

Subject of the Drive, Ethics of the Real

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In Jacques Lacan's *Seminar II* there is a moment when he stops to ask the question: what is a madman? A mad person is not somebody who thinks he is a king; a mad person is a king who really thinks he is a king.¹ Take for instance the Hollywood movie *The King's Speech* which opens with the main character King George VI, played by Colin Firth, feeling precisely this gap or symbolic castration. Symbolic castration resides in the distance between one's symbolic mandate: teacher, CEO, judge, etc., and one's own pathetic self. *Why am I what you are saying that I am?* is the hysterical outcry, which for analysis, is a good first step, since in analysis the analysand needs to be hystericized to a certain degree, as there needs to be a question ... why am I ... etc. However at the end of this particular movie, unlike the end of analysis, the King's persistent questioning and self-doubt are 'normalised' and as Slavoj Žižek points out, "the force of his hysterical questioning is obliterated."²

For the analyst-analysand in the clinic, the end of analysis is not defined in the moment when the symbolic mandate is pulled away and the *real* person emerges. On the contrary, analytic progress is made when all the masks and mandates of the analysand are pulled away to reveal, like an onion, nothing at its very centre.³ This paper will seek to reveal the event of shattering one's symbolic coordinates of identity, thus revealing not only the gap that marks her as a split subject \$, but it is only this gap as it emerges in the repetitions of the death drive that a theory of an ethical subject can emerge. As such, we will begin precisely at the point in which the individual is hailed into a symbolic mandate. What will be revealed is that this version of subjectification is not as air tight as it seems at first glance and that this gap is where precisely the subject emerges.

As the French Marxist Louis Althusser suggests, subjects are ‘hailed’ by the big Other into their respective roles and identities.⁴ Individuals ‘turn around’ to the call of an interpellative hail that comes from the school, the church, the media, the State, the police, all of which succeed in providing the subjective coordinates that allow the individual to properly identify and assume his or her various roles in society: worker, parent, son, citizen, etc. The key argument in this paper is that the political subject proper (as opposed to the individual) is the result of a failed interpellation.⁵ Additionally, the split subject marked \$ in Lacanian theory, simply marks the subject as lacking, and the attempt to incorporate this lack back into a fantasized fullness induces the *objet a* as at once the promise of fullness, and its barrier.⁶ Instead of chasing this *objet a* (for example, lining up in earnest expectation outside an Apple computer store), I will argue that the political subject only emerges when it identifies itself with its *objet a*. But what are these precipitating events, these triggers that will ignite subjective change proper? Additionally, what are the prerequisite conditions that lead to the emergence of a subject? In answering these questions, we need to begin with the form of compulsive masochistic repetition that Freud labelled the *death drive*.

Freud’s discussion of the death drive was first introduced in an earlier work as that which is ‘beyond’ the pleasure principle. In what way can we say the death drive is ‘beyond’ in any sense? Going some way towards answering this in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930),⁷ Freud famously wonders aloud regarding the genesis of the animal versus human:

In the case of other animal species it may be that temporary balance has been reached between the influence of their environment and the mutually contending instincts within them, and that thus a cessation of development has come about. It may be that in primitive man a fresh access of libido kindled a renewed burst of activity on the part of the destructive instinct. There are a great many questions here to which as yet there is no answer. (70)

Freud draws a contrast here between the homeostatic balance of animal nature and the death drive

that inaugurates a breakthrough to the human. Recall that in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920),⁸ Freud describes an incident now popularly known as the *fort-da* scheme. It consists of a baby throwing a spool over the edge of a cot, emitting an “ooo” or the German word “fort” meaning away, and then reeling the spool back in with the exclamation “daaa” or “here.” This sequence is commonly interpreted as a routine the baby performs, as a way of coping with the absence of the mother. But what gets overlooked is Freud’s statement with regards to the fact that the baby repeats more often the first part of the game: the throwing away of the object.

