kristeva 44-51). Consequently, the Other is not the borderline's object, but his abject, clownish, fallen and repulsive, and the borderline cannot be constituted as a subject: "No subject, no object: petrification on one side, falsehood on the other" (47).

This leads to the second reason for the inadequacy of relating abjection to this study of *Journey*, ideology and *jouissance*. The term abjection indicates Kristeva's distancing from Lacan, while upholding a Lacanian vocabulary, and her turning to the theory of object relations: the abject replaces the object, who, for Kristeva, personifies the Other. Conversely, for Lacan, the Other is not an object, but the locus of speech. The Other may be only represented by another person in so far as the latter occupies the function of the symbolic order for the subject.²⁴ Contrary to Kristeva's analysis, I will prove that Bardamu is clinically and structurally perverse, since, at least in *Journey*, he is using the Other as an instrument of *jouissance*, or, put alternatively by Lacan, he "makes himself the instrument of the Other's *jouissance*."²⁵

Back to the war in *Journey*, the feelings of (self) repulsion and disenchantment with the latest object of *jouissance* increase and Bardamu's only wish becomes to get away and quit the battlefield (7). What the cynic (and the pervert) most despise is being taken in.²⁶ Bardamu feels deceived: "I couldn't make it out. I was a cuckold in everything—in women, in money, in ideas. I was being deceived and I was unhappy" (*Journey* 76). Being deceived is unbearable for the pervert. As Fink and Mannoni explain, the pervert's schemes and manipulations produce a scene where he has the upper hand, and where he initiates and controls the *jouissance* of the Other.²⁷ Since he disavows the Law of the big Other, he stages a scene where an other (o lower case) plays the role of the Other who coerces the Law, or where the pervert himself plays the role of the Father instead of the disavowed signifier *Nom-du-Père*. But when the pervert encounters what he interprets as the Law itself, his whole plot collapses. Instead of being the master of the situation, he becomes the fool, the deceiver deceived, the non-duped who has erred.²⁸ This collapse means a fall from the status of the subject, extreme destitution, where a Real hole gapes in the pervert's structured reality. This hole may be filled only by the restoration of the fetish or the role of the plotter.

As will be clarified later on, for Bardamu, the "knowledge" of life is the fetish which fills the hole. Knowledge is gained by living and / as suffering, picking one's wounds or the wounds of others. That is, knowledge is equivalent to the infinite, unlimited *jouissance*:

This is how I had figured it out: I'll discover, by way of experiment, just how much of a flare-up you can start with yourself if you try. But the thing is you're never through with an excitement and to-do, you never know quite how far you'll have to go if you start being really outspoken. Or what people are still hiding from you... Or what they'll show you yet... if you live long enough, if you look far enough into their sillinesses. It all had to be begun all over again. (*Journey* 289)

Along with the detestable duty to fight, it is the war that enables Bardamu to “*entrer dans le fond de la vie*” (240),²⁹ to experience and know “Life, the one and only mistress of all men” (245). Getting into the thick of Life, into its bone marrow and blood capillaries is not only Bardamu’s safety valve against the lack in the Other, that is, his fetish, or as he puts it, “this confounded fate of mine,” “my *raison d’être*” (243). In this darkness of life, where the ugly truth about people, apparatuses and beliefs is revealed, Bardamu finds his aspiration, satisfaction and *jouissance*:

Truly everything that is really interesting goes on in the dark. One knows nothing of the inner history of people (63).

Studying changes you, it makes a man proud. Before one was only hovering round life. You think you’re a free man, but you get nowhere. Too much of your time spent dreaming. You slither along on words. That’s not the real thing at all. Only intentions and appearances. You need something else. With my medicine, though I wasn’t very good at it, I had come into closer contact with men, beasts and creation. Now it was a question of pushing right ahead, foursquare, into the gist of things. Death comes chasing along after you, you’ve got to get a move on, and you have to find something to eat too, while you’re searching, and dodge war as well. That makes an awful lot of things to do. It isn’t easy. (254)

It’s nice to touch the precise moment when matter becomes life. You soar out to the infinite plains, which stretch out before mankind. ‘Ooo!’ you say, and ‘Ooo!’ As much as you can, you enjoy riding that moment, and it’s like great, wide desert sands... (508)

Ideology as a Sublime Object

Being fascinated by the exposed ugliness of the dark heart of Life and human beings becomes Bardamu’s pattern, his own private Law, a sublime object, a fetish. Why? Here I will draw on Mannoni’s distinction between neurotic and perverse disavowal and his explanation of the difference between faith and belief (Mannoni).³⁰ Belief belongs to the imaginary register, for example, belief in gods, spirits, a specific ideology, etc. Conversely, faith is related to the symbolic register, the commitment to the big Other and the pact between the subject and the big Other. The neurotic may disavow his belief in the imaginary level, yet he puts faith in the symbolic, whereas the pervert disavows that he believes in the imaginary level and cannot have faith in the symbolic. The neurotic represses the castration or the Name-of-the-Father, yet accepts them unconsciously, due to the “compensation” he receives by entering the symbolic order and acquiring the status of a subject (son, parent, citizen, etc.). The neurotic has faith in ideology as an indispensable symbolic and social order, and although he does not believe in a particular ideology, he has (an unconscious) faith in “ideology in general,” as Althusser put it, that is, ideology as an unconscious eternal formation (Althusser 120-22).

On the contrary, the pervert, as Mannoni points out, is not ready to be deceived. He is not capable, structurally, of “playing the game,” participating in the symbolic pact. What the pervert disavows is the lack of the mother, the lack which enables (the mother’s and the infant’s) desire. As Fink clarifies, it is not the mother’s demand of the child to be the object that fills her lack which produces the perverse structure, but the failure and insufficiency of the paternal function. In the perverse structure, the paternal function exists as a prohibition of incest—*le Non du Père*, but it is disavowed as the Law which inscribes the prohibition, names the lack and opens up the way for desire—*le Nom du Père*. Thus the pervert knows well that mother does not have a phallus, and yet he acts as if she has one (by conferring an object, a shoe or a piece of cloth, the status of the phallus—this pattern holds specifically in fetishism). In relation to ideology or the symbolic order, the pervert may provide the same ambivalent statement as the neurotic, but his unconscious reason for adhering to ideology will be different from that of the neurotic. Ideology is (unconsciously) conceived by the pervert not as a dimension of the symbolic Law, but as another Law, which replaces the impotent Law of the Father. The pervert’s ideology is not ideology in general, but a particular ideology, elevated to the level of ideology in general, attempting incessantly to replace it. The pervert will hold on to his ideology because it is the last frontier that covers the traumatic lack, the same lack which is unbearable for the pervert, and which, at the same time, he is eager to ascribe to the Other, enjoying the latter’s lack / wound. The pervert will treat ideology as a sublime object, an object raised “to the dignity of the Thing,”³¹ that is, a fetish, with its entire eroticized rituality. Ideology is thus conceived as *objet petit a*, an element of *jouissance* and the object which blocks and, at the same time, sustains the lack in the Other.

In light of this, Bardamu enlists in the army and goes to war because war, as a practice of the dominant militaristic and nationalistic ideology, signifies, on the one hand, the lack, impotence and insufficiency of the Other, a lack which the pervert believes that he himself is not subject to. On the other hand, war provides *jouissance* which conceals and seals the lack in the Other. In any event, the pervert insists on the Other’s *jouissance*, and ideology in *Journey* turns out to be a resource of *jouissance*.

This may also explain why Bardamu is not a revolutionary, as Trotsky pointed out.³² In certain conditions, for example, the end of the analytic treatment, the neurotic can replace the current dominant order and “change the coordinates of the constellation,” as Žižek puts it, that is, affect the symbolic.³³ This is due to the symbolic being the instance of the obligatory Law, the exception which enables the exchange of different signifiers or particular ideologies. According to Freud’s myth of *Totem and Taboo*, the murder of the primal obscene father who enjoyed all the women of the horde, constituted the law of castration, which established the primal father as the prohibited exception and allowed the exchange of permitted spouses. For the pervert, conversely, the symbolic is not obligatory and its vacancy is filled with a representation of the primal obscene father. That is, the pervert’s world is filled

with *jouissance* and not with desire and with a futile Law which does not enable the exchange of signifiers and ideologies. The pervert is enslaved to another Law (and not to the Law of the Other), to an ersatz ideology that endeavors to replace the ideology-in-general and without which the pervert would have to confront the impossible Real. Bardamu eventually (mis)recognizes the dominant exploitative capitalist, colonialist, chauvinist and nationalistic ideology as the ultimate prototypical ideology, thus becoming an impostor entangled in his own trick.

A Pattern of Jouissance

The proceedings that bring Bardamu to enlist in the regiment delineate a recurrent pattern to be found before any new adventure in the novel. Firstly, there is a process of expectations and hopes regarding the forthcoming adventure, fantasized by Bardamu and encouraged by an ideological propaganda. Bardamu apparently neither believes in nor relies on the ideological promises, and yet typically anticipates them with excitement. Then, when the expectations and promises are not fulfilled, disenchantment and disappointment follow, sometimes accompanied with the symptomatic phrases, “C’est tout à recommencer!” (*Voyage* 10),³⁴ “It all had to be begun all over again” (*Journey* 289), “Tout était à recommencer” (*Voyage* 470).³⁵ Bardamu expresses his disappointment: He has been deluded again; he knew that his hopes and fantasies would be smashed and he nevertheless went eagerly for them. Then the world of the pervert temporarily collapses, before returning to its original state. As Mannoni writes regarding Casanova’s entrapment by the big Other (embodied in the forces of nature of the storm and thunder), “[W]e rather frequently encounter similar moments of panic among perverts in analysis; they do not necessarily have a therapeutic effect. Once the panic subsides, there is a return to the status quo.” And this is due to disavowal being “a system of protection” against castration (Mannoni 87).

The recurrence of the discussed structural pattern is significant, since it unfolds the meaning of the contradiction “I know well, but all the same.” Bardamu does not draw any pleasure or satisfaction from the discouraging adventures, but the recurrence implies that he extracts *jouissance* from them. His enjoyment is combined with pain, abjection and terror. He rejoices in suffering. For example, when he sails to Africa, after his release from the army:

‘I’ll go to Africa,’ I said to myself. ‘The further away I go the better.’ [...].

