

Medea's Family Reunion: The Lacanian Act & *Aphanisis* as a Challenge to Liberal Humanism



Christine Evans

Is There a Žižekian Act?: From “Nothing is Possible Anymore!” to Contingency and Subjectivity

At the conclusion of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s 1969 film *Medea*, Medea – having murdered her children to punish Jason, her husband, for his desertion – stands at the border of Corinth before the distraught Jason, who begs Medea to let him bury his children. Behind her, Medea’s house is in flames, and dust and smoke billow around her, occasionally obscuring her from sight. As Jason’s pleas are drowned out by clashing cymbals and discordant horns on the soundtrack, Pasolini frames Medea’s scowling face in a

tight close-up; she shouts to Jason, “Your words are wasted! Nothing is possible anymore!”, whereupon the film abruptly ends with a “Fin” intertitle. It is essential to mention that, while Medea’s penultimate admonishment of Jason originates in Euripides’ play, the final words in the film (“Nothing is possible anymore!”) are unique to Pasolini’s adaptation. The statement not only renegotiates the myth of Medea, but – more importantly – introduces a vital interpretive dimension which derails the determinacy of Medea’s infanticide.

Anyone familiar with Euripides’ staged version of the myth is aware that it concludes with Medea, bearing the bodies of her two children, being spirited away on a chariot

sent by her grandfather Hyperion, the sun-god. Contrasting this conclusion to the traumatic terminus of Pasolini's ending, it initially appears that Euripides' Medea certainly comes away with the better deal: rather than remaining irredeemably earth-bound and, as such, fettered to her earthly lawful obligations (in this case, punishment and pain for the murder of her children), the mythical Medea escapes Corinth and leaves Jason to his misery as originally intended. It therefore initially appears that these two versions set out to approach Medea's 'fated' punishment and its reliance on systems of ideological support in entirely different ways:

of symbolization: it is, precisely, 'nothing' – pure void.

As previously mentioned, this concluding statement in Pasolini's film impacts our reading of its cause (Medea's murder of her children) which – 'post cry' – acquires a traumatic presence in its erasure of all possibility. The implication of the statement "Nothing is possible anymore" – particularly the negative adverb 'anymore' – is clearly causal and, as such, one can interpret two varying degrees of traumatic inevitability: 'nothing is possible anymore *because* I have killed my children, who were precious to me, and their absence will make life unbearable', *or* 'nothing is

“In other words, what is witnessed in the concluding sequence of Pasolini's film is a full-scale dramatization of the Lacanian Act.”

the difference is between the divine respite that allows one to escape or reject the field of ideological meaning (Euripides), and the secularized reality of lawful punishment, of being wholly inscribed in symbolic identification and its ideologico-imaginary support (Pasolini).

However, it is precisely this temptation to read Euripides' redeemed and divine Medea *against* Pasolini's nihilistically secular heroine that should be avoided, primarily because Pasolini's conclusion is itself hardly lacking a 'divine' dimension. The statement, "Nothing is possible anymore" should here be interpreted literally, not only because the film text essentially conforms to the command and ends – thereby negating any further 'possibilities' – but because the statement complicates the logical causality of earthly expectation (namely the spectator's premonition that Pasolini's earthly Medea will be punished for her deeds and will suffer for her transgressions). Unlike her mythical counterpart, the filmic Medea does not escape Corinth in a chariot, but rather appears beset by a variety of all-too human problems: two dead children, a confrontation with her husband (who swears revenge), a burning house, the wrath of Corinth's inhabitants, banishment or death. However, this earthly dimension of crime and punishment (Jason's revenge, Medea's persecution and surrender to the supremacy of the Law) is precluded by Medea's prophetic assertion: "nothing is possible anymore" means precisely that – Medea will neither ascend into the heavens on her grandfather's chariot nor be dealt her earthly comeuppance since both options are equally impossible, and imagining such extra-diegetic epilogues under either divine or earthly governance is one of the many potentialities vitiated by the film's final utterance. What remains is not possibility as a positive attribute or gesture in empirical reality, but total abyssal cessation. In Pasolini's adaptation, Medea does not escape the Law or suspend ideology, but rather casts them into the void along with everything else rejected by her statement's radical finitude: reconciliation, remorse, family, and subjectivity. In short, what occurs 'after' Medea's proclamation is not merely in opposition to, but incongruously outside the Law, not against ideology but beyond it, and not barring but in excess

