Melancholy and the Act

Slavoj Žižek

The Lacanian big Other designates not merely the explicit symbolic rules regulating social interaction but also the intricate cobweb of unwritten, implicit rules. Roger Ebert’s *The Little Book of Hollywood Clichés* contains hundreds of stereotypes and obligatory scenes, from the famous fruit cart rule (during any chase scene involving a foreign or ethnic locale, a fruit cart will be overturned, and an angry peddler will run into the middle of the street to shake a fist at the hero’s departing vehicle), to the more refined cases of the “thanks, but no thanks” rule (when two people finish a heart-to-heart conversation, as Person A starts to leave the room, Person B will tentatively say A’s name. A will pause, turn, and say, “Yes?” and B will reply, “Thanks”) or of the grocery bag rule (whenever a scared, cynical woman who doesn’t want to fall in love again is pursued by a suitor who wants to tear down her wall of loneliness, she will go grocery shopping; her bags will always break spilling fruits and vegetables around her, to symbolize the mess her life is in and/or to give the suitor the opportunity to help her pick up the pieces of her life, along with her oranges and apples). This is what the big Other, the symbolic substance of our lives, is, this set of unwritten rules that effectively regulate our speech and acts. Although they are never explicitly stated, disobeying them can have dire consequences. One such rule in the radical wing of today’s academy in

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
the last decade is the elevation of Hannah Arendt into an untouchable
authority, a point of transference. One simply doesn’t criticize her. Two
or three decades ago, leftists rejected—or, rather, ignored—her as the
originator of the notion of totalitarianism, which was irreducibly embed-
ded in cold war ideology; today, even those from whom one would expect
aversion (psychoanalysts, due to Arendt’s well-known animosity towards
psychoanalysis; partisans of the Frankfurt school, due to her scorn for
Adorno) treat her with respect.

Another such rule concerns the relationship between mourning and
melancholy. In our permissive times when transgression itself is appro-
priated, solicited even, by the dominant institutions, the predominant
opinion as a rule presents itself as a subversive transgression. If one wants
to identify the hegemonic intellectual trend, one should simply search for
the trend that claims to pose the unheard-of threat to the hegemonic
power dispositif. With regard to mourning and melancholy, the predomi-
nant opinion is the following: Freud opposed normal mourning (the
successful acceptance of a loss) to pathological melancholy (the sub-
ject persists in his or her narcissistic identification with the lost object).
Against Freud, one should assert the conceptual and ethical primacy of
melancholy. In the process of the loss, there is always a remainder that
cannot be integrated through the work of mourning, and the ultimate
fidelity is the fidelity to this remainder. Mourning is a kind of betrayal, the
second killing of the (lost) object, while the melancholic subject remains
faithful to the lost object, refusing to renounce his or her attachment to
it. This story can be given a multitude of twists, from the queer one,
which holds that homosexuals are those who retain fidelity to the lost or
repressed identification with the same-sex libidinal object, to the post-
colonial/ethnic one, which holds that when ethnic groups enter capitalist
processes of modernization and are under the threat that their specific
legacy will be swallowed up by the new global culture, they should not
renounce their tradition through mourning, but retain the melancholic
attachment to their lost roots.

Due to this politically correct background, the mistake of deprecat-
ing melancholy can have dire consequences—papers are rejected, appli-
cants don’t get jobs because they express the “wrong” attitude towards

Slavoj Žižek, a philosopher and Lacanian psychoanalyst, is senior
researcher in the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of
Ljubljana, Slovenia. He is editor of Cogito and the Unconscious (1998) and
author of The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters
(1996), The Plague of Fantasies (1997), and The Fragile Absolute, or Why Is the
Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For? (2000). His previous contribution to
Critical Inquiry is “A Leftist Plea for Eurocentrism” (Summer 1998).
melancholy. However, for this very reason it is all the more necessary to insist on the need to denounce the objective cynicism that such a rehabilitation of melancholy enacts. The melancholic link to the lost ethnic Object allows us to claim that we remain faithful to our ethnic roots while fully participating in the global capitalist game. One should raise the question to what degree the whole project of postcolonial studies is sustained by this logic of objective cynicism. To make things absolutely clear: what is wrong with the postcolonial nostalgia is not the utopian dream of a world they never had (such a utopia can be thoroughly liberating) but the way this dream is used to legitimize the actuality of its very opposite, of the full and unconstrained participation in global capitalism.

1. Lack Is Not the Same as Loss

So what is theoretically wrong with this reassertion of melancholy? The problem concerns the status of anamorphosis: anamorphosis designates an object whose very material reality is distorted in such a way that a gaze is inscribed into its objective features. A face that looks grotesquely distorted and protracted acquires consistency; a blurred contour, a stain, becomes a clear entity if we look at it from a certain biased standpoint—and is this not one of the succinct formulations of ideology? Social reality may appear confused and chaotic, but if we look at it from the standpoint of anti-Semitism, for example, everything becomes clear and acquires straight contours—the Jewish plot is responsible for all our woes. In other words, anamorphosis undermines the distinction between objective reality and its distorted subjective perception; in it, the subjective distortion is reflected back into the perceived object itself, and, in this precise sense, the gaze itself acquires a supposedly objective existence.

This paradox of anamorphosis is obliterated in melancholy. One usually emphasizes the anti-Hegelian twist of this rehabilitation of melancholy; the work of mourning has the structure of sublation (Aufhebung) through which we retain the notional essence of an object by losing it in its immediate reality, while in melancholy the object resists its notional sublation. However, the mistake of the melancholic is not simply to assert that something resists the symbolic sublation but rather to locate this resistance in a positively existing, although lost, object. In Kant’s terms, the melancholic is guilty of committing a kind of paralogism of the pure capacity to desire, which resides in the confusion between loss and lack: insofar as the object-cause of desire is originally, in a constitutive way, lacking, melancholy interprets this lack as a loss, as if the lacking object was once

2. The most plastic example of such a sublation of historical reality in its symbolic notion is Hegel’s idea that Thucydides’ history of the Peloponnesian war was the true spiritual goal of the actual war itself; from a spiritual standpoint, the actual war was in itself a pretext, fought so that a text about it that renders its essence could have been written.
possessed and then lost. In short, what melancholy obscures is that the object is lacking from the very beginning, that its emergence coincides with its lack, that this object is nothing but the positivization of a void or lack, a purely anamorphic entity that does not exist in itself. The paradox, of course, is that this deceitful translation of lack into loss enables us to assert our possession of the object; what we never possessed can also never be lost, so the melancholic, in his unconditional fixation on the lost object, in a way possesses it in its very loss. This is also how one should read the medieval notion that the melancholic is unable to reach the domain of the spiritual or incorporeal: instead of merely contemplating the suprasensible object, he wants to embrace it in lust. Although denied access to the suprasensible domain of ideal symbolic forms, the melancholic still displays the metaphysical yearning for another absolute reality beyond our ordinary reality subjected to temporal decay and corruption; the only way out of this predicament is thus to take an ordinary, sensual material object (say, the beloved woman) and elevate it into the absolute. The melancholic subject thus elevates the object of his longing into an inconsistent composite of a corporeal absolute; however, since this object is subject to decay, one can possess it unconditionally only insofar as it is lost, in its loss. Hegel himself deployed this logic apropos of the crusaders’ search for the tomb of Christ; they also confused the absolute aspect of the divinity with the material body that existed in Judea two thousand years ago, and their search thus resulted in a necessary disappointment. For this reason, melancholy is not simply the attachment to the lost object but the attachment to the very original gesture of its loss.