The going away of the mother cannot possibly have been pleasant for the child, nor even a matter of indifference. How then does his repetition of this painful experience in his play fit in with the pleasure principle? One might wish to reply that the mother’s departure would need to be re-enacted in the game as the precondition of her happy return, and that this latter event was its real purpose. Such a view would be contradicted by the evident fact that Act One, the departure, was played by itself as a game all on its own and far more frequently than the whole drama with its happy conclusion. (53-54)

In other words Freud is drawing our attention to the fact that the baby repeats far more often the throwing away of the spool and the experience of this lack. As Slavoj Žižek often repeats, this repetition of a loss (death drive) is an excess unique to the human being. It is this disruption that breaks the human out of the smooth seamlessness of animal instinctual existence. In deference to the theme of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the realm of culture and the symbolic represent the gentrification of the death drive: culture is that which works to quell the traumatic originary loss constitutive of subjectivity. The death drive is just this repetition of the originary and traumatic loss constitutive of subjectivity. The loss marks the subject’s entry into signification and desire.

The key here for Todd McGowan⁹ is that Freud’s discovery of the death drive shows how satisfaction is attained via repetition and return to an ‘original’ loss. Once the subject falls into the defiles of the signifier, something retroactively is felt as lost, a lost primordial bond, a wholeness or oneness that never actually existed but retroactively comes into play once signification takes

hold of the subject. According to McGowan, the death drive returns us to the original loss, to the original sacrifice, bringing us as close as we can come to redeeming the original lost object: “the subject enjoys the disappearance of its privileged object; it enjoys not having it rather than having it because this experience returns the subject to the initial moment of loss where the subject comes closer to the privileged object than at any other time” (38). Satisfaction derives from the repetitive return to an original constitutive loss – a loss that marks subjectivity. The subject enjoys this loss¹⁰ – *but does not recognize or embrace it as such*. Instead, the subject continues to believe that the symptomatic disruption – the manifestation of loss – prevents the attainment of an ultimate satisfaction. McGowan cites the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center as an example of an enjoyment in loss with direct political bearings. A social bond emerged through an experience of collective loss, such that the headlines of French newspapers proclaimed on that day, “Nous sommes tous Américains” (160). However, precisely because a return to a foundational experience of loss is traumatizing, the subject seeks to escape this unbearable enjoyment and finds a way and means to disavow it (38). In other words, precisely because enjoyment of loss is a painful, shameful, humiliating experience, the United States quickly covered over its loss and turned to an assertion of imperial will “that would carry with it the promise of a restored wholeness – the recovery of an imaginary perfect security” (160). For a brief moment, a social solidarity emerged around this loss, but at that precise moment, too, forces were deployed that carried the promise – and nostalgia – of restoring a lost wholeness.

For McGowan, the very form of *subjective destitution* – this sense of loss, this nagging lack, rather than immobilizing the subject – provides the core of an ethical disposition. Similarly, Rothenberg, here quoting Žižek, points out: Introducing a distance towards one’s own symbolic identity puts one in a position to act in an “objective-ethical” way.¹¹ The profound implication for

an ethical subjectivity is the ramifications of staying with loss, of identifying with the barrier rather than falling into a mistaken belief that once the obstacle is circumvented the treasured object is attainable. Not only is the object not attainable, neither is the true subjectivity of the death drive, as the death drive cannot be subjectified; that is, there is no subject of the death drive in its full positivity. Rather it is the circling around a loss. As such, to say or describe some positivity or full identification of a subject of drive is impossible given the nature of drive. One way of understanding the nature of this loss is to think of the loss as a form of subjective destitution; that is, moving from the lost object to *loss itself as object*.¹²

Such a subject of radical withdrawal means every precept and ontological anchor is swept clean, such that its base singularity is all that is left. This means doing away with fanciful existential notions of a rational, unique kernel of subjectivity, a nameless X unique to every person, replacing it instead with an empty void, an empty cause. In other words, the subject must become its own *cause* but not in the individualist strong ego sense, rather the proper ethico-political relation is to garner this *objet a* and render it such that it resounds as the very motor of a universality, a singular universality. This singularity universality comes about through the emergence of a subjectivity that becomes an obstacle to the Symbolic but more than this, it is an act of total symbolic divestiture, joining other such singularities at the level of the objective Real. Subjective destitution via the death drive is nothing short of a total realignment of one's subjective coordinates. It short-circuits intersubjectivity and mutual recognition, and lands one in a thoroughly desubjectivized domain. Dislodging one's entire subjective coordinates, shaking up the quadrants holding together one's very being may give one pause nevertheless what can be called the 'event of the subject' happens.¹³ Subjective destitution is induced by some kind of event, and it is out of this that a dimension of sorts emerges, which was simply not part of the configuration

before. It is not simply a choice; rather there is another choice that becomes possible that was not there before.

Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia*¹⁴ begins on Justine's (Kirsten Dunst) wedding day reception party. With her marriage only hours old, Justine berates her overbearing boss and right on the spot quits her job at an upscale marketing firm. She then excuses herself from her husband that same night at the 'matrimonial bed' and, after having sex with another man, walks away from all elements of her *status quo* life up to then. Need we hurriedly condemn Justine for such irresponsible (key word: inappropriate) behaviour? Or, on the other hand, applaud her for breaking out of her socially coveted upper class shell? The answer is neither. Her 'breakdown' points out the fact that "the seemingly objective causality crushing us itself involves contingency and subjectivity, and the way we are inscribed in it gives us more power than we could ever hope for."¹⁵ One is far freer than one imagines. It requires a break, a decision whose coordinates for deciding, for acting as such, can only be given after the fact.

Justine's identity markers are dislodged, and her various symbolic mandates in tatters, rendering her *monstrous* by the prevailing normative regime. Here we see in a fitting example how a politics of the death drive first and foremost insists on the failed interpellation; that is, a subject who disregards, ignores or does not answer the identificatory hails coming from the big Other. One theorist who practices this type of monstrosity with an emphasis on the failed interpellation is Judith Butler. Can we see in Butler's theory an alternative entry point to a politics of the death drive?

For Judith Butler, whenever we question our gender "we run the risk of losing our intelligibility, of being labelled 'monsters.'"¹⁶ Furthermore, one should not too quickly seek to regain an intelligibility in the prevailing discourse, as Butler wants to "distress" any comfortable

place-setting for a queer identity that has a place reserved for it under the twin banners of “inclusion and tolerance.” In this sense, what the label of monstrosity signals is the possibility of existing outside of signification, at the very limits of the symbolic order. And it is here in her work in *Antigone’s Claim*¹⁷ and *Psychic Life of Power* that Butler advocates turning away from the law, resisting its lure of identity.

Such a turn demands a willingness *not* to be – a critical desubjectivation – in order to expose the law as less powerful than it seems. What forms might linguistic survival take in this desubjectivized domain? How would one know one’s existence? Through what terms would it be recognized and recognizable?¹⁸

Our attention needs to be drawn to this instance in Butler alerting us to a precise critical desubjectivization, coupled with its interrogation as the very possibility of survival. In *Precarious Life*, Butler emphasizes that it is simply not a question of an addition:

It is not a matter of a simple entry of the excluded into an established ontology, but an insurrection at the level of ontology, a critical opening up of the questions, What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade?¹⁹

Rejecting those theories that place the formation of the subject outside of and prior to a relation to others, Butler instead argues that the subject is formed in a relation prior to any individuality:

This relation *precedes* individuation, and when I act ethically, I *am* undone as a bounded being. I come apart. I find that I am my relation to the “you” whose life I seek to preserve, and without that relation, this “I” makes no sense, and has lost its mooring in this ethics that is always prior to the ontology of the ego.²⁰

Important to note here, subjective dispossession remains for Butler an ethical principal that is *prior* to the ontology of the ego. Subjective dispossession in this sense does not mean that there must exist something that is neither fully fledged being, nor simply non-being, another dimension that points to precisely a rift or impasse in being, a radical negativity and the subject is just this discontinuity.²¹