possible anymore because I have effectively lost everything, all my symbolic support; I have rejected my family and my ancestral ties to Colchis, been estranged from my husband, exiled from Corinth, and murdered my children. In short, *because* I have killed my children, I am finally able to see that I cannot take refuge from this act in other worthwhile aspects of my life, since the murder has dissolved their symbolic consistency and efficacy.' The crucial (and no doubt contentious) distinction to be drawn here is between the relative worth of 'everything' *qua* the murder; it is not that Medea's life and symbolic ties (history, ancestry, erotic and familial love) were always irretrievably absent and 'impossible' and that infanticide was merely the condition that illuminated their relative meaninglessness, but rather that the murder was directly responsible for the symbolic dissolution of Medea's life. The murder has transformed the very symbolic contours in which it occurred, thereby 'de-ontologizing' everything that preceded it, casting Medea into the "void of self-relating negativity" (Žižek 2001, 158), and retroactively reinscribing life, love, family, and history as meaningless and impossible. In other words, what is witnessed in the concluding sequence of Pasolini's film is a full-scale dramatization of the Lacanian Act.

When one speaks of an Act in psychoanalysis, one is not merely denoting physical animation, performed behaviour, or even a particular variety of activity and its unconscious psychic progenitors, but rather indexing a complex and often unstable term which is more efficiently accessed via the route of what it is *not* than by any attempt at empirical definition. However, the Act's recent renaissance in discourses of political theory and debates regarding philosophy's place in global politics, merits a certain reevaluation of the term's usage and implications. Distantly related to, but not to be confused with, the Freudian concept of 'acting out' in which the subject 'loses himself' in his unconscious fantasies and effectively "relives [them] in the present with a sensation of immediacy which is heightened by his refusal to recognize their source and their repetitive character" (Laplanche and Pontalis 4), the

Act is primarily associated with the theories of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and particularly with his work on ethics. In this specifically Lacanian context, the Act is intended to displace the notion of the Sovereign Good (espoused in Aristotelian morality), which assumes that all desire is essentially the desire to ‘do good’ but cannot account for any desire which does not trace back to this apparently formative motivation. In countering this apperception of the Sovereign Good with something other than a ‘quality’ that is diametrically opposed to goodness (i.e., Evil), Lacan conceives of the Act in a space extrinsic to quality or disposition and, as such, designates the Act as a performance in which the subject “act[s] in conformity with the desire that is in [him]” (Lacan 1986, 314) but does not remain mindful of the symbolically-erected boundaries which encompass goodness.

In this respect, the Act is not constitutive of a rebellious and reactionary ‘breaking of the rules’ which positions itself against the good and attempts to destroy it; rather, the Act for Lacan involves an outright rejection of the very symbolic contours which comprise this goodness. This distinction between iconoclastic rebellion against the symbolic and its total subversion is essential: the Act as such is not positioned against goodness and the symbolic order, but rather beyond them, ‘outside’ of them. When an Act is performed, these symbolic coordinates are shaken and destabilized.

Though there is no school of thought in psychoanalysis exclusively devoted to examinations of its permutations, the Act has more recently been revived in the work of Lacanian-Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek, proliferating in examples from film and literature and often serving as a challenge to the liberal humanist tendency towards absorbing, pacifying, or damning particularly ‘inexplicable’ outbursts of trauma or violence. While indebted to Lacan’s original formulations of the psychoanalytic ethic, Žižek’s combined critique of postmodernism

and a variety of philosophical sensibilities – particularly the Marxist, Hegelian, and Kantian overtones in his work – have engendered a new politico-ideological awareness of the

transform the symbolic context in which it appears. There exists no single text devoted to an investigation of the Act across Žižek’s body of work, although his most extensive

“In this respect, the Act is not constitutive of a rebellious and reactionary ‘breaking of the rules’... the Act for Lacan involves an outright rejection of the very symbolic contours which comprise this goodness.”