In his perspicuous characterization of Wilhelm Furtwängler’s conducting, Adorno claimed that Furtwängler

was concerned with the salvaging [Rettung] of something which was already lost, with winning back for interpretation what it began to lose at the moment of the fading of binding tradition. This attempt to salvage gave him something of the excessive exertion involved in an invocation for which what the invocation seeks is no longer purely and immediately present.4

What one should focus on is the double loss that sustains today’s (deserved) cult of Furtwängler, the fascination that his old recordings exert. It is not only that we are today fascinated with Furtwängler’s seemingly naive, immediately organic passion, which seems no longer possible in

4. Theodor W. Adorno, "Wilhelm Furtwängler" (1968), Musikalische Schriften VI, vol. 19 of Gesammelte Schriften, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Klaus Schulz (Frankfurt am Main, 1984), p. 469. The concrete context of this is, of course, Furtwängler’s attempt to salvage the classic tradition of German music from the onslaught of Nazi barbarism.
our era, when conducting is split between cold technical perfection and artificial passion as stage showmanship (Leonard Bernstein); the very lost object of our fascination already involves a certain loss. That is, Furtwängler’s passion was infused with a kind of traumatic intensity, a sense of urgency proper to the desperate attempt to salvage as part of our tradition what was already endangered, no longer at home in the modern world. What we are longing to recapture in old Furtwängler recordings is thus not the organic immediacy of classical music but rather the organic-immediate experience of the loss itself, no longer accessible to us. In this sense, our fascination with Furtwängler is melancholy at its purest.

Giorgio Agamben emphasized how, in contrast to mourning, melancholy is not only the failure of the work of mourning, the persistence of the attachment to the real of the object, but also its very opposite: “melancholia offers the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object.”5 Therein resides the melancholic’s stratagem: the only way to possess an object that we never had, that was from the very outset lost, is to treat an object that we still fully possess as if this object is already lost. The melancholic’s refusal to accomplish the work of mourning thus takes the form of its very opposite, a faked spectacle of the excessive, superfluous mourning for an object even before this object is lost. This is what provides unique flavor to a melancholic love relationship, such as the one between Archer Newland and Countess Olenska in Edith Wharton’s The Age of Innocence. Although the partners are still together, immensely in love, enjoying each other’s presence, the shadow of the future separation already colors their relationship so that they perceive their current pleasures under the aegis of the catastrophe (separation) to come (in an exact reversal of the standard notion of enduring present hardships by looking to the happiness to emerge out of them). The notion that, beneath his official socialist optimism, Dmitri Shostakovich was a deeply melancholic composer can be supported along the same lines by the fact that he composed his most famous string quartet (no. 8) in 1960 in memory of himself: “I reflected that if I die some day then it’s hardly likely anyone will write a work dedicated to my memory. So I decided to write one myself. You could even write on the cover: ‘Dedicated to the memory of the composer of this quartet.”6 No wonder, then, that Shostakovich characterized the basic mode of the quartet as “pseudo-tragicality”; in a telltale metaphor, he “measured the tears its composition had cost him as the volume of urine after a half-dozen beers.”7 Insofar as the melancholic mourns what he has not yet lost, there is an inherent comic subversion of the tragic procedure of mourning at work in melancholy, as in the old racist joke about Gypsies: when it rains,

5. Agamben, Stanzas, p. 20.
they are happy because they know that after rain there is always sunshine, and when the sun shines, they feel sad because they know that after sunshine it will at some point rain. In short, the mourner mourns the lost object and kills it a second time through symbolizing its loss, while the melancholic is not simply the one who is unable to renounce the object but rather the one who kills the object a second time (treats it as lost) before the object is actually lost.

How are we to unravel this paradox of mourning an object that is not yet lost, that is still here? The key to this enigma resides in Freud's precise formulation, according to which the melancholic is not aware of what he had lost in the lost object. One has to introduce here the Lacanian distinction between the object and the (object-) cause of desire: while the object of desire is simply the desired object, the cause of desire is the feature on account of which we desire the desired object (some detail or tic, which we are usually unaware of and sometimes even misperceive as the obstacle, as that in spite of which we desire the object). From this perspective, the melancholic is not primarily the subject fixated on the lost object, unable to perform the work of mourning, but rather the subject who possesses the object but has lost his desire for it because the cause that made him desire this object has withdrawn, lost its efficiency. Far from accentuating to the extreme the situation of the frustrated desire, of the desire deprived of its object, melancholy rather stands for the presence of the object itself deprived of the desire for itself. Melancholy occurs when we finally get the desired object, but are disappointed in it. In this precise sense, melancholy (disappointment at all positive, observable objects, none of which can satisfy our desire) effectively is the beginning of philosophy.

We are dealing here with the interconnection between anamorphosis and sublimation: the series of objects in reality is structured around (or, rather, involves) a void; if this void becomes visible as such, reality disintegrates. So, in order to retain the consistent edifice of reality, one of the elements of reality has to be displaced onto and occupy the central void—the Lacanian objet petit a. This object is the sublime object (of ideology), the object elevated to the dignity of a Thing, and simultaneously the anamorphic object (in order to perceive its sublime quality, we have to look at it awry, askew—if looked at straight on, it appears as just another object in a series). By the straight-on view, the Jew, say, is one in a series of national or ethnic groups, but at the same time the sublime object, the stand-in for the void (the central antagonism) around which the social edifice is structured—the ultimate hidden Master who secretly pulls all the strings. The anti-Semitic reference to the Jew thus seems to render things clear, making possible the perception of society as a closed or con-

sistent space. (Isn’t it the same with the notion that a worker in capitalism works, say, five hours for himself and three hours for the capitalist master? The illusion is that one can separate the two and ask that a worker should work only five hours for himself, getting the full pay for his work. Within the wage system, this is not possible. The status of the last three hours is thus in a way anamorphic; they are the embodiment of surplus-value—somewhat like the toothpaste tube whose last third is differently colored, bearing, in large letters, the message YOU GET 30% FREE! I am always tempted to say in such a situation, “OK, then, give me only this free 30 percent of the paste!”)

However, the point of the objet petil a as a negative magnitude—to use this Kantian term—is not only that the void of desire paradoxically embodies itself in a particular object that starts to serve as its stand-in but above all the opposite paradox: this primordial void or lack itself functions only insofar as it is embodied in a particular object; it is this object that keeps the gap of desire open. This notion of negative magnitude is also crucial if one is to grasp the revolution of Christianity. Pre-Christian religions remain at the level of wisdom; they emphasize the insufficiency of every temporal finite object and preach either moderation in pleasures (one should avoid excessive attachment to finite objects, because pleasure is transitory) or the withdrawal from temporal reality in favor of the True Divine Object, which alone can provide infinite bliss. Christianity, on the contrary, offers Christ as a mortal, temporal individual and insists that the belief in the temporal event of incarnation is the only path to eternal truth and salvation. In this precise sense, Christianity is a religion of love: in love one privileges, focuses on, a finite temporal object that means more than everything else. This same paradox is also at work in the specific Christian notion of conversion and of the pardon of sins. Conversion is a temporal event that changes eternity itself. The late Kant articulated the notion of the noumenal act of choice by means of which an individual chooses his eternal character; prior to his temporal existence, this act delineates in advance the contours of his terrestrial destiny. Without the divine act of grace, our destiny would remain immovable, forever fixed by this eternal act of choice; the good news of Christianity, however, is that in a genuine conversion one can, as it were, repeat this act and thus change, undo the effects of, eternity itself.