However, once she opens her theory to this possibility, Butler then just as quickly closes it

down resolving to define this unbindness and discontinuity of the subject as a mode of relationality to the other, finally landing in an ethics of finitude. For Butler, subjective destitution entails an unravelling, of vulnerability in relation to the other and that this very unstable framing of the subject is a condition of a viable ethical relation. Thus, her post-Cartesian theory of subject formation is premised on a relational ontology, of which subjectivity is first and foremost marked by an *undoneness*, vulnerability and exposure to the call of the Other. Butler makes a strong claim for a ‘subject unravelling’ a ‘critical desubjectivation’ even an ‘insurrection at the level of ontology.’ Even so, the argument can be made that she stops short and retreats from her promises of an insurgent rethinking of the subject precisely at the point where the subject unravels. This prompts Žižek to ask, “is the status of the subject always limited, dispossessed, exposed, *or is the subject itself a name for/of this dispossession?*”²² Žižek’s point here suggests that a radical subjective break from its own self-identity requires a clear break from the symbolic order and not just a rearrangement of its terms. This touches on an important distinction between the barred subject \$ and ‘subjectivization.’ Žižek makes this distinction in the following manner:

The subject in a way *is* the failure of subjectivization, the failure of assuming the symbolic mandate, of fully identifying with the ethical call. To paraphrase Althusser ... an individual is interpellated into subjecthood, this interpellation fails, and *the “subject” is this failure.*²³

Žižek’s point here is that the subject is not the positivity of an interpellation, it is irreducible to simply an identification in the big Other. The subject precedes subjectivization. It emerges in the gap between the interpellation and its failure. Over his entire *oeuvre*, Žižek’s most radical gesture is to “go to the end” and speak of *death drive* as the radical deformation and re-formation of subjectivity beyond symbolic performative resignifications.

It is precisely this notion of an emergence of a subject *separate from identity* that needs to be explored. This is what is required in order to effect a transition away from the symbolic matrix,

which are deeply etched Capitalism-Heterosexualism-Family. A subject that has traversed the fantasy thus *dis-identifies*, does not try to please, appease, seek out recognition or approval from a big Other. There are no laws of history, no God above, no Hell below, no axiomatic moral precepts with which to ground the ethical decision.

To engage in an act of subjective change is a position of pure non-pathological (in the Kantian sense) singularity, a singular non-identity seeking only truth without regard for consequences. Indeed such acts are rare, but that they do occur and are examples of an ethics of the Real in which a possibility of a solidarity emerging “not from intersubjective relations but rather from the relations of subjects purified of their symbolic identities, subjects who meet on the grounds of objectivity.”²⁴ When universality cuts through particularity, individuals emerge as universal subjects purged of symbolic identity and meet only as universals, which stand as the ground of all objectivity. A literary instance that reveals what an instance of this type of subjectivity is hinted at in Herman Melville’s 1853 short story “Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall St.”²⁵

Herman Melville’s 1853 short story “Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall St.” concerns a lawyer who runs a business copying legal documents. He hires Bartleby as a law-copyist – or scrivener – to help with the workload. Soon after Bartleby arrives he gradually begins to turn down work from the lawyer with the words, “I prefer not to,” until eventually he attends to the office every day, only to sit and not do anything. It is not so much his gesture of refusal, but the way he goes about doing it. Bartleby is no revolutionary; his aim is not social change, his aim is unclear – what is apparent though is that he seeks no recognition in a big Other for his deeds. It is an act of self-destitution, or depersonalization in the sense that he goes about his gesture of refusal of his preference not out of a defiance that can be named, but as a refusal that cannot be articulated within

the Symbolic order. Bartleby's co-workers and employer are baffled. His refusal via the mode of desubjectivization means it is not done on behalf of a particular identity (environmentalist, feminist, working class etc.). Bartleby's subjectivity does not appear on the plane of hysterical desire; he does not exist as a subject of desire. Bartleby is, on the contrary, a subject of the drive; he identifies directly with *objet a* and thus "institutes a gap between itself and its symbolic subjective dimension."²⁶ This is the gesture of subtraction at its purest, the reduction of all qualitative differences to a purely formal minimal difference. There is no violent quality in it; violence pertains to its very immobile, inert, insistent, impassive being – that's what makes his presence so unbearable.²⁷ The question, then, is: "So we must all then become so unbearable?" Unbearable in this precise sense: the subject now is placed in the position of *objet a* as void of the Other's desire. In other words, we find ourselves in the discourse of the Analyst,²⁸ and Bartleby occupies the position of *objet a*, silent, unobtrusive, prompting perhaps a slight hystericization of those around him in that they react defensively to his silence and refusals to participate in the 'game.'²⁹ Bartleby causes anxiety and slight turmoil at his office because he is not saying "I do not want to", but affirming, saying that he "prefers not to." Bartleby's act then is successful in setting off, against his own background of passive resistance, the contingency of the Symbolic, that things could be otherwise. By occupying the very void of desire in the position of agency (analyst discourse), he forces those closest around him into a frenzy of anxiety, self-doubt, persecution/scapegoating and fear. But he remains passive in his preference, not being able to hurt a fly, thus opening up a transformative space. Žižek believes that in Bartleby one sees "how we pass from the politics of "resistance" or "protestation" which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which "opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position and its negation" (382).