Act which occupies a more centralized and multifarious position in Žižek’s oeuvre than it does in Lacan’s theory. Indeed, a number of scholars who are affiliated with the emerging field of ‘Žižek studies’ – including Sarah Kay (2003), Ian Parker (2004), and particularly Rex Butler (2005) – posit that the Act is a seminal and defining term in Žižek’s work, a prominent component in his contribution to original philosophical thought, and therefore uniquely ‘Žižekian.’ Accordingly, the various interrogations and applications of the Act which appear throughout this paper function predominantly as responses to this distinctly Žižekian variant of the Act – a variant which, I contend, is characterized by problematic, although occasionally requisite, inconsistencies; of particular interest to me in this paper are the specific vicissitudes of the Žižekian Act as it relates to ideology and the global approach to politics.

Žižek’s preferred method of approaching the Act in theory is via the route of example and identification (not unlike the analogy between Pasolini’s *Medea* and the Act which I have presented above). His books, essays, and lectures are littered with passing references to the Act which, given Žižek’s penchant for excitable analysis, are often prematurely abandoned to accommodate other, increasingly complex perversions generated by the Act’s tendency to

dalliances with the topic appear in *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (1996), *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (1999), and *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (2000).¹ However, despite the Act’s more consolidated position in these texts, the reader should be cautioned against relying on any single book or essay for an explication of the Act since Žižek’s formulations are hardly stable. It is this very ‘instability’ which this paper seeks to explore in the context of its essential methodological permutations. Indeed, reading across Žižek’s texts, one will encounter a myriad of ‘definitive explanations’ and countless ‘examples *par excellence*’ of the Act which – suffice it to say – are rarely in agreement with one another. Narrative-specific and often explicitly violent scenarios from film and literature are presented alongside illustrations of positive politico-historical reform, but all such exemplary agents are eventually abandoned for a properly philosophical dimension which stresses the ‘impossible’ irreducibility of the Act. The significance of the examples themselves often remain uninterrogated.

Furthermore, while each of Žižek’s respective invocations of the ‘exemplary’ Act serve to individually clarify and contextualize his surrounding theoretical projects, the

¹ This text is a conversational series of essays between Žižek, Judith Butler, and Ernesto Laclau.

examples appear rather incongruous when divorced from the specific conditions they support: St. Paul and the Stalinist bureaucracy, murderous parents (Keyser Soze of *The Usual Suspects* [Brian Singer, 1995], Andrea Yates), former President Clinton's proposed Medicare reforms, bipolar pedophiles (Mary-Kay Letourneau), and the terrorist attacks of September

contentious undertaking. For while the Act involves the "radical gesture of subverting the very structuring principle of [a given] field" (2000a, 121), Žižek's decision to engage the Act *beyond* abstraction, to identify its manifestations in ordinary empirical reality, requires a unique form of justification which accounts for the acting subject's state of mind.

The Stella Parallax: Still Noble and Senseless

We can locate a particularly poignant variant of such self-relating negativity or concession to nonexistence in the famous conclusion to King Vidor's 1937 film, *Stella Dallas*. Stella, the film's protagonist, knows that her beloved daughter Lollie will benefit greatly from the wealth and prosperity offered by her fiancé's family; however, Stella also realizes that she must remove herself from Lollie's life, inciting Lollie to abandon her so that Lollie can live happily and without the guilt of knowing that she abandoned a 'good' mother. Orchestrating a meeting with Lollie and her fiancé, Stella feigns vulgarity – pretending to be drunk and carrying on an illicit affair – and Lollie, upset and disappointed, abandons her mother and marries her fiancé in a lavish ceremony. Most interpretations of the film's conclusion emphasize the noble selflessness of Stella's 'beautiful sacrifice but question the necessity of her forfeiture.³ Conversely, in Žižek's reading of the film, Stella's sacrifice is so extraordinary because it is one which "every good parent" should make out of love for his child (Rasmussen par. 42). However, the purpose of such a sacrifice is far from narcissistic self-commemoration, meaning that Stella's Act is not motivated by the assumption that Lollie will eventually realize her mistake and marvel at Stella's selflessness and nobility. Rather, Stella's awareness that her daughter's happiness is contingent on her (Stella's) absence compels a total erasure from her daughter's life, deliberately engineered to never attain the dignity of a sacrificial gesture, even in remembrance. In this respect, Stella's decision to 'strike at that which is most precious to her' (her loving relationship with her daughter) does not guarantee her place in history so much as her omission from it, much in the same way that the Act itself – due

“...when faced with an accusation of some misdeed – infidelity, for example – one simply responds, ‘Yes, that’s exactly what I was doing!’”