2. Postsecular Thought? No, Thanks!

This ultimate paradox of Christianity is obliterated in what poses today as melancholic, postsecular thought, the stance that finds its ultimate expression in a certain kind of Derridean appropriation of Levinas. In this, one fully concedes that modernist critique undermined the foundations of onto-theology, the notion of God as the supreme entity, and so
forth. However, what if the ultimate outcome of this deconstructive gesture is to clear the slate for a new postdeconstructionist and indeconstructible form of spirituality, for the relationship to an unconditional Otherness that precedes ontology? What if the fundamental experience of the human subject is not that of the self-presence, of the force of dialectical mediation-appropriation of all Otherness, but that of a primordial passivity, sentence, of responding, of being infinitely indebted and responsible to the call of an Otherness that never acquires positive features but always remains withdrawn, the trace of its own absence? One is tempted to evoke here Marx’s famous quip apropos of Proudhon from his The Poverty of Philosophy (instead of actual people in their actual circumstances, Proudhon’s pseudo-Hegelian social theory gives these circumstances themselves, deprived of the people who make them alive): instead of the religious matrix with God at its heart, postsecular deconstruction gives us this matrix itself, deprived of the positive figure of God that sustains it.

The same configuration is repeated in Derrida’s fidelity to the spirit of Marxism: “Deconstruction has never had any sense or interest, in my view at least, except as a radicalization, which is to say also in the tradition of a certain Marxism, in a certain spirit of Marxism.” The first thing to note here (of which Derrida is undoubtedly aware) is how this “radicalization” relies on the traditional opposition between letter and spirit: reasserting the authentic spirit of the Marxist tradition means to leave behind its letter (Marx’s particular analyses and proposed revolutionary measures, which are irreducibly tainted by the tradition of ontology) in order to save from the ashes the authentic messianic promise of emancipatory liberation. What cannot but strike the eye is the uncanny proximity of such “radicalization” to (a certain common understanding of) the Hegelian sublation (Aufhebung). In the messianic promise, the Marxian heritage is “sublated,” that is, its essential core is redeemed through the very gesture of overcoming or renouncing its particular historical shape. And—herein resides the crux of Derrida’s operation—the point is not simply that Marx’s particular formulation and proposed measures are to be left behind, replaced by other, more adequate formulations and measures; the point is rather that the messianic promise that constitutes the spirit of Marxism is betrayed by any particular formulation, by any translation into determinate economic and political measures. The underlying premise of Derrida’s “radicalization” of Marx is that the more radical these determinate economic and political measures are (up to the Khmer Rouge or Sendero Luminoso killing fields), the less they are effectively radical, the more they remain caught in the metaphysical ethical-political horizon. In other words, what Derrida’s “radicalization” means

is, in a way (more precisely: in the practical way), its exact opposite: the renunciation of any truly radical political measures (and, incidentally, all Derrida's particular political interventions, from his admiration of Nelson Mandela and his engagement on behalf of the dissident philosophers in Communist Czechoslovakia, to his conditional support of the bombing of Iraq in the Gulf War, perfectly fit the moderate Leftist stance).

The radicalism of Derridean politics involves the irreducible gap between the messianic promise of the democracy to come and all of its positive incarnations; on account of its very radicalism, the messianic promise forever remains a promise, cannot ever be translated into a set of determinate economic and political measures. The inadequacy between the abyss of the undecidable Thing and any particular decision is irreducible; our debt towards the Other cannot ever be reimbursed, our response to the Other's call is never fully adequate. This position should be opposed to the twin temptations of unprincipled pragmatism and totalitarianism, which both suspend the gap. While pragmatism simply reduces political activity to opportunistic maneuvering, to limited strategic interventions into contextualized situations, dispensing with any reference to transcendent Otherness, totalitarianism identifies the unconditional Otherness with a particular historical figure (the Party is historical reason directly embodied). In short, here enters the problematic of totalitarianism in its specific deconstructionist twist: at its most elementary, one is almost tempted to say ontological, totalitarianism is not simply a political force that aims at the total control of social life, at rendering society totally transparent, but the short-circuit between the messianic Otherness and a determinate political agent. The to-come (à venir) is thus not simply an additional qualification of democracy but its innermost kernel, what makes democracy democracy. The moment democracy is no longer to come but pretends to be actual—fully actualized—we enter totalitarianism.

To avoid a misunderstanding: this democracy to come is, of course, not simply a democracy that promises to arrive in future, but whose arrival is forever postponed. Derrida is well aware of the urgency, of the "now-ness," of the need for justice—if there is a thing foreign to him, it is the complacent postponement of democracy to a later stage in evolution, as in the proverbial Stalinist distinction between the present "dictatorship of the proletariat" and the future "full" democracy, legitimizing the present terror as creating the necessary conditions for the later freedom. Such a two-stage strategy is for him the very worst of ontology; in contrast to such a strategic economy of the proper dosage of (un)freedom, democracy to come refers to the unforeseeable emergencies or outbursts of ethical responsibility, when I am suddenly confronted with an urgency to answer the call, to intervene in a situation that I experience as intolerably unjust. However, it is symptomatic that Derrida nonetheless retains the irreducible opposition between such a spectral experience of the messianic call of justice and its ontologization, its transposition into a
set of positive legal, political, and so forth measures. Or, to put it in the terms of the opposition between ethics and politics: what Derrida mobilizes here is the gap between ethics and politics.

On the one hand, ethics is left defined as the infinite responsibility of unconditional hospitality. Whilst, on the other hand, the political can be defined as the taking of a decision without any determinate transcendental guarantees. Thus, the hiatus in Levinas allows Derrida both to affirm the primacy of an ethics of hospitality, whilst leaving open the sphere of the political as a realm of risk and danger.\(^\text{10}\)

The ethical is thus the (back)ground of undecidability, while the political is the domain of decision(s), of taking the full risk of crossing the hiatus and translating this impossible ethical request for messianic justice into a particular intervention that never lives up to this request, that is always unjust towards (some of the) others. The ethical domain proper, the unconditional spectral request that makes us absolutely responsible and that cannot ever be translated into a positive measure or intervention, is thus perhaps not so much a formal, a priori background or frame for political decisions, but rather their inherent indefinite différence, signalling that no determinate decision can fully hit its mark. This fragile, temporary unity of unconditional ethical injunction and pragmatic political interventions can be best rendered through a paraphrase of Kant’s famous formula of the relationship between reason and experience: “If ethics without politics is empty, then politics without ethics is blind” (E, p. 283). Elegant as this solution is (ethics is here the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of the political, simultaneously opening up the space for the political decision as an act without the guarantee in the big Other and condemning it to its ultimate failure), it is to be opposed to the act in the Lacanian sense, in which, precisely, the distance between the ethical and the political collapses.