They put me on this boat then, for me to go and try to make a new man of myself in the Colonies. They wished me well and were determined that I should make my fortune. Personally I only wanted to get away, but as one only ought always to look useful if one isn’t rich [...], it couldn’t very well last. [...]. So ‘Africa has it’ I said and I let myself be bounded towards the tropics, where I was told you only had not to drink too much and to behave fairly well to make your way at once.

[...]

For a packet of Pilett blades they were going to barter fine, long pieces of ivory with me, and birds of bright plumage and slaves under age. That's what I'd been promised. I was going to really live, so they told me. (*Journey* 114-15)

Bardamu is sent to Africa with ex-military men and colonial officers in an old rickety boat named *Admiral Bragueton*. At first their cruise is peaceful, but later on the weather changes, becoming sultry and disquieting. The heat and humidity are followed by disintegration and melting of objects and passengers alike. Bardamu, the only passenger who paid for his ticket, is harassed by crazy and enraged colonials and army officers, and turned into the scapegoat of the ship, "infamous unworthy wretch" (118). Bardamu overcomes their hatred and intended violence by again becoming an impostor: he shams a spectacle of patriotism, praises the "heroic officers" and tops it off by listening to and recounting fabricated tales of bravery from the war. But this deceptive way of self defense causes Bardamu to be filled with self-hatred. The deception here is intended to cover the terror and disintegration Bardamu undergoes when facing the enraged passengers. In contrast to other occasions, he does not have the upper hand in this situation:

Bit by bit, while this humiliating trial lasted, I felt my self-respect, which was about to leave me anyway, slipping still further from me, then going completely and at last definitely gone, as if officially removed. Say what you like, it's a very pleasant sensation. After this incident I've always infinitely free and light; morally, I mean, of course. (125)

When night falls, Bardamu takes the opportunity to flee into the darkness to his next adventure.

The same pattern occurs again, with Bardamu's arrival to New York, and later on, with his return to France. Murray notes too the recurrent pattern of enthusiastic expectations for spectacular adventures and the disenchantment in the novel, but he identifies it as a facet of ideological subversion in the satirical genre to which the novel belongs (Murray 158, 160). He claims that the depiction of the events on the ship and, subsequently, on land, where Bardamu is degraded and turned by the representatives of imperialism into an "unworthy wretch" are meant to undermine the imperial enterprise.

Yet, Murray's survey does not provide a complete explanation of Bardamu's course of action. A Lacanian perspective brings up the question of the subject's *jouissance*—what does Bardamu enjoy when he enters with all his might an adventure from which he will narrowly escape? I claim that, more than the uncovering of the ideological discourse, Bardamu enjoys the unveiling of the crude interests that lie behind the ideological claims. Bardamu enjoys, additionally and particularly, his becoming an "unworthy wretch," the sublime object of enjoyment which ideology feeds on, the plug in the hole of the big Other. It is this *jouissance* which Bardamu's adventures at the heart of darkness of ideology provide, and which crosses his

cynical reason: he knows well that the passengers of the *Admiral-Bragueton* will victimize him, and yet he chooses to play the role of the victim, while carefully plotting a position that will finally save his life. As a pervert, Bardamu wishes to control the *jouissance* of Others. He does not want that *jouissance* to control him so as to endanger his life, but rather, to put Others in a state of enjoyment / suffering. In their tortured enjoyment he finds his *jouissance*. Bardamu posits himself as *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire, the object which incites the others' violent and sexual drives, and is not only caught up in the network of the relationships on the ship, but also provides the others with the mandate to treat him as *objet petit a*, the remainder:³⁶ Although it seems that Bardamu does not have the upper hand in the orgiastic events of the ship, this is Bardamu, the (anti) hero and narrator, who is plotting his role as object *a*, the object of the Other's *jouissance*. Inscribing himself as the victim of the Other's *jouissance*, he ignites a masochistic orgy, where the Other becomes a spectacle of enjoyment: "A general moral rejoicing [*réjouissance*] was imminent aboard the *Admiral Bragueton*. This time the evil-eyed one wasn't going to get away with it. And that meant me" (*Journey* 118).

[T]here was one young governess who led the feminine element of the cabal. [...]. She was hardly ever separated from the Colonial officers, resplendent in their gorgeous tunics and armed with the oath they had sworn that they would annihilate me. [...]. In fact, I was a source of entertainment. This young lady spurred them on, invoked the wrath of Heaven on my head, wouldn't rest until I had been picked up in pieces, until I'd paid the penalty for my imaginary offence in full, been punished indeed for existing and, thoroughly beaten, bruised and bleeding, had begged for mercy under a rain of blows and kicks from the fine fellows whose pluck and muscular development she was aching to admire. Deep down in her wasted insides she was stirred at the thought of some magnificently blood-bespattered scene. The idea was as exciting to her as being raped by a gorilla. [...]. I was the victim. The whole ship clamored for my blood, seemed to tremble from kneeling in expectation. (121-22)³⁷

And after Bardamu reconciles the enraged group of soldiers with his cajolery discussion, he says:

By Gad, I was the fellow to make a party go! They slapped their thighs in approbation. No one else could make life so enjoyable in spite of the moist horror of these latitudes. The point is that I was listening beautifully. (128)

As a cynical pervert, Bardamu knows well what the Other(s) desire is, and he hastens to fulfill that alleged desire and to become the *objet a*. He is interested in the *jouissance* of Others, and thus portrays so well the sexual-violent vibrations and frissons of the ship and its passengers who are excited to see his downfall. After he manages to escape his lot, Bardamu functions as *objet a*, the object of enjoyment, for the officers who recount their tales of bravery.

Bardamu describes a similar ecstatic violent-sexual experience when he works at “Ford.” Here, as on the *Admiral- Bragueton* though in a different material reality, everything solid melts into one piece of steel, men and machines become one, and in this catastrophic copulation Bardamu (as well as the other workers) serves as object *a*, plugging the Real of the capitalist Other and becoming its object of *jouissance*:

The whole building shook, and one’s self from one’s soles to one’s ears was possessed by this shaking, which vibrated from the ground, the glass panes and all this metal, a series of shocks from floor to ceiling. One was forced to become a machine oneself, the whole of one’s carcase quivering in this vast frenzy of noise, which filled you within, and all round the inside of your skull and lower down rattled your bowels and climbed to your eyes in infinite unending strokes. (238)

Jouissance as the Capitalist Injunction

The will of surplus enjoyment and obtaining *objet petit a*, the object that fills the lack in the Other, urges Bardamu to taste repeatedly “a desire for fresh adventures and new worlds to conquer” (201),³⁸ even when it costs him his love (Molly) and well-being. In addition, every adventure merges with a mode of production and ideology that characterizes the epoch: the First World War, the Colonial enterprise, mass production and industrialization, the constitution of the establishments of science and medicine. Bardamu draws his *jouissance* from getting into the thick of things and wallowing in the dust and blood of life, and his unstoppable will-to-enjoy (*volonté-de-jouissance*) is supported, encouraged and induced by the different ideologies and modes of production which structure modern life.

Bardamu’s last major adventure is the medical escapade, the exploration of the sick and dying body, of flesh and blood, both supported and constituted by the medical establishment. I will conclude with this experience, and show how the ends of *jouissance*, the perverse structure and the capitalist ideology meet.

As a doctor, Bardamu mostly watches his patients passively, witnessing their suffering and decay. He faces their torments helplessly, unable neither to better their condition nor save them. He is intrigued and amazed by their pain and dying. Instead of being the Other, the authoritative doctor who conducts the session, Bardamu carefully observes every moment of their deterioration, and participates in the patients’ and their relatives’ *jouissance*. The enjoyment of Others astounds, overwhelms and paralyzes him, and he cannot react against it and restrict it. For example, in the case of the pregnant young woman and her horrific mother, the latter is ashamed of the conduct of her reckless daughter and refuses to hospitalize her, playing “the leading part as intermediary between her daughter and myself. She didn’t give a damn what happened to the play, she was all set, and having a wonderful time” (*Journey* 275-76).

Bardamu, weary and depressed by the mother's boisterous scene, silently listens to the girl's drops of blood fall onto the floor:

Too great a humiliation, too much trouble leads to absolute inertia. The world is too heavy a burden for you to lift. You give up. All the same I did ask, timidly, whether the placenta had come away entirely yet. The girl's pale hands, bluish at the tips, hung down loose on each side of the bed. My question was answered by the mother with a further flood of awful lamentations. But to pull myself together was really more than I could do.

I had been so long overcome by depression myself, I'd been sleeping so badly, that in this chaos I was no longer in the least interested as to whether any one thing happened before anything else. I only reflected that it was easier listening to this mother's wailings sitting down than standing up. (276)

Sitting down passively also enables Bardamu to reflect and compare the mother's and daughter's bygone sexual qualities and build a "psychological" profile of the mother (276-77). This scene as a whole may serve as a paradigm of a perverse social relation. Bardamu, knows well what he has to do, and yet betrays his vocation—the doctors' oath, playing again the part of the victim, watches the daughter dying and the mother exclaiming her moralistic vows. The mother, ignoring her daughter's condition, enjoys the scene she has made for the doctor at the expense of her daughter. And, finally, the daughter is enjoyed by the two living persons who will do nothing to help her.

How is this scene related to the dominant capitalist ideology? Bardamu's occupation is attached to the scientific and medical establishment. It is, thus, part of the discourse of the university, which according to Žižek, is the characteristic discourse of capitalism. The scientific discourse and the discourse of capitalism share the structure of the university discourse:

$$\frac{S_2}{S_1} \rightarrow \frac{a}{\mathcal{S}}$$

Fig.1 The discourse of the university

In the discourse of the university S_2 , that is, knowledge or the chain of signifiers, is in the dominant position, that of the speaking agent. This knowledge claims to be factual and scientific, although it hides its foundation in a Master (S_1) which is in the position of truth. Bardamu's scientific knowledge is not (only) impartial, but draws its authority from the scientific establishment, which is full of contradictory interests and power struggles, as described lengthily by the narrator (*Journey* 294-301). Turning to the discourse of capitalism, this means that "The facts... are not integrated into comprehensive symbolic arrangement; instead they are the ever-conflicting guidelines and opinions of myriad experts" (Dean 98). As Parapine,

Bardamu's teacher and colleague, asserts, when the latter asks him for an advice on the treatment of the dying boy, Bébér: "Amid so many unstable theories, so much contradictory data, the reasonable thing, when it comes down to it, is to make no definite choice. Do the best you can, my friend!" (*Journey* 300). The decline of symbolic efficiency is one of the features that Žižek finds in nowadays capitalist ideology (Dean 98-99). It pertains to the subject's perplexity regarding any ideology and "truths," and his cynical reason and deficiency of belief.