11th are all, according to Žižek, exemplary Acts or actors/agents. Although one would certainly demure from crudely requesting a universalized and reductive definition of the Act or a single 'example *par excellence*', the lack of consistency among Žižek's aphoristic engagements can nonetheless prove frustrating, especially in regards to the mutable psychic position of the subject *in* and *preceding* the Act. If it is possible to distinguish between an authentic and an inauthentic Act, can we similarly differentiate a legitimately 'acting subject' from one who fails to fulfill this criteria? What occurs *after* an Act is clear enough – the Act generates its own historical possibility after the fact, such that we are only able (from our present standpoint) to conceive its effects against the background of this Act that 'changed everything', in much the same way that Medea's infanticide in Pasolini's film retroactively dissolves the symbolic consistency of her life and renders everything 'impossible.' Yet addressing the subject *himself* who endeavours to Act, who makes this impossible, 'crazy' choice in the face of forced choice, or is irresistibly compelled to commit this Act for whatever reason, is a far more

According to Žižek, all acting subjects share a need to "renounce the transgressive fantasmatic supplement that attaches [them] to... the grip of existing social reality" (2000b, 149): much like an accused criminal who realigns the symbolic coordinates of a reproach by refusing to concede to its conditions (when faced with an accusation of some misdeed – infidelity, for example – one simply responds, "Yes, that's exactly what I was doing!"). Yet the Act extends beyond semantic petulance, and such refusals or repudiations on the subject's part are often (self) injurious, striking at the very core of his being. Indeed, Žižek asserts that the radical difference of the Act, in its rejection of the field of possibility in favour of the 'crazy' choice, can be partially attributed to the subject's decision to "strik[e] at himself, at what is most precious to himself" (2000a, 122). In other words: this is not an exercise in praxis², where the subject reaffirms his humanity and upholds the fundamental fantasy through some positive action, but rather a recognition of one's own nothingness – a traversing of the fantasy – wherein the subject "accepts the void of his nonexistence" (1999a, 281).

2 Lacan defines praxis as a "concerted human action, whatever it may be, which places us in a position to treat the real by the symbolic" (*Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1981. pp. 6).

3 In an article comparing Vidor's 1937 version to John Erman's 1990 remake *Stella*, Janet Maslin's analysis of Stella's enduring archetypal charm argues that the character's "popularity as a soap's heroine is in no way compromised by the fact that she happens not to make any sense" (par. 3). Suspicious that Stella's sacrificial motivations are contrary to her awareness of her own vulgarity, Maslin questions if "it is really necessary, in any version of this story, for Stella to step out of her daughter's life for the sake of the young woman's happiness? She could accomplish the very same thing by electing not to dress herself like a float at the Rose Bowl parade" (par. 4). (Maslin, Janet. "Shed a Tear for Stella, Still Noble but Senseless." *The New York Times*. Sunday February 11, 1990. [http://movies2.nytimes.com/mem/movies/review.html?_r=2&title=STELLA%20DALLAS%20\(MOVIE\)&title2=&reviewer=Janet%20Maslin&pdate=&v_id=&oref=slogin&oref=logon](http://movies2.nytimes.com/mem/movies/review.html?_r=2&title=STELLA%20DALLAS%20(MOVIE)&title2=&reviewer=Janet%20Maslin&pdate=&v_id=&oref=slogin&oref=logon)).

to its monumental impact on historical contingency – must necessarily remain in a perpetual ‘beyond,’ absent from and unacknowledged by the historical record.⁴

It is via the route of Stella’s concession to nonexistence, of her conscious omission from history, of her certainty that the Act will never triumphantly ‘belong’ to her, that we are now in a position to confront the filmic Medea’s final assertion that “nothing is possible anymore.” This position’s relationship to *Stella Dallas* is hardly incidental, since Žižek’s stipulation that Stella’s sacrifice (an Act) should be carried out by every parent implicitly appends an injunction to the Act itself: just as one should only have children when one is prepared to sacrifice his own reputation for the child’s happiness and – more drastically – devise the child’s rejection of its own parent, one should similarly only commit an Act insofar as one is willing to say, “Nothing is possible anymore.” This is precisely Žižek’s point when he asserts that Medea’s radicality is unique in its ability to “out-violence Power itself” or “out-universalize universal Power itself” (2001, 158 fn. 24), but this total negation and upending of Aristotelian morality/the order of powers is likewise the background of every authentic Act: it is precisely the a-heroic dimension which evacuates any psychic logic the subject may ascribe to ‘her’ Act, effectively vitiating its identity as ‘hers’ and relegating it to an invisible position of universality in history. In short, the contra-humanist ‘risk’ which the acting subject, like Medea, must always be prepared to take – which he or she in fact must actively *undertake* prior to committing the Act – is an exclusion from his or her own radical freedom.