Let’s take—what else?—yet again the case of Antigone. She can be said to exemplify the unconditional fidelity to the Otherness of the Thing that disrupts the entire social edifice; from the standpoint of the ethics of Sättlichkeit, of the mores that regulate the intersubjective collective of the polis, her insistence is effectively mad, disruptive, evil. In other words, in the terms of the deconstructionist notion of the messianic promise that is forever to come, is Antigone not a protototalitarian figure? With regard to the tension (which provides the ultimate coordinates of the ethical space) between the Other qua the Thing, the abyssal Otherness that addresses us with the unconditional injunction, and the Other qua the Third, the agency that mediates my encounter with others (other “normal” humans)—where this Third can be the figure of symbolic authority, but also

\(^{10}\) Simon Critchley, Ethics—Politics—Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas, and Contemporary French Thought (London, 1999), p. 275; hereafter abbreviated E.
the “impersonal” set of rules that regulates my exchange with others—does Antigone not stand for the exclusive and uncompromising attachment to the Other qua Thing, eclipsing the Other qua Third, the agency of symbolic mediation or reconciliation? Or, to put it in slightly ironic terms, is Antigone not the anti-Habermas par excellence? No dialogue, no attempt to convince Creon of the good reasons for her acts through rational argumentation, but just the blind insistence of her right. If anything, the so-called arguments are on Creon’s side (the burial of Polynice would stir up public unrest, and so forth), while Antigone’s countertype is ultimately the tautological insistence, “OK, you can say whatever you want, it will not change anything. I stick to my decision!” Such a view is far from a fancy hypothesis. Some of those who read Lacan as a proto-Kantian effectively (mis)read Lacan’s interpretation of Antigone, claiming that Lacan condemns her unconditional insistence, rejecting it as the tragic suicidal example of losing the proper distance towards the lethal Thing, of directly immersing oneself in the Thing.\textsuperscript{11} So, from this perspective, the opposition between Creon and Antigone is the opposition between unprincipled pragmatism and totalitarianism: far from being totalitarian, Creon acts as a pragmatic state politician, mercilessly crushing any activity that would destabilize the smooth functioning of the state and the civil peace. Even further, is the very elementary gesture of sublimation not totalitarian, insofar as it consists in elevating an object into the Thing, as in sublimation something—an object that is part of our ordinary reality—is elevated into the unconditional object that the subject values more than life itself? And is this short-circuit between a determinate object and the Thing not the minimal condition of ontological totalitarianism? Against this short-circuit, is the ultimate ethical lesson of deconstruction not that the gap that separates the Thing from any determinate object is irreducible?

3. The Other: Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real

The problem here is, Is Lacan’s ethics of the Real, the ethics that focuses neither on some imaginary good nor on the pure symbolic form of a universal duty, ultimately also another version of this deconstructive-Levinasian ethic of the traumatic encounter with a radical Otherness to which the subject is infinitely indebted? Is not what Lacan himself calls the ethical Thing its ultimate point of reference, the neighbor, der Nebenmensch, in his or her abyssal dimension of irreducible Otherness that cannot ever be reduced to the symmetry of the mutual recognition of the

Subject and his Other, in which the Hegelian-Christian dialectic of intersubjective struggle finds its resolution, that is, in which the two poles are successfully mediated? Although the temptation to concede this point is great, it is here that one should insist on how Lacan accomplishes the passage from the Law to Love, in short, from Judaism to Christianity. For Lacan, the ultimate horizon of ethics is not the infinite debt towards an abyssal Otherness. The act is for him strictly correlative to the suspension of the big Other, not only in the sense of the symbolic network that forms the substance of the subject’s existence, but also in the sense of the absent originator of the ethical call, of the one who addresses us and to whom we are irreducibly indebted and/or responsible, since (to put it in Levinasian terms) our very existence is responsive—that is, we emerge as subjects in response to the Other’s call. The (ethical) act proper is precisely neither a response to the compassionate plea of my neighborly semblant (the stuff of sentimental humanism) nor a response to the unfathomable Other’s call. Here, perhaps, one should take the risk of reading Derrida against Derrida himself. In his *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, Derrida tries to dissociate the decision from its usual metaphysical predicates (autonomy, consciousness, activity, sovereignty) and think of it as the “other’s decision in me”: “The passive decision, condition of the event, is always, structurally, an other decision in me, a rending decision as the decision of the other. Of the absolutely other in me, of the other as the absolute who decides of me in me.”

When Simon Critchley tries to explicate this Derridean notion of “the other’s decision in me” with regard to its political consequences, his formulation displays a radical ambiguity:

> the political decision is made ex nihilo, and is not deduced or read off procedurally from a pre-given conception of justice or the moral law, as in Habermas, say, and yet it is not arbitrary. *It is the demand provoked by the other’s decision in me that calls forth political invention, that provokes me into inventing a norm and taking a decision.* [E, p. 277]

If we read these lines closely we notice that we suddenly have two levels of decision: the gap is not only between the abyssal ethical call of the Other and my (ultimately always inadequate, pragmatic, calculated, contingent, unfounded) decision of how to translate this call into a concrete intervention; rather, the very decision is split into “the other’s decision in me” and my decision to accomplish some pragmatic political intervention as my answer to this other’s decision in me. In short, the first decision is identified with/as the injunction of the Thing in me to decide; it is a decision to decide, and it still remains my (the subject’s) responsibility to translate this decision to decide into a concrete, actual intervention, to invent

---

a new rule out of a singular situation, where this intervention has to obey pragmatic and/or strategic considerations and is never at the level of the decision. However, back to Antigone again: Does this distinction of the two levels apply to her act? Is it not rather that her decision (to insist unconditionally on her brother's proper funeral) is precisely an absolute decision in which the two dimensions of decision overlap? This is the Lacanian act in which the abyss of absolute freedom, autonomy, and responsibility coincides with an unconditional necessity—I feel obliged to perform the act as an automaton, without reflection; I simply have to do it, it's not a matter of strategic deliberation. To put it in more Lacanian terms, the "other's decision in me" does not refer to the old structuralist formulaic phrases about how "it is not I, the subject, who is speaking, it is the big Other, the symbolic order itself, that speaks through me, so that I am spoken by it," and other similar babble, but to something much more radical and unheard-of. What gives Antigone such unshakable, uncompromising fortitude to persist in her decision is precisely the direct identification of her particular/determinate decision with the Other's (Thing's) injunction or call. Therein resides Antigone's monstrosity, therein resides the Kierkegaardian madness of decision evoked by Derrida. Antigone does not merely relate to the Other-Thing, she—for a brief, passing moment of, precisely, decision—directly is the Thing, thus excluding herself from the community regulated by the intermediate agency of symbolic regulations.