Back to the university discourse, S2, knowledge, addresses *a*, who is in the position of the Other. In the scientific discourse the subject is considered an object of investigation. Recall Bardamu's statements about his insatiable "curiosity" regarding the human body and mind, quoted here previously. In Capitalism the subject is addressed as an object of excess, a kernel of enjoyment (Dean 98). He is referred to as a capricious and unstable set of needs, desires and drives, that is, as the object of *jouissance*. Žižek defines the second characteristic of capitalism as an injunction to enjoy that addresses the subject by the obscene dark shadow of the symbolic order—the superego. The injunction to enjoy is contradictory, inconsistent and impossible to fulfill, and thereby defines enjoyment. For example, the encouragement to consume fatty and salty food, and at the same time to maintain strict diet and fitness, is conflicting. In *Journey* the superego's injunction to enjoy may be seen, for example, in Bardamu's experience at "Ford," when the doctor who examines the candidates for the job says to Bardamu:

'Your studies won't be any use to you here, my lad. You haven't come here to think, but to go through the motions that you'll be told to make... We've no use for intellectuals in this outfit. What we want is chimpanzees. Let me give you a word of advice: never say a word to us about being intelligent. We will think for you, my friend. Don't forget it.' (*Journey* 237)

Soon after, Bardamu merges with the other workers and machines in the factory into one vibrating piece of *jouissance*.

The pervert, Bardamu, may be considered as capitalism's ultimate consumer and distributor—an ideal counterpart to the university and scientific discourses of capitalism. That is why he is thrown from one capitalist enterprise to another. He fits into a society whose symbolic mandate is inefficient, where the Name-of-the-Father is not taken seriously. In this society, equipped with scientific knowledge and authority, he can position himself in the place of the symbolic shadow, the superego, enjoining Others to enjoy, and participating in their enjoyment. Bardamu's mission of exploring the human body and soul strays away from the mere curiosity and the benefitting of humanity that may characterize the doctor or the scientist. Rather, as a representative of the scientific establishment, the medical profession serves as an axe for Bardamu to grind, a vocation behind which he can hide his particular interest: to be present at the Other's *jouissance* and be the object of *jouissance*, which fills the lack in the Other.

Notes

1. Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, trans. John Marks (London : Chatto and Windus, 1934). *Voyage au bout de la Nuit*. 1932, Dossier par Phillip Destruel (Paris: Gallimard, 1996). Henceforth cited in the text as *Journey* or *Voyage*.
2. Jack Murray, *The Landscapes of Alienation: Ideological Subversion in Kafka, Céline and Onetti* (California: Stanford UP, 1991), 128-130.
3. *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (1937), *L'École des cadavres* (1938), *Les beaux draps* (1941).
4. Henri Godard, *Poétique de Céline* (Paris: Bibliothèque des idées, éditions Gallimard, 1985). Butler, Gerald J., "Three Contributions to the Reading of Céline" in James Flynn ed. *Understanding Céline* (Seattle: Genitron P, 1984) 133-186. See, for example: "[F]or how could those two novels [*Voyage au bout de la Nuit* and *Mort à Crédit*] so full of compassion (as they are often described now) be written by—an anti-Semite?" 157.
5. David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1995). Scullion, Rosemary and Solomon Philip H. (eds.), *Céline and the Politics of Difference* (New Hampshire: UP of New England, 1995). Roussin, Philippe, *Misère de la Littérature, Terreur de l'Histoire : Céline et la Littérature Contemporaine* (Paris : Gallimard, 2005).
6. Sandrine Sanos, *The Aesthetics of Hate: Far-Right Intellectuals, Anti-Semitism, and Gender in 1930s France* (California: Stanford, 2012).
7. James Flynn, ed, *Understanding Céline* (Seattle: Genitron P, 1984) 5.
8. Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Conversations with Professor Y*, trans. Stanford Luce (Champaign : Dalkey Archive Press, 2006) 13.
9. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 1983, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987). Specifically in the last part of his book, 384-533.
10. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 124.
11. Jodi Dean, *Žižek's Politics* (NY and London: Routledge, 2006) 190.
12. Žižek, *Sublime* 28-33.
13. Nevertheless, there are few exceptions to this corpus of particular ideological / anti-ideological criticism: Jack Murray concentrates on the ideological subversive and satirical effect of Céline's novel. His account of ideology is based on Fredric Jameson's, who saw ideology as a constant (and unconscious) production of "symbolic acts," constitutive meanings and ideas, and emphasized the subversive political effect of literary products (Murray 2-3). Yet what Jameson and Murray's accounts lack is the way the ruling ideology persists, in spite of subversive and satirical effects in literary texts, as well as other cultural products, and the way in which ideology structures the social reality and is indispensable. Another study that takes into account the question of ideology as an unconscious structure is Andreas Bjørnerud's doctoral dissertation, *Beckett, Céline, Lacan: The Death of 'Man'*. Bjørnerud's work can be considered a major contribution to the study of bourgeois consciousness in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and especially between the two world wars. Bjørnerud points out the transformation of bourgeois ideology "from liberal to monopoly capitalism" during the interwar period, when the enlightened autonomic subject enslaves himself willingly, "masochistically," as Bjørnerud writes, to the ruling ideology although he knows that it will eliminate him. Nevertheless, this submissive subject believes himself to be free.

Although Bjørnerud does not develop this idea according to the Lacanian-Žižekian analysis of enjoyment as the surplus of ideology, he does describe here, without articulating it, the cynical reason of the late capitalism. See Bjørnerud, Andreas, *Beckett, Céline, Lacan : The Death of 'Man'*, Diss. Oxford U (Bodleian), 1992 (Oxford: Oxford U, 1993) 25-26.

14. “‘Ideological’ is not the ‘false consciousness’ of a (social) being but this being itself in so far as it is supported by ‘false consciousness’.” Thus we have finally reached the dimension of the symptom, because one of its possible definitions would also be ‘a formation whose very consistency implies a certain non-knowledge on the part of the subject’: the subject can ‘enjoy his symptom’ only in so far as its logic escapes him—the measure of the success of its interpretation is precisely its dissolution.” (Žižek, *Sublime* 21). Italics in original.
15. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)” in Slavoj Žižek ed., *Mapping Ideology* (London: Verso, 1994) 127.
16. “I am only what I am for the others, yet simultaneously I am the one who self-determines myself, i.e., who determines which network of relations to others will determine me. In other words, I am determined by the network of (symbolic) relations precisely and only insofar as I, qua void of self-relating, self-determine myself this way.” (Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* [Durham: Duke UP, 1993] 131-32).
17. “Monkeys with a gift of speech” (*Journey* 2).
18. Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT P, 2003) 5.
19. Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” in James Strachey et al. eds., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 18. (London: Hogarth and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953-1974) 7-64.
20. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982) 135.
21. Kristeva *Powers* 170-73.
22. Bruce Fink, “Perversion,” in Molly Ann Rothenberg, Dennis Foster and Slavoj Žižek eds., *Perversion and the Social Relation* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003) 38, 43-44.
23. Kristeva *Powers* 15-16.
24. Evans, Dylan, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996) 135-6.
25. Jacques Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious,” trans. Bruce Fink, Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg, in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2002) 697.
26. Octave Mannoni, “I Know Well, but All the Same...” Trans. G. M. Goshgarian, in Molly Ann Rothenberg, Dennis Foster and Slavoj Žižek eds., *Perversion and the Social Relation* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003) 90.
27. Bruce Fink, “Perversion,” in Molly Ann Rothenberg, Dennis Foster and Slavoj Žižek eds., *Perversion and the Social Relation* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003) 38-67.
28. Based on Lacan’s pun, Le Nom-du-Père/Les non-dupes errent.
29. Meaning “to enter into the bottom of life” (my translation). This phrase is missing from Marks’s translation. See *Journey* 254.

30. See also: Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001) 109-10.
31. Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis (seminar VII)*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992) 112.
32. Leon Trotsky, "Céline and Poincaré: Novelist and Politician" in Paul N. Siegel ed., *Art and Revolution: Writings on Literature, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Pathfinder P, 1970) 191-203.
33. Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2006) 342.
34. In Marks's translation: "I doubt if it's worth it" (*Journey* 5).
35. In Marks's translation: "It hadn't been any good" (*Journey* 504).
36. The definition of *objet petit a* depends on the development of Lacan's teaching. I will not follow here its definition throughout all the stages of Lacan's teaching, but only mention the elaborations relevant to this essay. In 1957 Lacan presents the matheme of fantasy ($\$ \diamond a$) where *a* represents the object of desire. This is an imaginary partial object, which is imagined to be separated from the rest of the body. There are four part-objects: breast, excrement, voice and gaze. In a later elaboration *objet a* is a Real remainder that falls during the constitution of the subject as a speaking being. In Seminar VIII, on transference (1960-61) Lacan connects the *objet petit a* with the Greek term *agalma*, a precious object imagined to be found in the Other. This unattainable object is an object of lack, and as an object of lack it renders the Other desirable. In Seminar X, on anxiety (1962-63), *objet a* becomes connected with the Real, and it is the object which causes the anxiety. From 1963 onwards *objet a* becomes the object-cause of desire, that is, an unattainable object that incites the desire of the subject, and not the object toward which the desire aims. In *Seminar XX* (1969-70), *objet a* is defined as a remainder, the remains that has been left in the process of symbolization. *Objet a* is grasped as a surplus meaning and surplus-enjoyment. In addition, *objet a* plays the part of the analyst in the analytic treatment, when the analyst places himself as the object-cause of desire of the analysand. See Evans 128-29; Glowinski et al. 122-29.
37. The sexual connotation of the scene is also maintained in the name of the Captain who leads the confrontation with Bardamu: Captain Frémizon. *Frémir* means to shake and shudder, usually in sexual exaltation or disgust.
38. "Le goût de l'aventure et des nouvelles imprudences" (*Voyage* 190).