That Self-Inflicted Shot to the Foot: Partial Solutions

One question pertaining to the Act which is often implied (but generally elided) by its critics is why anyone would ever want to commit one. It certainly seems

an unpleasant and often painfully fruitless ordeal of self-obliteration: concession to one’s own nothingness or self-relating negativity, and a radical restructuring of the realm of possibility that one’s present/acting self cannot survive or sustain. Noteworthy agents of the Act demean themselves and others so brutally, furthering the social regression from “Bad to

Laclau questions, “Is it a ground of the social? Is it an imaginary construction totalizing a plurality of discrete struggles” (*ibid*)? This response addresses Žižek’s contention that the Act cannot be conceived as something which ‘strikes out’ as a reactionary or curative response to an identifiable injustice. Such an approach to the Act would necessarily inspire a pragmatic

“One question pertaining to the Act which is often implied (but generally elided) by its critics is why anyone would ever want to commit one”

Worse” (Žižek 1999a, 377) so utterly (your husband has abandoned you? Kill your children!), that one wonders how an Act could ever suspend its destructive impulses long enough to properly ‘address’ its ideological effects – ‘ideological’ here denoting less how the Act comes to change the world so much as our shared ability to acknowledge this change. This is precisely the intimation of political theorist Ernesto Laclau when he critiques Slavoj Žižek’s position on the Act and its total structural involution as a failure of global politics.⁵ What is at stake in performing a (specifically Lacanian) Act is, for Laclau, the entire dimension of liberal humanism. According to Laclau, Žižek’s decision to oppose “partial solutions within a horizon to changes in the horizon as such” (198) reveals the abyssal futility of the Act; for Laclau, partial solutions are the individual conditions of a situation which render it worthwhile, while the horizon itself is purely structural and intangible. In ignoring the constitutive elements of a given horizon, one is undertaking a hopeless enterprise: there can be no concrete achievement/outcome of the Act, no authentic ideological potentiality in its performance, unless we can finally agree “about what a horizon is and about the logic of its constitution.”

evaluation in the reader and anchor the Act to some historicist impasse – i.e., infanticide as a retaliation against a husband’s abandonment is surely ‘overreacting.’ What good would it do? Such evaluative ascriptions are inconsequential for both Lacan and Žižek, since the Act for them does not appear as a solution to a partial problem “within a given field”, but rather subverts “the very structuring principle of the field” (Žižek 2000a, 121); the Act is therefore perpetually out of joint with any curative or consequential impulses, and especially with humanist aspirations to ‘solve problems.’ Recall here Lacan’s distinction in *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* between goodness (a symbolic condition) and the ethical Act’s radical rejection of the symbolically-mandated margins of such goodness (218-240).

The problem with any philosophical approach seeking a concrete humanism is that it will, like Laclau, object to the Act as insular, ‘anti-ideological’, and ‘apolitical’ – at least within that faction of global politics where ethics are conceived against the horizon of the Good. For Laclau, the entire sphere of the Act and its relation to forced choice – “a choice that is motivated by no good” (Lacan 1986, 240) – is nothing if not defeatist, willfully ignorant of its potential for *positive* historical

⁴ To do otherwise – that is, to fully acknowledge and celebrate the causal chain of Acts – would ensnare us in a fatalistic deadlock, or in a paradoxical ‘service of Acts’ which would necessitate our reaching ever further back into history to locate *the* generative Act which was somehow more authentic than the others. As such, while the Act may indeed ‘change everything’, it is a change that can rarely be acknowledged. The failure to write the originary gesture out of history is narratively exemplified in Tom Tykwer’s *Run Lola Run* (1998), in which the life or death of Lola’s boyfriend is determined by how quickly she runs down the stairs immediately after receiving his phonecall.