The topic of the other is to be submitted to a kind of spectral analysis that renders visible its imaginary, symbolic, and real aspects. It provides perhaps the ultimate case of the Lacanian notion of the Borromean knot that unites these three dimensions. First, there is the imaginary other—other people "like me," my fellow human beings with whom I am engaged in the mirrorlike relationships of competition, mutual recognition, and so forth. Then there is the symbolic big Other—the substance of our social existence, the impersonal set of rules that coordinate our coexistence. Finally, there is the Other qua Real, the impossible Thing, the inhuman partner, the Other with whom no symmetrical dialogue, mediated by the symbolic Order, is possible. And it is crucial to perceive how these three dimensions are hooked up. The neighbor as the Thing means that, beneath the neighbor as my semblant, my mirror image, there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, of a monstrous Thing that cannot be domesticated. Lacan indicates this dimension in his third seminar:

And why [the Other] with a capital A [for Autre]? For a no doubt mad reason, in the same way as it is madness every time we are obliged to bring in signs supplementary to those given by language. Here the mad reason is the following. You are my wife—after all, what do you
know about it? You are my master—in reality, are you so sure of that? What creates the founding value of those words is that what is aimed at in the message, as well as what is manifest in the pretence, is that the other is there qua absolute Other. Absolute, that is to say he is recognized, but is not known. In the same way, what constitutes pretence is that, in the end, you don’t know whether it’s a pretence or not. Essentially it is this unknown element in the alterity of the other which characterizes the speech relation on the level on which it is spoken to the other.\(^{13}\)

Lacan’s notion, from the early fifties, of the founding word, of the statement that confers on you a symbolic title and thus makes you what you are (wife, master), is usually perceived as an echo of the theory of the performatifive (the link between Lacan and J. L. Austin, the author of the notion of performatifive, was Emile Benveniste). However, it is clear from the above quote that Lacan aims at something more: we need the recourse to performativity, to symbolic engagement, precisely and only insofar as the other whom we encounter is not only the imaginary semblant but also the elusive absolute Other of the Real Thing with whom no reciprocal exchange is possible. In order to render our coexistence with the Thing minimally bearable, the symbolic order qua Third, the pacifying mediator, has to intervene; the domestication of the Other-Thing into a normal fellow human cannot occur through our direct interaction but presupposes the third agency to which we both submit ourselves—there is no intersubjectivity (no symmetrical, shared, relation between humans) without the impersonal symbolic Order. So no axis between the two terms can subsist without the third one. If the functioning of the big Other is suspended, the friendly neighbor coincides with the monstrous Thing (Antigone); if there is no neighbor to whom I can relate as a human partner, the symbolic Order itself turns into the monstrous Thing that is directly parasitical upon me (like Daniel Paul Schreber’s God who directly controls me, penetrating me with the rays of jouissance). If there is no Thing to underpin our everyday symbolically regulated exchange with others, we find ourselves in a Habermasian, flat, aseptic universe in which subjects are deprived of their hubris of excessive passion, reduced to lifeless pawns in the regulated game of communication. Antigone-Schreber-Habermas: a truly uncanny ménage à trois.

4. The Ethical Act: Beyond the Reality Principle

The antimony of postmodern reason that demonstrates the difference between reality and the Real resides in the two apparently opposed

---

ideological commonplaces that predominate today. On the one hand, there is the ideology of realism: we live in the era of the end of great ideological projects, let's be realists, let's give up immature utopian illusions. The dream of the welfare state is over; one should come to terms with the global market. The title of François Furet's history of communism, with its reversal of Freud's The Future of an Illusion—The Passing of an Illusion—directly relies on this postmodern realism: an illusion is no longer something with a force that will persist long into the future, something that, by definition, has a future, but something past, whose time is over. Such a reference to reality functions as a direct dogmatic appeal, which dispenses with the need for argumentation. On the other hand, the inherent counterpoint to this realism is the notion that there is no true reality, that the Real is the ultimate metaphysical myth and illusion—what we perceive as reality is just the result of a certain historically specific set of discursive practices and power mechanisms. Here, the ideological criticism of illusions on behalf of reality is universalized and inverted into its opposite: reality itself is the ultimate illusion.

The lesson to be drawn from this paradox concerns the opposition between reality and the Real: deprived of the hard kernel of the Real, of that which resists the simple integration into our common reality (symbolization, integration into our universe), reality itself turns into a malleable, indefinitely plastic texture that, precisely, loses the character of reality and turns into a fantasmatic effect of discursive practices. And the obverse of the same paradox also holds: the ultimate experience of the Real is not that of a reality which shatters illusions, but that of an illusion which irrationally persists against the pressure of reality, which does not give way to reality. The sad joke, the reversal of the common wisdom, of the reformists in the German Democratic Republic after the Stalinist crackdown on the liberal economic reforms in the early seventies ("Another reality broke down on the hard rock of illusion") renders perfectly this insistence on the Real located in the illusion itself. And the premise of Freud's The Future of an Illusion is that illusion is illusion, not because people cannot ever accept hard reality and need false dreams, but because illusions are sustained by the unconditional insistence of a drive that is more real than reality itself.

One can now precisely locate the ethical act—or, rather, the act as such—with regard to the reign of the reality principle. An ethical act is not only beyond the reality principle (in the sense of running against the current, of insisting on its Cause/Thing without regard to reality), it rather designates an intervention that changes the very coordinates of the reality principle. The Freudian reality principle does not designate the Real but rather the constraints of what is experienced as possible within the symbolically constructed social space, that is, the demands of social reality. And an act is not only a gesture that does the impossible but an intervention into social reality that changes the very coordinates of
what is perceived to be possible; it is not simply beyond the good, it redefines what counts as good. Let us take the standard case of civil disobedience (which, precisely, is the case of Antigone). It is not enough to say that I decide to disobey the positive public law out of respect for a more fundamental law, that is, that we are dealing with the conflict between different obligations, which is resolved when the subject sets his priorities straight and establishes a clear hierarchy between these conflicting obligations ("In principle I obey the public law, but when it encroaches upon my respect for the dead . . ."). Antigone’s gesture of civil disobedience is much more radically performative: through her insistence on giving her dead brother a proper funeral, she defies the predominant notion of the good.

The standard misreading of Kantian ethics reduces it to a theory that posits as the sole criterion of the ethical character of an act the pure interiority of subjective intent, as if the difference between true ethical act and mere legal act concerns only the subject’s inner attitude: in a legal act, I follow the law on account of some pathological consideration (fear of punishment, narcissistic satisfaction, admiration of peers), while the same act can be a proper moral act if only I perform it out of the pure respect for duty, that is, if duty is the sole motive for accomplishing it. In this sense, a proper ethical act is doubly formal; it not only obeys the universal form of law, but this universal form is also its sole motive. However, what if the new content itself can only emerge out of such a redoubling of the form? What if a truly new content that effectively breaks up the frame of formalism (of formal legal norms) can only emerge through the reflection-into-self of the form? Or, to put it in the terms of law and its transgression, the ethical act proper is a transgression of the legal norm—a transgression that, in contrast to a simple criminal violation, does not simply violate the legal norm, but redefines what is a legal norm. The moral law doesn’t follow the good—it generates a new shape of what counts as good.¹⁴

It is here that we confront the key problem; that is to say, a naive question emerges here: Why is it like this? Why is an ethical act not possible that simply realizes an already existing ethical norm in such a way that the subject does it solely out of duty? Let us approach this problem from the opposite end: how does a new ethical norm emerge? The interplay between the existing frame of norms and the empirical content to which these norms are applied cannot account for it. It is not that when the situation gets too complex or changes radically, so that it can no longer be covered adequately by the old norms, we have to invent new norms (as is the case with cloning or organ transplant, where the straight application of old norms leads to a deadlock). A further condition must

¹⁴. I rely here on conversations with Alenka Zupancic; see also her outstanding Ethics of the Real: Kant and Lacan (London, 1999).
be fulfilled: while an act that just applies an existing norm can be merely legal, this redefining of what counts as ethical norms cannot be accomplished as a mere legal gesture but has to occur as a formal gesture in the above-mentioned double meaning of the term, that is, it also has to be accomplished for the sake of duty. Again, why? Why can it not be accomplished as the accommodation of norms to new reality?