To add another twist on our take on Bartleby, Žižek continues, "Bartleby's gesture is what

remains of the supplement to the Law when its place is emptied of all its obscene superego content” (382). What is key to understand Bartleby is that, getting back to Butler’s query above: in an act of critical desubjectivization, how would one know one’s existence, how would it be recognizable? A critical desubjectivization empties the law of its obscene superego content of imaginary resentment, hate, jealousy and fantasies of revenge, scapegoating, etc. Thus, any identities that emerge could be labelled *post-Oedipal*, yet we must be careful to note here, post-Oedipal identities are *not* whole, refined, without excess, as that would simply be another form of imaginary identification, one of purification, which entails its own debilitating and politically vile logic. Bartleby’s desubjectivization provoked vile resentment from the other two law clerks. However, the lawyer, though initially perturbed by Bartleby, chooses not to displace the anxiety Bartleby causes by attempting to rid the office of his presence. Instead, he seeks to meet him half-way. Rothenberg argues that “Bartleby’s de-personalization forces the lawyer to recognize Bartleby as something *in addition* to a symbolic identity, to treat him as well at the level of the foundation of subjectivity, not as something subhuman.”³⁰ The ethical stand of the lawyer is premised on one question he now must ask himself: Will I act in conformity to what threw me for a loop?

Conclusion

When Butler quotes Nietzsche’s emphatic statement that there is “no doer behind the deed,” we should interpret this as saying that the subject *is* this very failure of interpellation. The subject is its own failure to signify. The emergence of the subject is its very failure. As opposed to the game of “subjectivation” and subject positions, we need to bring attention to the self-relating negativity that is the subject³¹, the fact that failing to heed the interpellative call is this very

minimal self-difference inherent to subjectivity. And it is precisely this *out-of-jointness* of the subject with itself that is the subject. The subject is thus a void, between two signifiers; it can never be completely exhausted by the signifier, it can never be One.³² Thus, the crux of the ethical relation for Žižek is not to construct an Other in its capacity for goodness, (a slippery signifier if there ever was one).³³ To recognize another person is thus not primarily or ultimately to recognize him or her in a certain well-defined capacity (“I recognize you as . . . rational, good, lovable”), but to recognize a person in the abyss of their very impenetrability and opacity. “This mutual recognition of limitation thus opens up a space of sociality that is the solidarity of the vulnerable.”³⁴ It is a solidarity of not-having: “Our enjoyment of the social bond operates according to the logic of not-having: we enjoy the shared experience of loss” (McGowan 2013, 159). And this shared experience of loss can only come about through an individual and collective reconfiguration to the *objet a*, the object-cause of desire. This would enable a version of intersubjective relations to shift from a language of “tolerance” and “mutuality” to a truly unsentimental ethical duty of “I did it because I had to do it” – a Kantian imperative without the pathological remainder. After all, intersubjectivity is not a relation of mutual recognition of each other’s positive ontic qualities. This would reduce intersubjectivity to a mirroring relationship that, more often than not, ends in bitter rivalry, jealousy, resentment and hate.³⁵ Intersubjective recognition should be grounded in the void of subjectivity. This void is accessed strictly through the *objet a*.