HENRY SUSSMAN

THEORY ON THE FLY

CRITICAL SYNTHESIS UNDER CONDITIONS OF MATERIAL PIRATING AND BORROWED TIME¹

1.

The figure of the *flâneur*, in large measure invented by Baudelaire, but elevated to its full notoriety in Benjamin's writings on the French Second Empire, keeps circulating back in an endless recursive loop to the Parisian haunts of her fascination, inclination, or fatal attraction. My own swings in and out of the virtual environment of *The Arcades Project* (*Das Passagen-Werk*)² over the past decade pursue a parallel cat-and-mouse dynamic. Benjamin rendered the account of modernization in Paris during the nineteenth century, an increasingly urgent preoccupation over the last thirteen years of his life, in snippets of historical documents and twentieth century accounts, interspersed with his occasional critical syntheses. This is at once a magisterial historico-critical summation, archive, and accounting in its own right and a key instance of what I have elsewhere termed, in recent work, a "dissolving book," a work that, in the tradition of the Bible itself, the Talmud, *Don Quixote*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Finnegans Wake*, Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, and Derrida's *Glas*, explodes the very formats and parameters indispensable for its legibility under the weight of its ramifications, marginalia, hypertexts, spinoffs, "strange loops," and free associations.³ The point at which I repeatedly arrive in my gravitation to such expansive and rambling works, those frustrating any attempt to render an authoritative reading or critique of them, is the inescapable realization that they have been always already embedded with many of the key aspects that we attribute to self-referential and autopoietic programs and machines despite their preponderantly arising in an age prior to the hardware. It may be the fate of *The Arcades Project* to dissolve, having run its course through a sequence of *Konvolutes* (*Konvoluten*) or chapters devoted to fashion, iron and glass construction, photography, prostitution and gambling, and Charles Baudelaire among other topoi. But this transpires not before it has embodied, simulated, and performed the full complexity of life, on socio-cultural, economic, psycho-social, and even unconscious levels--collective as well as individual, amid extreme conditions of urban density, political theology, corporate hegemony, technocratic reproducibility and power. If *The Arcades Project* may be said to constitute the very Bible or operating system of industrial modernization, it simulates while it dissolves. It encompasses within its virtual "binding" a storehouse of the complexity embedded in the hyper-modernity that it simulates.

The *Arcades Project* is a superclimate of the many zones or neighborhoods making it up. This becomes explicit in Convolute D, juxtaposing Parisian moods with the obsession with the weather running a full gamut of contemporary accounts and signature artifacts of the Second Empire, including Meryon's engravings, the Baudelairean *Fleurs du mal*, and Gustave Caillebotte's signature canvas, "*Rue de Paris; temps de pluie*" (also known as, "*La Place de l'Europe*," 1877). Attenuated browsing through this archive and compendium produces a naval pilot's familiarity with the currents, eddies, and mini-climates among and between the citations, the "information bits" largely composing it. These in turn form the *environment* in which some of Benjamin's definitive formulations, on such tropes of modernity as collecting and allegory, the dialectical image, and "petrified unrest" arise. Indeed, within the "framework" of *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin's memorable theoretical syntheses "happen" against the backdrop or manifold of the citations of others in a "figure-ground" relation.

Within the compass of this enigmatic compilation, Benjamin's culminating critical crystallizations have been written on borrowed time, under street-conditions simulating the totalitarian anomie that overtook Europe in the decades between the 1920's and the 1940's. There is no time in *The Arcades Project* to accord the overarching critical overview of an epoch, however incisive, the showcase it would ordinarily claim in an academic treatise, a work composed under "normalcy," with a full measure of disciplinary and institutional stability (if not stasis). Not only was the *Passagen-Werk* written under conditions of what would now be called extreme precarity⁴; the tenuousness of the socio-political as well as personal circumstances under which it was written extends systematically across its composition, progression, and stylistics.

The Arcades Project furnishes us with a compelling panorama on the emergence of what I would term "theory on the ground" or "on the run" out of a seemingly chaotic agglomeration of archival materials, retrospective accounts, and critical observations—preponderantly of fragmentary scale and jarring impact. The overarching climate of this *Werk* is pure turbulence. Even approaching social and political catastrophe toward the end of his Parisian run, Benjamin has gathered the telling citations comprising most of *The Arcades Project* in the Bibliothèque Nationale and other Parisian archives with the same playful inquisitiveness with which the child (another central persona in his critical writings) collects its beloved "good objects," such as the waste-materials of adult construction and craft, and with them improvises the discoveries of its virtual play-world. Indeed, the multidimensional playfulness of childhood has never abandoned either the figure of the irreducibly historicizing "*Sammler*" of Convolute I, nor his counterpart, the invariably quirky and even violent allegorist of the same pages, who somehow manages to torque historical reconstruction into full-fledged critique, in its fully radical and incommensurate prescription

The Arcades Project's most telling "authority" consists in the materials and citations that it can gather and register on its display-screen in a hurry. It is, therefore, the work of philosophy synthesized and formulated under conditions of improvised fieldwork, of what in the social sciences would be termed "quasi-experimentation."⁵ Its major theoretical inroads pursue a menagerie of arcane topics: iron and glass as the first inherently "smart" materials to have found widespread architectural and urban deployment; conditions under which a collective socio-cultural "awakening" might be conceivable; the fate of critical lucidity amid the dialectical "winds" of historical catastrophe. One has not "read" *The Arcades Project* until one has traced the metamorphosis of citational polyvocality and even randomness into stunning critical insight—one that, akin to the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), entraps

us within the double-binds of systematic closure, with insight and circumspect emerging only in borrowed time, “on the fly.” It is this crystallization to which the remainder of the essay will be dedicated: to how *The Arcades Project*, a work overwhelmed from the outset in literary and historical debt to the degree that it is composed preponderantly of citations, liberates itself from the constriction of precedence and predetermination, erupting into a poetics of insight and commitment to ongoing critical discernment and discrimination at all costs. And indeed, for Benjamin, as opposed to subsequent generations of academic professionals, this line of open-ended inquiry and inscription came at all costs: of his patrimony, his home, his library, everything.

Benjamin's radical insistence on allowing the surviving and contemporary materials of Parisian modernization under the Second Empire to speak for themselves may well constitute the defining watermark defining not only *The Arcades Project* but the entire genre of historical narratives and critical receptions crystallized through compilation and grafting rather than through rendering authoritative commentary. It is of course in the electronic media, under the guise of what we call topically configured websites, that Benjamin's original genre of convolutes has consolidated itself definitively. In terms of contemporary cybernetics, *The Arcades Project* constitutes a network of textual materials configured under the politics of radical democracy: they have, to the same degree as Walter Benjamin, their “collector” and their “allegorist,” been empowered to speak on behalf of themselves and the perspectives from which they emanate; also among and between themselves. The materials, including the invariably occasional and offhand comments by Walter Benjamin, form the feedback loops and constitute the virtual domain of what Gregory Bateson,⁶ Anthony Wilden,⁷ and Douglas R. Hofstadter⁸ treat as an “open system,” my own term is, again, a “dissolving book.” The diverse materials of *The Arcades Project* may be also thought of as a climate-zone in which the textual extracts and fragments interrelate as much through the randomness of turbulence as through cumulative argumentation or topical coherence.

My purpose in this essay is to gain some traction on the play between the archival materials of *The Arcades Project* and the stunningly poetic and epigrammatic formulations (concentrated in Convolutes K-N but by no means limited to them) that were to constitute Benjamin's consummate additions to the literature of critical theory. I am arguing that the very conditions of material destitution, statelessness, homelessness, and “borrowed time” under which Benjamin lived and labored particularly 1933-40 played a constitutive role—not only in the formulations on historical epistemology and catastrophe abounding in Convolute N, but in the very possibility for theoretical deliberation and efficacy in the subsequent stages of the modernization whose emergence in nineteenth-century Paris he chronicled and, in keeping with allegory, performed. Without venturing into explicit detail regarding the “survival” of Benjamin's sensibility as well as *oeuvre* in the post-World War II period, I cannot help but surmise the enduring impact of the script of “theory on the fly” upon such master-strokes of twentieth-century critical theory as the following: Jacques Lacan's crystallizing for his *Seminars* a prose medium more redolent of the abrupt disruptions and digressions of an analytical session than of a Freudian case-study or “master-elucidation”;⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's writing their “Capitalism and Schizophrenia” diptych from the perspective of what they term “the body without organs” and “smooth space” rather than from putative hierarchical (and institutional) academic authority;¹⁰ and, Jacques Derrida's highlighting, in the decisive allegorical works of his *oeuvre*—including “Tympan,” “Plato's Pharmacy,” “The Double Session,” and *Glas*—the sub-semantic “noise” or static nonetheless of decisive

significance both within the architecture and the dismantling of knowledge.¹¹ These memorable critical artifacts, epitomizing the literature of contemporary critical theory, reside at a certain pitch of dramatic uncertainty. In multiple dimensions, they are themselves expressions of a quasi-theory or “theory on the fly,” one fully modulated by conditions of homelessness, transitory movement and temporality, and professional *instability*, that Walter Benjamin first submitted to a comprehensive test-trial or trial-run.

What this demonstration presupposes, before it turns, inevitably, to chapter and verse, is a short list of propositions that have crystallized to me over years of deciphering *The Arcades Project* and encapsulating it for students:

Every convolute, that is, loosely thematically organized compartment of *The Arcades Project*, fluctuates between the materials that Benjamin has found most relevant and a theorization, often but not always bearing Benjamin’s signature, immanent to that particular collation of materials or mini-climate. In Convolute A, where Benjamin has defined the Parisian arcades and what transpired there, as well as introduced, always through the medium of citations, their thumbnail history, the emergent theoretical formulations concern such issues and phenomena as signage and naming itself. Only when Benjamin takes on, in Convolute I, the standardization and new emphasis placed on middle-class residential space—as always, with relevant first-hand accounts and twentieth-century recapitulations as the intermediaries—does he hazard the theoretical personifications of the collector and the allegorist, both of whom, in different respects, embody the accumulation and display of consumer commodities within the post-Hausmannian apartment. This is to say that in certain designated eddies or back-alleys of *The Arcades Project*, theoretical formulations advanced initially in a purely local and topical setting, instances including the theory of fashion and the models of historical progression evolving from fashions, or the theory of supplementarity inextricably intertwined with the so-called “black-markets” in prostitution and gambling, increase in power or “chunk” themselves into formulations concerning knowledge or writing themselves. This is another way of saying that in certain sections, notably Convolumes K-N, the stage-by-stage theorization of the benchmarks of modernization covered by *The Arcades Project* loops back upon itself, attaining new levels of programmatic power. The autopoietically upgraded operating system of *The Arcades Project* turns outward—beyond both Paris and the parameters of its own investigation—toward the very configuration of critique amid conditions of historical catastrophe.