When we change legal norms in order to accommodate them to the new demands of reality (say, when liberal Catholics “realistically” make a partial concession to new times and allow for contraception, if it takes place within marital intercourse), we a priori deprive the law of its dignity because we treat legal norms in a utilitarian way, as the instruments that enable us to amend the satisfaction of our pathological interests (our well-being). What this means is that rigid legal formalism (one should adhere unconditionally and in all circumstances to the letter of the law, whatever the costs) and pragmatic utilitarian opportunism (legal norms are flexible; one should bend them in accordance with the demands of life; they are not an end in themselves but should serve concrete living people and their needs) are the two sides of the same coin in that they share a common presupposition in excluding the notion of transgressing the norm as an ethical act, accomplished for the sake of duty. Furthermore, what this means is that radical evil is, at its most extreme, not some barbaric violation of the norm but the very obedience of the norm for pathological reasons. To do the right thing for the wrong reason, to obey the law because it profits me, is much worse than simply transgressing the law. While the direct transgression just violates the law, leaving its dignity untouched (and even reasserting it in a negative way), doing the right thing for the wrong reason undermines the law’s dignity from within, treating the law not as something to be respected, but degrading it into an instrument of our pathological interests—no longer an external transgression of the law, but its self-destruction, its suicide. In other words the traditional Kantian hierarchy of the forms of evil should be reversed: the worst thing that can happen is external legality, the compliance with the law for pathological reasons; then comes a simple violation of the law, disregard for the law; finally, there is the exact symmetrical opposite of doing the right (ethical) thing for the wrong (pathological) reason, doing the wrong thing for the right reason, that is, the violation of ethical norms for no pathological reason, but just for the sake of it (what Kant called the diabolical evil, although denying its possibility). Such evil is formally indistinguishable from the good.

So it is not only that an ethical act, on top of being accomplished out of duty, also has actual effects, also intervenes in reality. It does more than intervene in reality in the sense of having actual consequences; it redefines what counts as reality. In a proper moral act, the inner and the outer, inner intention and external consequences, coincide; they are two sides of the same coin. And, incidentally, the same goes for science. Science
touches the Real not only when it explains the common reality—say, telling us that water is really $\text{H}_2\text{O}$—but when it generates new objects that are part of our reality and simultaneously explode its established framework: the atom bomb, clones such as the unfortunate Dolly. When water is accounted for as a certain composition of $\text{H}$ and $\text{O}$, the explanation leaves our reality the way it was before—it simply redoubles it with another level (of formulas, and so forth) at which we learn what our common reality “really” is. The monstrosity of the Real is rendered palpable when, through the mediation of scientific knowledge, new, seemingly unnatural, objects become part of our daily reality.

5. The Pope versus the Dalai Lama

What are the practical consequences of this stance? When I was finishing the publication of one of my first books in English, the publisher insisted that all the bibliographical references should be done in the infamous author-date style; in the main text, one mentions only the author's family name, the year of publication, and the page, while a list of complete references is provided in alphabetical order at the end of the book. To take revenge on the publisher, I did the same with quotes from the Bible. In the register at the end, I listed the item “Christ, Jesus. 33. Collected Speeches and Thoughts. Edited by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Jerusalem,” and in the main text I included passages such as “(as to this notion of evil, see also the interesting observations in Christ, 33).” The publisher rejected it, claiming that I was indulging in tasteless blasphemy, showing no understanding for my counterargument that such a procedure is deeply Christian, treating Christ—God Himself—as fully human, as just another human being (author) in the same way he was crucified between two ordinary brigands. Christ is the first and only fully ready-made God in the history of religions; he is fully human and thus indistinguishable from other ordinary men—there is absolutely nothing in his bodily appearance that makes Him a special case.\(^{15}\) So, in the same way Marcel Duchamp’s pissoir and bicycle are not objects of art because of their inherent qualities but because of the place they are made to occupy, Christ is not God because of his inherent divine qualities—he has divine qualities (performing miracles, resurrection) because he is God’s son, occupying that symbolic place. There is a certain passage from tragic to mock-comic at the very heart of the Christian enterprise: Christ is emphatically not the figure of a dignified, heroic master.

This is also the reason why every good Christian not only need not be offended but should feel nothing but a guiltless amusement at parodies like Edward Moser’s The Politically Correct Guide to the Bible. If there is a

---

15. I rely here on a conversation with Boris Groys.
problem with this hilarious book, it is that it relies a little too much on
the standard procedure of starting a passage with a well-known dignified
biblical line and then adding as the final twist some thoroughly contem-
porary qualification (following Marx’s well-known quip about the way the
human rights guaranteed by the French Revolution function in the actual
life of the market exchange: “Freedom, equality, and Bentham”): “Though
I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for
‘evil’ and ‘good’ are mere logical constructs.” “And they began to speak
in tongues, and every man heard them in his own language, because of
bilingual education programs.” This rewriting reaches its high point
when Moser reformulates the Ten Commandments into the “Ten Recom-
mandations”—suffice it to quote two of them: “Thou shalt remember the
Sabbath day, so thou can get all thy shopping done at that time.” “Thou
shalt not take the name of God in vain, but with gusto, particularly if you
are a gangsta rap artist.”

The problem is that what is here evoked as satiric exaggeration is
actually taking place today. John Gray, the author of Men Are from Mars,
Women Are from Venus, deployed in a series of Oprah Winfrey shows a vul-
garized version of narrativist-deconstructionist psychoanalysis: since we
ultimately are the stories we are telling ourselves about ourselves, the so-
lution to a psychic deadlock resides in a creative, positive rewriting of the
narrative of our past. What he has in mind is not only the standard cogni-
tive therapy of changing negative false beliefs about oneself into a more
positive attitude of the assurance that one is loved by others and capable
of creative achievements, but a more radical, pseudo-Freudian notion of
regressing back to the scene of the primordial traumatic wound. That is
to say, Gray accepts the psychoanalytic notion of a hard kernel of some
early childhood traumatic experience that forever marks the subject’s fur-
ther development, giving it a pathological spin. What he proposes is that,
after regressing to his primal traumatic scene and thus directly confront-
ing it, the subject should, under the therapist’s guidance, rewrite this
scene, this ultimate phantasmatic framework of his subjectivity, in a more
positive, benign, and productive narrative. If the primordial traumatic
scene that persisted in your unconscious, deforming and inhibiting your
creative attitude, was, say, that of your father shouting at you, “You are
worthless! I despise you! Nothing will come of you!” you should rewrite
it into a new scene with a benevolent father kindly smiling at you and
telling you, “You’re OK! I trust you fully!” (In one of Winfrey’s shows,
Gray directly enacted this experience of rewriting the past with a woman
who, at the end, gratefully embraced him, crying from happiness that she
was no longer haunted by her father’s despising attitude towards her.)
To play this game to the end, when the Wolf Man “regressed” to the