It is only in the analyst’s discourse where *objet a* takes on the position of agency. Rather than *objet a* taking on the function of scapegoat (Jew), or of the mysterious *je ne sais quoi* that holds the Other as irremediably Other, (their body odour, their food, the way they enjoy), one “traverses the fantasy” and confronts the void, the gap, filled up by the fantasmatic object. In other

words, *objet a* is that which stares back, dumbly, but importantly seeks not to incite a call to an Other for rescue, or for meaning, or invoke a resentful sneer, a racist slur, etc. The conclusion to be drawn is that there is no big Other and this then involves a different subjective position, a traversing of and realignment to a new fantasy framework. This involves a more radical ethical freedom in which one can assume a certain position of ‘being impossible’: i.e. a position of refusing the terms of socio-political engagement and identitarian inscription; of refusing the terms of existing possibility.³⁶ We are back to Bartleby’s “I prefer not to.” But, to be more precise, it is Bartleby who in the position of *objet a*, invites the lawyer to establish a different relationship to his fantasy framework. Recall the lawyer, upon trying to enter his office on a Sunday morning, is met by Bartleby who has taken up residence in the office, and who kindly asks the lawyer to come back in a while so that he can change. The lawyer – instead of “standing his ground” and enforcing his right to enter his own office, of not “being shown up” by a subordinate – instead, complies and goes for a walk around the block in order to give Bartleby time to wash, gather his stuff and leave. In fact the lawyer, from the beginning, refrains from scapegoating Bartleby. On the other hand, and in strict contrast, Bartleby’s co-workers do not waste any time rebuking Bartleby’s insolence. So is the lawyer being played here for a dupe, a fool? Or, is the lawyer, striking out against himself, risking looking like a fool, breaking with convention and with his professional status, engaging in an experience of collective loss with Bartleby? Reconfiguring this relation to *objet a* is what is at stake in our claim that a certain mode of dispossession of the subject figures a new ethical relation. It is the part of no-part in which the subject as object, meets the other on this ground of objectivity; that is, subjects meet on the singular ground of objectivity minus their respective ontic particularistic traits. Struggles in which “there are neither men nor women, neither Jews nor Greeks ... Palestinian women demonstrating against the Wall were joined by a group of Jewish

lesbian women from Israel. ... a sublime solidarity developed, with a traditionally dressed Palestinian woman embracing a Jewish lesbian with spiky purple hair – a living symbol of what our struggle should be.”³⁷

In this is the mode of dispossession, a singular universality emerges out of subjective destitution, of a subject that has touched the *real* of the dissolution of her own symbolic coordinates. The subject has affected a distance or a gap between herself and her own symbolic-subjective dimension. This opens up the dimension of objectivity, which cuts diagonally across all ontic particularities (race, gender, class, culture, etc.) and unites subjects as subjects not of desire, but as subjects of drive. The difference between the subject of desire and subject of drive being the latter’s fidelity to the Universal.

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Notes

¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud’s theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. with notes by Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), p.243.

² Slavoj Žižek, "Redefining family values on film." *The Guardian*. 3 October 2013.
<http://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2013/oct/03/slavoj-zizek-family-values-on-film>

³ Molly Anne Rothenberg puts this point quite well in terms of the difference between the *level of enunciation* and the *level of the enunciated*: “The fact that one has become meaningful to others – i.e. been registered in the Symbolic – does not mean that one actually knows what one means to others. On the contrary, to enter the Symbolic register is to fall under the regime of signification as a signifier, that is, as capable of transmitting meaning, but not capable of coinciding precisely with one’s meaning. A gap remains between the subject who is *referred to* in the utterance at the level of enunciated (“I am a woman”) and the subject who is *making the utterance* at the level of enunciation. This gap marks the locus of the minimal difference that keeps the subject from coinciding with itself. It is as though one were constantly uttering, simply by virtue of being a

subject, “Here I am,” without, however, knowing what others make of that message. The subject does not know what message it is sending because the subject cannot eliminate the excessive dimension from its utterance. The subject cannot make the subject of which it speaks (“I am a woman”) coincide with the subject which is speaking (“[Here I am saying that]...”). That difference, that excess, is irreducible. So, the inability to control the meaning of oneself for others, this consequence of the difference between the level of the enunciated and the level of enunciation, is the way in which the subject becomes aware of its own non-self-coincidence.” (*The Excessive Subject*. Cambridge Mass: Polity Press, 2010 p. 43)

⁴ Louis Althusser, 1971. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Translated by Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press.