I’m implying here that *The Arcades Project*, not unlike Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, stages some process of increase, or sublimation in conceptual power. But the stages along this progressive realization are anything but the carefully orchestrated, sequentially planted, and dialectically mechanical developments that Hegel plots out for *Geist* in his *Phänomenologie* (and in other evolutionary treatises and schemata that it inspired). I will present the inevitable summary of the quantum leaps and other “strange loopings” (the term is Douglas Hofstadter’s)¹² in theory-power in the course of *The Arcades Project* with the greatest compression and brevity that I can manage. Among the many wonders of *The Arcades Project* are the subjects and scenarios that Benjamin selected at the outset of the work as those indispensable to a retrospective processing of modernization in Paris under the Second Empire. How is it that Benjamin could deem the primary materials deployed in the city’s remaking, its subterranean zones, its weather, and even its emotional moods or climate as decisive factors in its modernization and in its enduring ethos and *Gestalt*? Wouldn’t that mean that materialist history, the account satisfying the Marxian imperative that the impact of labor and the material

conditions of life be factored into all retrospective equations, is as much the history of the intangibles as the tangibles?

Just as Benjamin places his own comments in the same epigrammatic and fragmentary form as the citations that he has culled from hundreds of sources, there is never any compartmentalization, in *The Arcades Project*, between the facts and materials of history, on the one hand, and meta-critique on the other. We are astonished on two levels that *The Arcades Project*, once the arcades' basic historical initiation and the local patois of their signage and vocabulary have been set out in Convolute A, turns to an intense scrutiny of fashion in the nineteenth-century, even though this sphere is almost defined by the arbitrary and non-linear stutter-steps between its generations. Not only does Benjamin gather materials on the rationale behind such extreme phenomena as the crinoline (also on its impact on street-traffic); fashion becomes a more compelling mechanism of historical change and development than, say, the history of technology or of war. What I'm suggesting here is that the entire ecology of Convolutés A-I vacillates at all times and in unpredictable ways between the materiality of Paris in the throes of its nineteenth-century modernization and the near-simultaneous theorization of this process. The theoretical retrospect also amounts to an impact-study of critique in the decades and generations succeeding modernization. In its theoretical articulation, fashion becomes the very model for all culturally-motivated historical evolution: "For the philosopher, the most interesting thing about fashion is its anticipations" [from B1a,1]. "To each generation [of fashions] the one immediately preceding it seems the most radical anti-aphrodisiac imaginable. In this judgment it is not so far wrong as might be supposed. Every fashion is to some extent a bitter satire on love" [from B1a,4]. Iron, steel, and glass, by the same token, are not only the underlying building materials facilitating the transformations imposed by large-scale industrialization, including the multiplication of the commodities produced and the acceleration of their transport and sale. These materials have, by Benjamin's account, inverted the classical relationships between form and function in architectural aesthetics. Whether a structure houses machinery or residents, whether it shelters pedestrians or serves as a railroad terminal, means everything in the age of steel and glass. Embedded into the new materials is the intelligence to torque, grow, and evolve with industrialization: "It is worth considering . . . whether, at an earlier period, technical necessities in architecture . . . determined the forms, the style, as thoroughly as they do today. With iron as a material, this is already clearly the case, and perhaps for the first time. Indeed the [now citing A. G. Meyer, *Einbauten* (Esslingen, 1927), p. 23]: 'basic forms in which iron appears as a building material are . . . already themselves, as distinct syntheses, partly new. And their distinctiveness, in large measure, is the product and expression of the natural properties of the building material'" [from F3a,5]. Even where Benjamin plays ventriloquist to A. G. Meyer, his designation of glass and steel as the "smart materials" of their age and its Prevailing Operating System, playing a role analogous to that of semiconductors in our own, is a profound, quintessentially theoretical formulation, but one imbricated within the very material substrate both of the moment and its critical reprise. So too with respect to the weather, another "X-factor" blowing in from the extremities of conceptual left field as a dynamic factor in the history of modernization. But as Benjamin powerfully demonstrates, climates, emotional and geophysical, are quintessential to theorizing the long-term effects—aesthetic, cognitive and psycho-social as well as commercial and technological—established through the consolidation of the Second Empire's radically different Prevailing Operating System: "The mere narcotizing effect which cosmic forces have on a shallow and brittle personality is attested in the relation of such a person to one of the highest and most genial manifestations of these forces: the weather. Nothing is more characteristic than that precisely this most intimate and

mysterious affair, the working of the weather on humans, should have become the theme of their emptiest chatter. Nothing bores the ordinary man more than the cosmos. Hence for him, the deepest connection between the weather and boredom” [from D1,3].

The above examples, culled from a cosmic field of textual cut-outs, illustrate the degree to which Convolutes A-I function as a climate or ecology in which the material remains, and hence brute materiality of history are on an interactive feedback loop with the theoretical crystallizations forming the very substance of critique. Benjamin keeps no cards up his sleeve in getting *The Arcades Project* on its feet. Convolutes A-I have been dealt a full hand, but the rhythms and traffic patterns they establish are simply not nearly as far as the work’s trajectory has to go. In its consummating moments, the work turns aside from its material groundings and addresses the status of theory in its moment, our ongoing age. And these are the conditions of “theory on the fly,” a nomadic, inconsequential draft or formulation, one bearing few ties to the institutions of homeostasis, which as Benjamin will go on to demonstrate, only join the unscrolling catastrophe, playing an integral role within its demonic status quo.

2.

In the wake of the critically repetitive as well as innovative reprise of established motifs transpiring in Convolute J under the aura of Baudelaire, it is as if Benjamin’s theoretical discourse has emerged from a week-long practice at a Yoga retreat: it is more supple and, even where its subject-matter verges on the arcane, more confident to articulate at some remove from the material evidence and remains. Benjamin’s foundational work in Convolutes A-I has been formidable. After the work’s dominant motifs have been recalibrated in keeping with the life, times, and artistic milieu and production of Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin takes the liberty to pronounce on the most tenuous, but for this reason most intriguing spinoffs of modernization: the multidimensional “awakening” that will have to transpire if European civilization is to shake off the slumber of totalitarian rule and thinking. Also during this maiden flight—in Convolutes K and L—of his freeform theoretical articulation, that is, whose conceptual pretext is its own articulation rather than as a “read-out” of the materials, making it, within the panorama of *The Arcades Project*, “second-order”¹³ critique, Benjamin offers us a guided tour to the palaces of the collective dream—Parisian museums, libraries and other archives, even train stations—both fending off and facilitating the current backslide to barbarism.

Awakening is a graduated (*stufenweiser*) process that goes on in the life of the individual as in the life of generations. Sleep its initial stage. A generation’s experience of youth has much in common with the experience of dreams. Its historical configuration is a dream configuration. Every epoch has such a side turned to dreams, the child’s side. For the previous century, this appears clearly in the arcades. But whereas the education of earlier generations explained these dreams for them in terms of tradition, of religious doctrine, present-day education simply amounts to the distraction of children. Proust could emerge as an unprecedented phenomenon only in a generation that had lost all bodily and natural aids to remembrance and that, poorer than before, was left to itself to take possession of the periods of childhood (*der Kindheitwelten habhaft werden konnte*) in merely an isolated, scattered, and pathological way. What follows here is an experiment in the technique of awakening. An attempt to become aware of the dialectical—the Copernican—turn of remembrance (*Eingedenkens*). [K1,1]

The nineteenth century a spacetime <Zeitraum> a dreamtime (<Zeit-traum>) in which the individual consciousness more and more secures itself in reflecting, while the collective consciousness sinks into ever deeper sleep. But just as the sleeper—in this respect like the madman—sets out on the macrocosmic journey through his own body, and the noises and feelings of his insides, such as blood pressure, intestinal churn, heartbeat, and muscle sensation . . . generate, in the heightened inner awareness of the sleeper, illusion (*Wahnsinn*) or dream imagery which translates and accounts for them, so likewise for the dreaming collective, which, through the arcades, communes with its own insides. We must follow in its wake so as to expound the nineteenth century—in fashion and in advertising, in buildings and politics—as the outcome of its dream visions. [K1,4]

In the outlandish mosaic of his materials, Benjamin does not stop short of including sleep—and the cognitive processing that persists under somnolent conditions—among the consequential parameters of any given Prevailing Operating System. Even sleeping counts in the retrospective collation of telling cultural factors. And sleep under the Second Empire, Benjamin is arguing, is substantially different from sleep, or anxious insomnia, today. The arcades represent, not unlike contemporary Las Vegas, a persistent collective dream of the moment: in the case of the Second Empire as we have seen, a particularly ravenous, if unschooled stage of economic expansion and commercial acceleration. As the embedded composite narrative of this hyperactive moment emerges, the arcades serve as the prototype of a new commercial space doubling as a dream-space. It is no stretch at all for Benjamin to extrapolate the original arcades of the early decades of the nineteenth century—modest in scale and deliberate in their planning despite their revolutionary repercussions—into the grand steel-and-glass architectural monuments of the age, whether the central rail-terminals of the city, the grandiose department stores, or a new generation of comprehensive archives and museums. These become, in Benjamin's terms, the "dream-houses" of nineteenth-century Paris. We need to process, as informed readers of *The Arcades Project* that with relish Benjamin documents the place and role of these consummate edifices within the collective panorama of modernization while at the same time, in the name of awakening, he dedicates the ambient theoretical practice emerging in the work to the very rupture and critical penetration of this dream. The strategy of these transitional convolutes, for "awakening," makes Benjamin a strange bedfellow of contemporary "sexploitation" cinema—drawing on the cutting edge of cinematic verisimilitude to enhance the sexual allure of its mediated virtuality, while rendering moralistic judgment on its depicted transgression.