126, 72, 72.
traumatic scene that determined his further psychic development—witnessing the parental *coitus a tergo*—would the solution be to rewrite this scene to say that what he effectively saw was merely his parents lying on the bed, father reading a newspaper and mother a sentimental novel? (Ridiculous as this procedure may appear, let us not forget that it also has its politically correct version, that of ethnic, sexual, and other minorities rewriting their past in a more positive, self-asserting vein.) Along the same lines, do we not practice today the rewriting of the Decalogue itself? Is some command too severe? Let us regress to the scene on Mount Sinai and rewrite it! “Thou shalt not commit adultery—except if it is emotionally sincere and serves the goal of your profound self-realization.” Exemplary here is Donald Spoto’s *The Hidden Jesus*, a New Age, tainted, liberal reading of Christianity, where we can read apropos of divorce:

Jesus clearly denounced divorce and remarriage. . . . But Jesus did not go further and say that marriages cannot be broken. . . . Nowhere else in his teaching is there any situation when he renders a person forever chained to the consequences of sin. His entire treatment of people was to liberate, not to legislate. . . . It is self-evident that in fact some marriages simply do break down, that commitments are abandoned, that promises are violated and love betrayed.\(^\text{17}\)

Sympathetic and liberal as these lines are, they involve a fatal confusion between emotional ups and downs and an unconditional symbolic commitment that is supposed to hold precisely when it is no longer supported by direct emotions: “Thou shalt not divorce—except when your marriage ‘in fact’ breaks down, when it is experienced as an unbearable emotional burden that frustrates your full life,” in short, except when the prohibition to divorce would have regained its full meaning (since who would divorce when his or her marriage still blossoms)!

What disappears in this total availability of the past for a subsequent retroactive rewriting are not primarily the hard facts, but the Real of a traumatic encounter whose structuring role in the subject’s psychic economy forever resists its symbolic rewriting. Emblematic here is the figure of John Paul II. Even those who respect the pope’s moral stance usually accompany this admiration with the qualification that he nonetheless remains hopelessly old-fashioned, medieval even, sticking to old dogmas, out of touch with the demands of new times. How can one today ignore contraception, divorce, abortion? Are these not simply facts of our life? How can the pope deny the right to abortion even to a nun who got pregnant through rape (as he effectively did in the case of the raped nuns during the war in Bosnia)? Is it not clear that even when one is in principle against abortion one should in such an extreme case bend the principle and consent to a compromise? One can now understand why the

Dalai Lama is much more appropriate for our postmodern, permissive times. He presents us with a vague, feel-good spiritualism without any specific obligations; anyone, even the most decadent Hollywood star, can follow him while continuing a money-grubbing, promiscuous lifestyle. In contrast, the pope reminds us that there is a price to pay for a proper ethical attitude. It is his very stubborn clinging to old values, his discounting of the realistic demands of our time even when the arguments against his stand seem obvious (as in the case of the raped nun), that makes him an authentic ethical figure.

6. Levinas with John Woo: The Face as a Fetish

Let us, then, in the guise of a conclusion, clarify the incompatibility between Lacan and Levinas through reference to John Woo’s Face/Off (1997), the film in which an antiterrorist policeman (John Travolta) and the playful and sadistic ultraterrorist (Nicholas Cage) are caught in a deadly game. While Cage is in a coma, the police learn that there is a powerful poison bomb ticking somewhere in Los Angeles; however, since Cage is in a coma, the only way to learn details about the bomb and thus prevent catastrophe is to gain the confidence of Cage’s younger brother. So the police get the idea of using high-tech medicine in order to lift off the faces of both Cage and Travolta, preserving Travolta’s face in a special transparent liquid and then transplanting Cage’s face onto his head. With Cage’s face, Travolta will be able to gain Cage’s brother’s confidence and prevent the disaster. Unfortunately, Cage unexpectedly awakens from the coma, rises from the hospital bed, looks into the mirror, and sees the red, raw flesh of his face as well as Travolta’s face in the liquid. Guessing what happened, he gets in contact with his gang, who occupy the hospital, force the doctors to put Travolta’s face on his head, and then kill all the participants and destroy all documentation, so that nobody knows of the exchange. Cage, the arch-villain, is now free to return to normal social life as Travolta, the superagent, while Travolta is condemned to stay in a high-security prison, forever identified as Cage. However, while Cage takes over Travolta’s job and even his family life (including sex with his wife), Travolta succeeds in escaping and takes over as the boss of Cage’s gang, and so each finds himself occupying the other’s social role. We are thus in the hallucinatory domain of the realized fantasy. The old expression “to lose face,” usually designating a situation of moral shame and humiliation, acquires here a literal meaning: the skin surface of our faces becomes literally the face we are wearing, the mask that it is possible to exchange, to replace with another. What is beneath the artificial replaceable mask is no longer a proper bodily skin surface, but the horrifying raw flesh of blood and muscles. “I” am no longer the face that anyone can see: my face is a mask I can take off. A certain ontological gap is thus
opened, a gap often manipulated also in the work of David Lynch, whereby the ordinary reality we know dissolves into the proto-ontological Real of raw flesh and replaceable mask (rather like the scene from Terry Gilliam's Brazil in which the food served in a restaurant consists of a nice color photo of the meal on a frame above the plate, which actually holds a formless slime).

At first glance, it is obvious how this duel between Travolta and Cage provides a perfect staging of what Lacan calls the mirror relationship: in a deadly struggle with my mirror double, every strike at him is a strike at me, and vice versa, by hurting myself I hurt my enemy. No wonder that a number of scenes involve one of the two main characters facing his mirror image and not being able to endure it, since what he sees is the image of his arch-enemy. This procedure is brought to a higher, reflexive, ironic level when, in the final confrontation, Travolta and Cage find themselves on opposite sides of a thin wall covered on both sides by a mirror. They draw their guns and turn towards the mirror, seeing in it the image of their own face, that is, seeing in it who the enemy behind the mirror wall truly is. One can well understand Travolta's hesitation in striking a full blow to Cage's face: since the skin of this face is literally his own, by destroying it he destroys his own face, ruining the chances of ever getting it back on his head. No wonder that the dying Cage desperately tries to cut and damage his face; he knows that, by doing this, he will prevent Travolta from getting it back.