⁵ The difference between the ‘subject’ and ‘individual’ is that between the ethical and the social in which the latter lives entirely within the normalised social domain and within a dominant fantasy frame that works to secure reproduction of the social ‘as is.’ Whereas the former, the ethical subject, emerges when I become ‘dislocated’ or ‘aware’ of the inexistence of the big Other and do not attempt to cover over this gap by substituting various fantasies of social cohesion and plenitude (along with the necessary scapegoats). It is a crucial distinction for a Lacanian political theory. For two different takes on developing a Lacanian political project see Stavrakakis 2007 *The Lacanian Left*. New York: SUNY Press, and McGowan 2013, *Enjoying What We Don't Have*. University of Nebraska Press.

⁶ The *objet petit a* or simply *objet a* (‘a’ for *autre*) stands for the ‘object-cause of desire’ and for that which escapes desire. It is that which causes the relentless and unending movement from object to object, an unassimilable excess, always pronouncing after each successive capture, “That’s not it.” It is both the lure, the ‘object-cause’ of desire, and the void behind this lure. Or as Zupančič (2000) notes, after a need is satisfied and the subject gets the demanded object, desire continues on its own, it is not extinguished by the satisfaction of need. “The moment the subject attains the object she demands, the *objet petit a* appears...” Alenka Zupančič, (*Ethics of the Real*. London: Verso, 2000), p. 17.

⁷ Sigmund Freud, 1930, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961).

⁸ Sigmund Freud, 1920. “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.” *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. John Reddick (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

⁹ Todd McGowan, *Enjoying What We Don't Have* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 2013). Further references are incorporated into the text. For further commentary on McGowan see Randall Terada, “Enjoyment and the Death Drive.” *American Imago* (71) 1, Spring 2014 pp. 89-96.

¹⁰ Enjoyment or *jouissance* points to the paradoxical nature and psychic entanglements (guilt, repetition, masochism, sadism) involved in the pursuit of one’s pleasure, as for example in the guilty pleasure of consuming chocolate, serial cheating on a partner, the complaints of the

hypochondriac, Marquis de Sade's pursuit of pleasure/pain.

¹¹ Molly-Anne Rothenberg, *The Excessive Subject* (Cambridge Mass: Polity Press, 2010), p. 177.

¹² Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006a), p. 62.

¹³ This no doubt brings to mind the work of Alain Badiou and the influential commentaries on his work by both Žižek (1999) and Johnston (2009). Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (London: Verso, 1999). Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009).

¹⁴ *Melancholia*. Directed by Lars von Trier (Denmark: Zentropa, 2011), Film.

¹⁵ Mladen Dolar, "Everyone is a Ventriloquist An Interview with Mladen Dolar." Interviewed by Aaron Schuster, *Metropolis M* April/May no. 2, 2009.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, "Gender Is Extramoral." Interview with Fina Birulés, *Monthly Review Magazine* (2009), Accessed February, <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2009/butler160509.html>

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford CA.: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 129.

¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004b), p. 33.

²⁰ Judith Butler, "Precarious Life and the Obligations of Cohabitation," Talk given at the Nobel Museum, Stockholm Sweden, May 24, 2011 and with Bracha Ettinger at European Graduate School October 25, 2011, Accessed, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJT69AQtdtg&lr=1> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5O9KsXVpLI>

²¹ Zupančič relates the joke: *A guy goes into a restaurant and says to the waiter "Coffee without cream, please." The waiter replies "I am sorry sir, but we are out of cream. Could it be without milk?"* (2012) In this joke there is a singular kind of nothing or negativity namely the dimension in which coffee without cream is not the same as coffee without milk. It is this dimension of *with-without* – coffee *with-without* cream – that makes trouble, it neither is part of being qua being, nor is it nothing. It precisely this dimension of subjectivity that Butler fails to consider in her move to an ethics of finitude.

Alenka Zupančič, "Sexual Difference and Ontology." *e-flux journal* no.32 (2012).