In the passage immediately above, then, Benjamin generates a convincing pastiche—parroting the first pages of *Du Côté de chez Swann*—of Proust's poetic eulogy of sleep as a surface-depth, figure-ground phenomenon. In the passage from Convolute L below, he furnishes a verbal companion-piece to a series of impressionist canvasses of Gare St-Lazare that Monet painted in the late-1870's. These are notable for the dreamy quality of the smoke emanating from the railroad locomotives that we address head-on. Their vapor overwhelms the station-shed, partially obscuring it. The pervasive nineteenth-century enchantment at steel-and-glass and steam technologies that *The Arcades Project* perforce records and documents in no way obliterates Benjamin's strong sense that it is from this dream that history—somewhat urgently--needs to escape. Excavating a mythological substrate coinciding with the *noir* atmosphere of the Parisian underground (specifically addressed in Convolute C), Benjamin places his full credentials as a modernist on display. But even the classical underworld referenced by the station's monumental statuary, its invocation of Orpheus, Eurydice, and Hermes, is a figment of a cultural Imaginary in need of awakening. We wander into museums

—at least into those initiated under the Ideological State Apparatus of the Second Empire¹⁴—as well for a confirmation and celebration of our broader culture’s long-standing dreams. But as Benjamin will explicitly spell out in Convoluted N, the tradition plays its own constitutive role in the catastrophe of encroaching barbarism:

The Gare Saint-Lazare: a puffing, wheezing princess with the stare of a clock. “For our type of man,” says Jacques de Lacretelle, “train stations are truly factories of dreams” (“Le Rêveur Parisien,” *Nouvelle Revue française*, 1927). To be sure: today, in the age of the automobile and airplane, it is only faint, atavistic terrors which still lurk within the blackened sheds; and that stale comedy of farewell and reunion, carried on before a background of Pullman cars, turns the railway platform into a provincial stage. Once again we see performed the timeworn Greek melodrama: Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes at the station. Through the mountains of luggage surrounding the nymph, looms the steep and rocky path, the crypt into which she sinks when the Hermaic (*hermetische*) conductor with the signal disk, watching for the moist eye of Orpheus, gives the sign for departure. Scar of departure, which zigzags, like the crack on a Greek vase, across the painted (*dargehaltenen*) bodies of the gods. [L1,4]

Museums unquestionably belong to the dream houses of the collective. In considering them, we would want to emphasize the dialectic by which they come into contact (*entgegenkommen*), on the one hand, with scientific research and, on the other hand, with “the dreamy tide of bad taste.” “Nearly every epoch would appear, by virtue of its inner disposition, to be chiefly engaged in unfolding (*entwickeln*) a specific architectural problem: for the Gothic age, this is the cathedrals; for the Baroque, the palace; and for the early twentieth century, with its regressive tendency to allow itself to be saturated with the past: the museum” Siegfried Giedion, *Bauen in Frankreich*, p. 36. The thirst for the past forms something like the principle object of my analysis—in light of which the inside of the museum appears as an interior magnified on a grand scale. In the years 1850-1890, exhibitions take the place of museums. Comparison between the ideological bases of the two. [L1a,2]

As the dream-palaces of the advanced capitalist world, museums, train stations, and department stores, house its transitional spaces: sites where the public encounters and engages the transitional objects of the moment. These are play-spaces. In the free-wheeling convolutes preparatory to Convoluted N, Benjamin is in a thoughtscape adjacent to the one out of which, on War’s outbreak, Johan Huizinga wrote *Homo Ludens*, in which homicidal annihilation and playful contest are not nearly as foreign to one another as might be supposed.¹⁵ The post-War, psychoanalytical reprise to this broad survey is D.W. Winnicott’s *Playing and Reality*.¹⁶ The psychoanalyst, having treated, at crucial junctures, the displaced children produced by the War, invokes and mobilizes playfulness—both as a store of untapped inner gumption and energy and as programmatic material for therapeutic healing. Constitutionally fragile and attenuated, even amid catastrophe, allegorico-materialist critique surveys the playing fields where untrammelled improvisation may again resume after the time-out declared in the name of barbarism.

3.

With its stunning formulations on historical epistemology, the dialectical image as the pivotal trope of illumination amid conditions of historical catastrophe (a disarray that may in fact be

solid-state), and “dialectics at a standstill,” Convolute N, placed neither at the beginning nor at the end of the work, nonetheless furnishes a certain theoretical denouement to the sporadic, if stunning episodes of meta-critical illumination that have preceded it. Like a secondary character in a novel, whose machinations turn-out, in an act self-disclosure usually reserved for late in the drama, to have been formative, Convolute N supplies decisive missing program and information. While the cultural labor of deciphering *The Arcades Project* might have been easier had these formulations been available from the start, say in the kind of introductory material now *de rigueur* in academic monographs, readers would not have lived the experience of nineteenth-century modernization in quite the same way. I would even go so far as to suggest that the stunning formulations of Convolute N hung at the Parisian horizon beyond Benjamin, until he himself had undergone the theoretical, meta-critical, and proto-cybernetic experiences of cobbling together Convolutes A-M.

As I write this particular simulacrum of my own making sense of *The Arcades Project* quintessential “dissolving book” over the years, I of course open wide the question of the status of the thirty Convolutes succeeding what I am tagging as the decisively theoretical Convolute N. Do not these as well hold to the generic specifications of what I would characterize as a major, again proto-cybernetic addition to the full array of literary forms—i.e., the Convolute itself--on Benjamin’s part? This is indeed a legitimate question to pose. My irreducibly provisional answer runs as follows: with the exception of Convolutes O (labeled “Prostitution and Gambling” by the U.S. editors) and Y (“Photography”), the remaining Convolutes can be productively thought of as the “overflow stacks” within the Borgesian archive or library that the *Passagen-Werk* simulates. Without an exception, they introduce material and commentary relevant to the phenomenon of modernization under the Second Empire; Benjamin was nonetheless able to do without their interpellation in the sequence leading to Convolute N’s magisterial, but quintessentially sporadic and fragmentary theoretical asides. To the degree that the “Prostitution and Gambling” Convolute amounts to a brilliant staging of the supplemental economy to French national expansion in the nineteenth century, in which the “black markets” of gambling and the skin-trade themselves form a continuous Möbius strip, conspicuously “handing off” to one another at crucial junctures in the primary materials surviving from the day, Convolute N lets us down gently. Convolute O, it could be well-argued, is a striking historico-material allegory of the theory of supplementarity, decades before Jacques Derrida coined the term and orchestrated this process as an ongoing philosophical infrastructure as well as a rhetorical trope.¹⁷ By the same token, Convolute Y introduces vital material that is new to *The Arcades Project*, above all expanding its “coverage” of image-reproduction and therefore deepening its theorization of modern media. And surely the work on “Literary History, Victor Hugo” in Convolute d is a viable companion to its counterpart on Baudelaire: its insertion anywhere in the aftermath of Convolute J justified. We may thus take the work’s theoretical apotheosis in Convolute N, neither at the outset, as things turned out, nor as a definitive downbeat, in several ways: first and foremost, in a work of near-global receptiveness to different art-forms and discursive media, as the inclusion of fragmentary, occasional theoretical “outtakes” as merely one format of articulation in a very wide spectrum that has included literary citations, first-person accounts, historical consolidations, and twentieth-century recapitulations in a variety of disciplines. A crucial Benjaminian lesson regarding the indispensable interplay and exchange between different discursive media in the synthesis of memorable criticism may well be embedded here. However intense the critical poetry that Benjamin managed to instill within the theoretical sequences “emerging suddenly, in a flash” in Convolute N, it may be by design that he placed this particular “scene of writing” among the others. And then, there is the “overflow” factor

mentioned above: it could simply turn out that Benjamin, giving his work-in-progress a final sequencing before entering a completely transient existence, found Convolutes P-r ancillary to the traffic-patterns that I have been tracing, for better or worse.

In whatever fashion contemporary and future critical reception resolve the issues posed by the *Arcades Project*'s sequencing, the arcs of meta-critical thinking emerging in Convolute N are among the most striking to have emerged in the history of fragmentary philosophical articulation—certainly also including early German Romanticism and Nietzsche, whether we take the “longest view” possible, factoring in Anaximander and Parmenides, or not.¹⁸ Whether by design or default, Convolute N becomes the theoretical engine-room of the time-capsule of modernization, with its ramifying conceptual and textual rhizome, that Benjamin bequeaths to European history in catastrophic times. Within the framework of the current writerly occasion, I have latitude to “process” at most two of the telling sequences from the Convolute, linked by a crucial inter-text, in which Benjamin characterizes his theoretical achievement as “dialectics at a standstill.” I’ve insisted on extracting the two sequences of entries from Convolute N in their “entirety,” though this notion is entirely up for grabs, as found objects, in other words, in their fully random and arbitrary “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*).¹⁹ It is almost only by chance that these two sequences have come up on my personal critical “screen” as units of articulation claiming a certain degree of integrality. Within the radioactive cloud chamber of *The Arcades Project*, then, the two sequences “emerge in a flash,” they are purely immanent, but as allegorical scenes of theoretical illumination, they resonate to me as only very few others in the history of this artform, at whatever length. Taking into account the chaotic conditions under which Benjamin synthesized his formulations, I am arguing, as theoretical “mini-treatises,” these panels of snippets from Convolute N of *The Arcades Project* may be placed alongside Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, Proust’s *Recherche*, Kafka’s *Der Process*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and the miniature fictions of Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino. The first such sequence from the *The Arcades Project*'s running account that I would clip out for my display is the following:

This research—which deals fundamentally with the expressive character of the earliest industrial products, but also the earliest advertisements, department stores, and so on—thus becomes important for Marxism in two ways. First, it will demonstrate how the milieu (*Umwelt*) in which Marx’s doctrine arose affected that doctrine through its expressive character [*Ausdruckscharakter*] (which is to say, not only through causal connections); but second, it will also show in which respects Marxism, too, shares the expressive character of the material products contemporary with it. [N1a,7]

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin (*entwenden*) no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own (*zu ihrem Rechte kommen lassen*): by making use of them (*sie verwenden*). [N1a,8]

Bear in mind that commentary on a reality (for it is a question here of commentary, of interpretation in detail), calls for a method completely different from that required by the commentary on a text. In the one case, the scientific mainstay (*Grundwissenschaft*) is theology; in the other case, philology. [N2,1]