This mirror relationship occurs at the level of the interaction between the Real (the raw flesh) and the Imaginary (the replaceable masks we are wearing). However, this mirror relationship is not the whole truth about the film. The first thing to do in order to discern the traces of a third, symbolic dimension is to read this exchange of faces against the background of the obvious fact that, with regard to their screen personas, Travolta is much closer to the Cage character (the evil, playfully cynical sadist), while Cage, who usually plays active, strong, but nonetheless tender and compassionate characters, fits much better the true identity of the Travolta role in the film. No wonder, then, that when the two swap faces, the spectator experiences this exchange as a kind of justified redefinition of the proper state of things; Travolta is extremely convincing when he behaves like the playfully sadistic arch-villain, while Cage is no less convincing as the desperate honest policeman trying to convince his family of his true identity. Here we encounter the symbolic efficiency of the mask. It is as if the relationship between the mask and the true face is inverted, as if the real faces of Travolta and Cage are already masks, suppressing their true characters, so that it is by putting on the other person's face that the subject is able freely to articulate his true self. Against this background, the film's end, when the situation seems normalized, with everyone returning to his true face (even Travolta's teenage daughter, who during the film heavily paints her face like a punk, shows
her “natural” face with no makeup and piercing), appears more ambigu-
ous than it may seem. Travolta’s desperate endeavor to regain his true
face displays not so much his effort to return to his true self but rather his
plea to keep at bay, in a state of repression, the dark side of his personality.

Or is this side really so dark? When, in one of the nicest scenes of
the film, Cage-with-the-face-of-Travolta confronts his enemy’s daughter
and, instead of acting like the usual harsh father that Travolta was, almost
flirts with her and offers her cigarettes, do we not get a glimpse of an-
other father-daughter relationship, in which the father drops the mask
of rigid paternal authority and shows some understanding for the daugh-
ter’s lifestyle? Perhaps this fact explains one of the most poignant scenes
in the film, in which Cage and Travolta fight in front of Travolta’s daugh-
ter, who holds a gun in her hand. The daughter is confronted with the
Groucho Marx predicament (“Whom do you believe, your eyes or my
words?”): she is torn between believing her eyes (which tell her that the
man wearing her father’s face is her father) and believing the words (the
desperate plea of her true father telling her who he really is). Signifi-
cantly, she makes the wrong decision, choosing to believe her eyes, and
shoots her father, wounding him in his arm. Or is this decision really
wrong? Was she really simply the victim of the false evidence of her eyes?
What if she deliberately chose the person who presented a more likable
paternal figure than her true, but stiff and authoritarian, father? What
the Travolta character tries to elude in his effort to regain his true face is
thus the fact that the faces we wear are inherently a deceptive lure, that
none of them is our true face. Ultimately, the subject’s true face beneath
the masks is nothing but the formless, skinned, raw, red flesh. The guar-
antee of our identity is not the face we wear but the fragile symbolic iden-
tity that is always threatened by the face’s seductive lure.

It is from here that one should approach the key Levinasian notion
of encountering the other’s face as the epiphany, as the event that pre-
cedes Truth itself: “To seek truth, I have already established a relation-
ship with a face which can guarantee itself, whose epiphany itself is
somehow a word of honor. Every language as an exchange of verbal signs
refers already to this primordial word of honor. . . . Deceit and veracity
already presuppose the absolute authenticity of the face.”


19. Donald Davidson, “Empirical Content,” in Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the
very condition of its effective functioning. So when Levinas claims that a face “can guarantee itself,” this means that, precisely, it serves as the nonlinguistic point of reference that also enables us to break the vicious circularity of the symbolic order, providing it with the ultimate foundation, the “absolute authenticity.” The face is thus the ultimate fetish, the object that fills in (obfuscates) the big Other’s castration (inconsistency, lack), the abyss of its circularity. At a different level, this fetishization—or, rather, fetishistic disavowal—is discernible also in our daily relations with another person’s face. This disavowal does not primarily concern the raw reality of flesh (“I know very well that beneath the face there is just the Real of the raw flesh, bones, and blood, but I nonetheless act as if the face were a window into the mysterious interiority of the soul”), but, rather, at a more radical level, the abyss or void of the Other: the human face domesticates the terrifying Thing that is the ultimate reality of our neighbor. And insofar as the void called the subject of the signifier is strictly correlative to this inconsistency (lack) of the Other, subject and face are to be opposed; the event of encountering the other’s face is not the experience of the abyss of the other’s subjectivity; rather, the only way to arrive at this experience is through defacement in all its dimensions, from a simple tic or grimace that disfigures the face (in this sense, Lacan claims that the Real is the grimace of reality), up to the extreme case of losing face, morally and physically, as in Face/Off.

Perhaps the key moment in any Jerry Lewis film occurs when the idiot he plays is compelled to become aware of the havoc his behavior has caused. At this moment, when he is stared at by all the people around him, unable to sustain their gaze, he engages in his unique mode of making faces, of ridiculously disfiguring his facial expression, twisting his hands and rolling his eyes. This desperate attempt of the ashamed subject to efface his presence, to erase himself from the other’s view, combined with the endeavor to assume a new face more acceptable to the environs, is subjectivization at its purest. So what is shame, this experience of losing face? In the standard Sartrean version, the subject “for-itself” is ashamed of the “in-itself,” of the stupid Real of his bodily identity: am I really that, this bad-smelling body, these nails, these excrements? In short, shame designates the fact that spirit is directly linked to the inert, vulgar bodily reality—which is why it is shameful, for instance, to defecate in public.

20. This circularity is best exemplified by the paradox of Saussure’s definition of the signifier: a signifier is nothing but a bundle of differences from the other signifiers. And if the same goes for all the others, what sustains the whole edifice? How is it that it does not collapse and implode? The structural answer is, of course, to introduce the paradoxical excessive signifier, which, far from serving as the ultimate foundation, gives body to its lack “as such,” that is, the signifier that is not one in the series but stands for the very presence of the signifier as opposed to its absence, for the difference as such.
However, Lacan’s counterargument is here that shame by definition concerns fantasy. Agamben emphasized that shame is not simply passivity, but an actively assumed passivity: if I am raped, I have nothing to be ashamed of; but if I enjoy being raped, then I deserve to feel ashamed.22

Actively assuming passivity thus means, in Lacanian terms, finding jouissance in the passive situation in which one is caught. And since the coordinates of jouissance are ultimately that of the fundamental fantasy, which is the fantasy of (finding jouissance in) being put in the passive position, what exposes the subject to shame is not the disclosure of how he is put in the passive position, treated only as a body. Shame only emerges when such a passive position in social reality touches upon the (disavowed intimate) fantasy. Let us take two women, the first liberated, assertive, and active; the other secretly daydreaming about being brutally handled by her partner, even raped. The crucial point is that if both of them are raped, the rape will be much more traumatic for the second one, on account of the very fact that it will realize in external social reality the stuff of her dreams. Why? There is a gap that forever separates the fantasmatic kernel of the subject’s being from the more superficial modes of his or her symbolic and/or imaginary identifications. It is never possible for me to fully assume (in the sense of symbolic integration) the fantasmatic kernel of my being; when I approach it too much, when I come too close to it, what occurs is the aphanisis of the subject, in which the subject loses his or her symbolic consistency and disintegrates. And, perhaps, the forced actualization in social reality itself of the fantasmatic kernel of my being is the worst, most humiliating kind of violence, a violence that undermines the very basis of my identity (of my “self-image”) by exposing me to an unbearable shame.

We can clearly see, now, how far psychoanalysis is from any defense of the dignity of the human face. Is the psychoanalytic treatment not the experience of rendering public (to the analyst who stands for the big Other) one’s most intimate fantasies and thus the experience of losing one’s face in the most radical sense of the term?