²² Slavoj Žižek, ed. *Lacan: The Silent Partners* (New York: Verso, 2006b), p. 45.

²³ Slavoj Žižek, *In Defence of Lost Causes* (New York: Verso, 2008), pp. 343-344.

²⁴ Molly-Anne Rothenberg. *The Excessive Subject* (Cambridge Mass: Polity Press, 2010), p. 177.

²⁵ To be sure there is no basis with which to concretely articulate a post-oedipal, post-capitalist, post-patriarchal identity, such that in the following story we can be sure that the character of Bartleby is less a model of subjectivity than an underlying principle, an articulating spirit that sustains the work of constructing the coordinates of a new symbolic order.

²⁶ Molly-Anne Rothenberg. *The Excessive Subject* (Cambridge Mass: Polity Press, 2010), pp. 176-177.

²⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006a), p. 385.

²⁸ Lacan introduced the 4 discourses in a series of lectures gathered in *Seminar XVII The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* and continued to refine them up to his *Seminar XX Encore*. In the discourse of the analyst what precisely does it mean to occupy the position of *objet a*? The analyst stands in for that which the analysand doesn't know that he or she knows, "the analyst stands precisely for the ultimate inconsistency and failure of the big Other, that is, for the Symbolic order's inability to guarantee the subject's symbolic identity."

Slavoj Žižek. *Iraq the Borrowed Kettle* (New York: Verso, 2004b), p. 116.

²⁹ Bartleby here refuses the typical camaraderie of office workers who regularly go out for coffee, complain about the work and the boss behind her back but not acting on their complaints precisely because they may be obtaining a certain *jouissance* in complaining and gossiping about their employer.

³⁰ Molly-Anne Rothenberg, *The Excessive Subject* (Cambridge Mass: Polity Press, 2010), p. 213.

³¹ The negativity I am striving to articulate is a negativity which as such is the underpinning of something, it is not as if first we get rid of something. Rather *it is through this radical negativity that something appears*. Similarly with subjective destitution, when one speaks about this the mistaken assumption is that one starts with a subject and then there is a whole movement to destitute it and then you are left with what? On the contrary, the destitution of the subject *precedes* subjectivity. Wherever subjectivity is, it is there on behalf of the destitution. It is not as if we are persons and then we have to destitute ourselves. It is precisely the very point through which some newness emerges, that something emerged as a new possibility as a new something through this destitution. Subjective destitution is not supposed to be a recipe as if ok let's now destitute the subject. It is always *après coup* it's always afterwards when you see the trace of the subject you follow it because you can be sure that something already happened there. In this way one can be sure that this is not about some type of worshipping of the ultimate sacrifice that one can make of oneself. [Personal conversation with Alenka Zupančič]

³² Robert Sinnerbrink, "The Hegelian 'Night of the World': Žižek on Subjectivity, Negativity, and Universality," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 2(2) (2008): 1-21. Robert Sinnerbrink (2008) summarizes Žižek's Hegelian reading of subjectivity: "The subject is ... a *self-relating negativity*: that which wins its truth (its self-identity in otherness) only through the experience of radical negativity or the freedom to negate itself, to say 'no!' to everything, even

itself; or as Hegel puts it, through the experience of finding itself in and through “utter dismemberment” (7).

³³ McGowan (2013) details how a politics of the death drive rejects all traditional ethical notions based on the Good. Rather than trying to rally people around a collective notion of the Good, he emphasizes a politics based around the radical negativity of loss.

³⁴ Slavoj Žižek, “Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence.” *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (pp. 134-190), edited by Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner and Kenneth Reinhard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 138-39.

³⁵ What Lacanians call the *imaginary*, and being caught in the *imaginary* is to be overwhelmed in *affect* rather than the mediation of the symbolic. A relationship that remains caught in the *imaginary* is suffused with affective states of extremes such as rivalrous jealousy, love, hate and resentment.

³⁶ Daly, Glyn. “Politics of the political: psychoanalytic theory and the Left(s),” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 14.3 (2009): 279–300.

³⁷ Slavoj Zizek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (New York: Verso, 2002), p. 46.