It may be considered one of the methodological objectives of this work to demonstrate a historical materialism which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress. Just here,

historical materialism has every reason to distinguish itself sharply from bourgeois habits of thought. Its founding concept is not progress but actualization. [N2,2]

Historical “understanding” is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife of that which is understood: and what has been recognized in the analysis of the “afterlife of works,” in the analysis of “fame,” is therefore to be considered (*zu betrachten*) the foundation of history in general. [N2,3]

How this work was written: rung by rung, according as chance would offer a narrow foothold (*schmalen Stützpunkt*), and always like someone who scales dangerous heights and never allows himself a moment to look around, for fear of becoming dizzy (but also because he would save for the end the full force of the panorama opening out to him). [N2,4]

Overcoming the concept of “progress” and overcoming the concept of “period of decline” (*Verfallszeit*) are two sides of one and the same thing. [N2,5]

This passage amounts to a lucid “tell-all,” implanted near the dead-center of the work’s vast archive of resources, of how Benjamin set about producing the work. “If I had only known beforehand,” we are so tempted to say. The “literary montage” not only characterizing the work’s collation of references and textual fragments but creating an inextricable affinity between this twentieth-century “dissolving book” and cinema takes place against a backdrop of Marxian expressiveness [N1a,7]. This may be characterized as the moment at which the materials and “material conditions” at the basis of the Marxist worldview begin to speak on their own and in their own terms; when the paradox of expressive matter, is kicked into action, an anomaly akin to the intelligence that Benjamin has located in modern steel and glass. The work of *Passagen*, in other words, or passaging, will brook no rigid distinction between the things of culture—its fragments, its *matériale*, and its articulation, its rendition into sense. The fabric of *Das Passagen-Werk* is a mixed bag, semantic and ideational, on the one hand, and absolutely obtuse on the other. Citation is the gift that keeps on giving because it is the compositional process accessing and displaying, to a comprehensive degree, text’s dual status as information and as matter, material, stuff, German *Stoff*, hence woven or texted material, or colloquially, cultural dead meat. This material amalgam is the dialectical image par excellence, folded in on itself in its mutually neutralizing thingly and expressive functions. Yet it is precisely in deploying such an inchoate medium that Benjamin has managed, “rung by rung” to assemble a perversely systematic and asystematic simulacrum of nineteenth-century modernization in “advanced” Europe.

Hopelessly after the fact, Benjamin lifts the curtain concealing his method: one before the fact visual as well as verbal (“needn’t say anything, merely show”). This is a visual performativity on the page. The convolutes, each configured to order, play or dance their points at least as much as they posit them. They tap a visual performative clearly tipping its hand toward the cinematography of splicing, editing, emerging and disappearing within the visual manifold “in a flash.” Yet Benjamin keeps his cool within the volatile street-scene of “theory on the fly”—maintaining cool being the indispensable ur-principle to this particular modality of critical inscription. This is what would enable him, under full battle conditions, to place the commentary on a “reality,” i.e. a historic-epistemological configuration or state of affairs, under the overall aegis of theology [N2,1]; “in a flash,” in the same snippet, to understand that analysis setting out from the linguistic and media conditions of an artifact belongs to philology. I needn’t overstate the considerable exertions the critical theory of the post-War period went to in order to establish precisely this fact: the suspension of a priori moral, ethical,

and logical premises in the analysis of artifacts whose constitution is irreducibly formal and linguistic. I underscore the dramatic epigrammatic compression attained by theory under the conditions of what may well turn out to be its definitive skirmishes. The critical argumentation crystallizing in these crisis-riddled sequences attains the miniaturization that already, not so long after the War, became the *Grundprinzip* of cybernetic information-systems and organizations.

Such a modality of theoretical inscription, whether it attains permanent display in one culture memory-capsule or another or not, surely has a vested interest in stopping history in its tracks, in somehow, through sheer imagistic precipitousness and captivation, capturing the catastrophe in a freeze-frame. This may well be the unconscious wish underlying the dead halt, to which the imagistic flashes of insight sporadically exploding, with the help of Benjamin's montage technique of materials, across the panorama of history, will bring systematic thinking. So nuanced, overdetermined, and on target is what Benjamin terms the dialectical image that it stops easy historical, theologically-driven interpretation in its tracks even where the tragedy of history marches on. Perhaps *the* pivotal passage of Convoluted N runs:

Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each "now" is the now of a particular recognizability (*Erkennbarkeit*). In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. This point of explosion, and nothing else, is the point of *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth. It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past: rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash (*blitzhaft*) with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill (*Dialektik im Stillstand*). For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been (*Gewesenen*) to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural <*bildlich*>. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical—that is, not archaic—images. The image that is read—which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability—bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded. [from N3,1]

Once again, in a particularly resonant transitional passage between several of Convoluted N's telling extended riffs, Benjamin has prophetically anticipated the signature issues of post-War critical theory. He has seen them far out ahead of their explicit recognition, but has also compressed them, in the turbulent cloud-chamber of *The Arcades Project*, to the now of their recognizability. The striking images flashing up from the photographic plate of historical progression register on a recognizability already in place. They would otherwise remain illegible. There is some sort of cognitive silver nitrate at work allowing the image to register, and be registered, in the now. At great length Lacanian psychoanalysis characterizes the *méconnaissances* emerging from nothing more formidable than every child's belated entry into the community of language-users. The distortion-effects prompted by the belatedness of linguistic signaling, reception, and comprehension become a mainstay of theoretical post-War models, from psychoanalysis to deconstruction. The dialectical image is truly shocking, in the sense of the spasmodic movement-style and urban concussions that Benjamin traced to "The Man of the Crowd" and its Baudelairean repercussions; but the time-frame in which it works to full effect is metaleptic and uncanny. What explodes in the machine-gun fire of nows each shocking in its impact is the broader cultural concept of *intentio* itself. From formalistic analysis to Barthesian semiotics and post-Structuralism, post-War theory devotes bookshelves to the debunking of intentionality in discourse as well as fiction. In the theoretical street-

skirmishes of Convolute N, the shocking emergence of successive images in the now opens “authentic historical time,” whose truthful dimension is the affinity between its own thinking and writing- conditions and the catastrophic events in the world. Under such attenuated conditions of thinking and civilization itself, Benjamin invokes what he calls the dialectical image as the only intercession powerful and striking enough to reinstate thoughtful and critical deliberation through its initiation of a cease-fire or time-out in the endless defile of catastrophic spinoffs. The dialectical image, conjured into Being throughout the Convolute, is a crystallization so anomalous and striking in itself that it brings the distractions of history and the easy forward momentum of articulation to a dead halt. “Petrified unrest,” “dialectics at a standstill,” and indeed, Benjamin’s textual medium in itself, at once material in its sourcing and deployment but critical in its repercussions and in the illumination that it radiates, are all perfect instances of the dialectical image. Perhaps my favorite example of an elaborated figure bringing reading and thinking as well to a productive standstill, the Zen double-bind from which a leap of realization might emerge,²⁰ is the falling star from Section 9 of “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” whose trajectory starts out as a wish-laden folkloric vehicle and ends up on the roulette table in the gaming sideshow to capitalist accumulation.²¹

How ironic that the last momentous critical passage from Convolute N that I invoke here unveils the intrinsically dialectical image of the sailboat. Temperamentally, perhaps, this image resides at a far cry from the aggravated conditions under which Benjamin synthesizes his critical caption for the historical movement arising in the arcades and first international expositions, and ending, for many beside himself, in twentieth-century totalitarianism. Sailing, as Norbert Wiener and other initiators of cybernetic discourse had noted clearly,²² involves a constant taking and correction of bearings amounting at least to the first stages of meta-critical revision and of the rise in processing power that it affords. The pilot’s skill as *kybernētēs* is the ability to productively take stock, adjust, and reconfigure amid what we call “battle conditions,” precisely such catastrophic upheaval as Benjamin faced as he assembled the materials of the *Passagen-Werk*. Benjamin’s crystallization of the dialectical sailboat as the very medium for theoretically-guided critique in times of accelerated turbulence and destruction extends beyond a vague, proto-cybernetic intuition, one in keeping with his pitched overall attention to twentieth-century media. It is, then, by design that the critical sailboat that Benjamin unveils in order to characterize the relation between concepts and historical turbulence, between the sedate and the violent conditions of writing, is hardly out for a smooth sail.

Scientific method is distinguished by the fact that, leading to new objects, it develops new methods. Just as form in art is distinguished by the fact that, opening up new contents, it develops new forms. It is only from without that a work of art has one and *only* one form, that a treatise has one and *only* one method. [N9,2]

On the concept of “rescue”: the wind of the absolute in the sails of the concept. (The principle of the wind is the cyclical.) The trim of the sails (*Segelstellung*) is the relative. [N9,3]

What are phenomena rescued from? Not only, and in the main, from the discredit and the neglect (*Verruf und Mißachtung*) into which they have fallen, but from the catastrophe represented very often by a certain strain in their dissemination (*wie eine bestimmte Art uhrer Überlieferung*), their “enshrinement in heritage.”—They are saved through the exhibition of the fissure that is within them.—There is a tradition that is catastrophe. [N9,4]

It is the inherent tendency of dialectical experience to dissipate the semblance of eternal sameness, and even of repetition, in history. Authentic political experience is absolutely free of this semblance. [N9,5]

What matters for the dialectician is to have the wind of world history in his sails. Thinking means for him: setting the sails (*Segel setzen*). What is important is *how* they are set. Words are his sails. The way they are set makes them into concepts. [N9,6]

The dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash (*ist ein aufblitzendes*). What has been is to be held fast—as an image flashing up in the now of its recognizability. The rescue that is to be carried out by these means (*dergestalt*)—and only by these—can operate solely for the sake of what in the next moment is already irretrievably lost (*unrettbar verloren [sich] vollziehen*). In this connection, see the metaphorical passage from my introduction to Jochmann, concerning the prophetic gaze that catches fire from the summits of the past. [N9,7]

Being a dialectician means having the winds of history in one's sails. The sails are the concepts. It is not enough, however, to have sails at one's disposal. What is decisive is knowing the art of setting them (*Die Kunst, sie setzen zu können, ist das Entscheidende*). [N9,8]

The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are “status quo” is the catastrophe. It is *not* an ever-present possibility but what in each case is given. Thus Strindberg (in *To Damascus?*): hell is not something that awaits us, but this life here and now. [N9a,1]

We need again to take up the marvelous shorthand of these messages scribbled out, crunched into a bottle, and then left for posterity with George Bataille. They may well comprise a secret code of what is left for us to accomplish as we adapt past traditions and conventions of scholarly publication to such media as Twitter and Facebook, as we ourselves count, for rescue, rescue from obscurity, from the “repressive tolerance” comprised of being fancy-free within, but quarantined on campus, by new media of script and social recognition. Do the trenchant and prophetic above formulations dodge the bullet of historical sensibility? Decidedly not! The formidable, exhausting labor of precipitating an ambient theory of the moment out of the detritus of the actual events and the cultural records anticipating them and left behind them has gone on since page 1 of Convoluted A and continues through to the *Werk's* last page. As much as Benjamin, we need to read *everything*. We need to “take no prisoners” in our openness to virtually all relevant data-bases, information-stores, and discursive media. Our professional dismissiveness and complacency are artifacts of a delusional stability and social consensus regarding what we do that had in a now-distant cultural scene already been terminally damaged by 1927, when Benjamin first set out on the sailboat ride that became *The Arcades Project*. Tradition, in the passage above, is as much the catastrophe as human barbarism and blindness. It remains incumbent upon us to do the reading, to process the manifold and unscrolling text, but then to infuse the findings into media that are still capable even now of being *received*. A formidable challenge, you say? Benjamin surely rose to it in the above passage, and for that reason it is still read, with open-ended amazement, today. Particularly in the meticulous attention that Benjamin paid to image-transfer techniques and visual media in Convoluted Y of *The Arcades Project* and elsewhere, he methodically took up this challenge.

It is the nature of intellectual and cultural production that we always end up overstaying our time: the winds of history are too chaotic; the permutations that they mobilize too complex and multifaceted. Before I overstay the rhythm and span of the current study, I will limit any further comments to the figure of the dialectical sailboat and the rescue it might promise.

Benjamin is, once again, as boggled as we are that anything as deliberate and orderly as a *method* could have emerged from his active engagement with as many strands as he could access of nineteenth-century modernization and its twentieth-century reception. The culmination of this adventure is the sailboat, a dialectical image, that is to say a self-programming and redirecting vehicle of the second order, of his own methodological programming, even if explicit performatively and allegorically rather than discursively. Benjamin still—messianically²³—affords himself the hope of cultural deliverance effected through some alignment between thinking and the vast energy-expenditure, or explosion, of catastrophe. In the literature of systems and chaos theory, beginning with Norbert Wiener's 1954 *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*, sailing a boat (as riding a bicycle) is almost a stock figure for the correction of balance, direction, and other parameters of homeostasis by means of open-ended feedback with the environment. Early though this kick-off to the cybernetic age may seem to some, a good decade beforehand, Benjamin had launched interactive, autopoietic critical theory on its course with the more nuanced figure of the dialectical sailboat. It is within the framework of sailing, as Benjamin did in happier times with intellectual interlocutors and his future lover Asja Lacis off Capri in 1924, that the cultural critic, even amid catastrophic winds, stays calmly at her post, "trimming," then "setting," her sails, so that they are propelled by the "wind of the absolute," which is also the "wind of world history." Set accurately, through all the "relative" modulations, the sails deliver the "concept," changing over time, but at every juncture keeping the critic on track, even amid cultural turbulence deranging the bedrock institutions of society, say higher education, law, and journalism. Curiously, in this sequence, it is the "phenomena" needing to be rescued. Even under cultural anomie, one fueled as much by steady-state complacency as by draconian authoritarian insults, the thinker struggles to navigate her boat, to maintain its stability, in the hope that the concept distilled and periodically reconfigured through philosophical rigor is capable of rendering an adequate reading of the brutal facts. Accessing the concept, or we would now say, theoretical program that can make sense of the facts, is the credo and vocation of the critic. Imagining the rapt attention that the critic, amid hurricane conditions, pays to minute differences in the sail-settings is an aporia, or systematic double-bind exhausting the fullest possible limberness and torque of the dialectical image. And the tool that the dialectical sailor has for making these adjustments is nothing more formidable than his words: "Thinking means for him: setting his sails. What is important is how they are set. Words are his sails. The way they are set makes them into concepts" [from N9,6]. The critic keeps writing. Writing is the only craft or exercise through which the writer maintains her tact at setting the sails of difference and modulated articulation, even if she already has tenure, even if writing further therefore represents an unnecessary risk or danger to the stability she has achieved. The critic keeps on writing, even as she has sustained her quixotic quest of reading, in Benjaminian fashion, *everything*.

Does anything in this excursion along the shoals of critical contingency and chaotic immanence sounds familiar? Even if our writing instruments have morphed into laptops and iPads? At the beginning of a fresh new solar cycle (2012), I wish all of you indulgent enough to lend these occasional scribbles some credence a year of exuberant writing ahead. I do *not* wish you staying out of trouble.

¹ This essay has been extracted from Chapter 5 of my forthcoming Playful Intelligence: Digitizing Tradition (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014) and appears with the kind permission of the Bloomsbury Publishing. It was originally prepared for a Special Session on “Guilt and Debt in Literature” at the 2011 Modern Language Association Convention in Seattle. I’m deeply grateful to Profs. Jonathan Luftig of Morgan State University and Helmut Illbruck of Texas Christian University for their kind invitation and their expert organizing.

² Citations in this essay derive from Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1999). Benjamin’s technique of numbering each extract in this encyclopedic and thematically organized collection of primary sources mixed with his own pointed commentary spares me the need for page-references to this work. This measure also allows readers of *The Arcades Project* in “foreign” languages, notably in the German original, to follow along.

³ In recent writing, I’ve attempted to characterize these and other “dissolving” works as sites of production where the book medium tests its conceptual and physical bindings as it moves toward the *ouverture* of “open systems.” See my *Around the Book: Systems and Literacy* (New York: Fordham UP, 2011), xi-xxi, 1-22, 134-37.

⁴ I’m considerably indebted to the Whitney Humanities Center Working Group in Theory at Yale and to its guiding lights, Kirk Wetters, Joshua Alvizu, Jason Kavett, and Andrew Kirwin, for introducing me to this highly suggestive term and its literature. Highly recommended basic reading on precarity would include Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation* (London: Minor Compositions, 2009) and *Open, 17* (2009): *A Precarious Existence: Vulnerability in the Public Domain* (New York: NAI010 Publishers).

⁵ In the social sciences, Thomas D. Cook and Donald T. Campbell made a major impact with their overview of the objectivity and critical detachment that could be imported to experiments conducted *à l’improviste* and under field (as opposed to laboratory) conditions. Their position-paper on the exigencies pertaining to rigorous thinking and reality-testing conducted, in terms of the present chapter, “on the fly,” is their *Quasi-Experimentation: Design and Analysis Issues for Field Settings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979).

⁶ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000), pp. 315-17, 446-53, 490-95, 498-501, 504-11.

⁷ Anthony Wilden, *System and Structure* (London: Tavistock Press, 1972), pp. 203-05, 356-67, 373-77.

⁸ Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 36-38, 85-87, 97-99, 115-16, 191-94.

⁹ For merely *one* instance of this discursive modality, see Lacan’s comments on Freud’s personal “Dream of Irma’s Injection,” which he subjected to self-analysis in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, I: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, 1954-55, trans. Sylvana

Tomaselli (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), pp. 146-71.

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987), pp. 43, 149-66, 474-88.

¹¹ For an aggravated instance of sub-syllabic semantic drift or glide in Derrida's readings, see *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavy, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986), pp. 119-22, 139-42, 235-37. Derrida's fragment, "Tympan," inaugurates his *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1972), pp. ix-xxix.

¹² For "strange loopings" in Hofstadter, see *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, pp. 15, 21, 149-51.

¹³ Within the discourse of contemporary systems theory, "second-order" is the register at which cybernetic and other isomorphic programs become self-adaptive and "autopoietic," at which they "learn," when their activity is not only intra-systematic but meta-systematic. The current primer to processes and capabilities at the second order is *Emergence and Embodiment: New Essays on Second-Order Systems Theory*, ed. Bruce Clarke and Bruce N. Hansen (Durham, NC: Duke U P, 2009).

¹⁴ For Louis Althusser's pivotal construct, the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), see his *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, pp. 142-47, 150-51, 166-67, 181-86).

¹⁵ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), pp. 40-41, 49-53, 58-65.

¹⁶ D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1991), pp. 38, 40-52, 108-09, 121.

¹⁷ See, for example, Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1976), pp. 144-57, 163-64, 262-68, 313-16; *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981), pp. 99-102, 108-12, 202-03, 208.

¹⁸ I recall here the well-established argument that Romantics from Wordsworth and Blake to their German counterparts including Goethe and the Athenaeum group elaborated and refined fragmentation as they deployed it on multiple fronts in resisting the claims to systematic comprehensiveness and totality of their day. Along with the image, the idea, and criticism, fragmentation played a prominent role in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy's interstitial overview, on the interface between literary invention and philosophy, in Romanticism, in *The Literary Absolute*, trans. Philip Bernard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: SUNY P, 1988), pp. 39-58.

¹⁹ For the key Heideggerian notion of thrownness (*Geworfenheit*), see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Maquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 134-38, 174, 219-24, 235, 264-65, 294-95, 434-36.

²⁰ Hofstadter, in setting out the broadest possible primer of emergent cybernetic culture and technology in 1979 for a literate public, includes Zen kōans (along with Bach's canons, Escher's impossible perspectives, Gödelian incompleteness, and the biochemically transmitted codes of genetics) as a phenomenon *expanding* its programmatic possibility through its gravitation toward stark double-binds. He views the capacity to "break"

double-binds through non-linear transformations (mutations, in the case of genetics; mystical realizations in Zen meditation) as a feature of all “self-referential,” autopoietic, or “second-order” systems. See his *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, pp. 189-90, 231-65.

²¹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, IV, pp. 330-31.

²² Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954), pp. 15, 61, 152, 178.

²³ In his *Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2011), Peter Fenves compellingly updates the prospects for Benjamin’s messianism, particularly with respect to the various temporalities that it implicates and informs.