change, and “a prescription for political quietism and sterility” (293). The psychoanalytic claim that the Act restructures the very contours of ideology, possibility, and involvement (and can therefore never be ‘against’ them in the structural sense) is irrelevant to Laclau, since our inability to bridge the gap between (ethical)

any consensus on the Act’s ideological ground. Recall that, for Lacan as well as for Žižek, the subject is always (and can only be) defined in relation to the symbolic order, and is a ‘subject’ only “by virtue of his subjection to the field of the Other” (Lacan 1988, 188); in other words, until the subject appears in a symbolic context which precedes

responsibility which Žižek abridges as “I cannot do otherwise, yet I am none the less fully free in doing it” (1999a,376). The subject’s constitution in the order of Otherness cannot be overlooked, and although the Act may certainly subvert the constellations of symbolization, this says little of the acting subject’s relationship to the order his performance casts asunder. The following pages will elucidate the subject’s varying positions of ‘activity’ in regards to the Other’s location in the symbolic, Real, and imaginary realms.

An example which accounts for the restructuring of the symbolic order *through* the subject’s dual submission to and freedom in the Act, appears in the conclusion to Frank Capra’s 1944 film, *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Upon discovering on his wedding day that his beloved elderly aunts Abby and Martha have murdered thirteen lonely bachelors and buried their bodies in the cellar, Mortimer Brewster spends a hectic night neglecting his new bride and attempting to conceal his aunts’ homicidal secrets from the various visitors to the house. Despite their bubbly personalities, Aunts Abby and Martha are both clearly insane, and steadfast in their shared belief that their victims were miserable men with “nothing left to live for.” After a series of delightful Capra-esque capers and misunderstandings, the director of the local insane asylum arrives with the police lieutenant to commit Mortimer’s cousin Teddy for reasons unrelated to the murders, whereupon the aunts unexpectedly protest: “Commit us too!” Mortimer, realizing that his aunts can escape incarceration for their murders in the insane asylum, is delighted by their surprising demand and agrees that his aunts belong in the asylum. The papers are signed, and by the time Aunts Abby and Martha begin to cheerfully relay the details of their murders to the director and the lieutenant, their confessions are overlooked as the wild imaginings of two insane women; the film concludes with the self-committed aunts and

“when we speak of the acting *subject* we include by necessity the subject’s founding disappearance into the symbolic fiction”

theory and (humanist) practice denotes a ‘fated’ and dangerous indifference which is apolitical in itself. In this respect, the ‘radicality’ of rejecting the pre-inscribed choices of the symbolic universe and refiguring the principles of a given horizon is far from inherent in or native to the Act, since there exists no consensus of what comprises this horizon.

The Subject of the Other and the Act That Changes the World

What ultimately ‘counts’ in this formulation of the Act’s ‘subjective accessibility,’ and what Laclau neglects as decisive in the Žižekian Act (and its Lacanian progenitor), is whether or not one is prepared to take as its foundation the subject of *psychoanalysis*. And although this is not at all Laclau’s intention when he demands a unified horizon of radicality against which to evaluate all Acts, the subject himself should be the very horizon which Laclau seeks. The fact that this disagreement between Laclau/Boostels and Žižek transpires in the arena of global politics and not in the minutiae of the subject who, in a single motion, effects and disappears from that very politic, prematurely vitiates

him and integrates himself into that order of Otherness, he remains essentially unenunciated.

Yet for Laclau, the Act’s violent intrusion into the subject’s ‘partiality’ – his need to address and rectify a given set of partial problems – is ultimately futile and politically counterproductive; the subject must be protected from the Act’s totalizing tendency to derail “the social and cultural pluralism existing in a given society” (Laclau, 293). However, the very notion of safeguarding the subject against his own negativity is absurd from a psychoanalytic perspective, since for Lacan it is only in the moment of self-relating negativity that the subject loosens himself from primordial solipsism and takes up a lived position in relation to his Real-Symbolic-Imaginary Other, “the principle of his own disappearance” (Durand, 863). As such, when we speak of the acting *subject* we include by necessity the subject’s founding disappearance into the symbolic fiction⁶, his ‘subjection’ to the field of Otherness; the acting subject’s gesture never denotes absolute freedom or total hegemonic enchainment, but a double-scansion of inevitability (I must act, regardless of the terrible consequences) and intentionality/

5 Although Laclau is critical of much of Žižek’s work, for our purposes his objections will be limited to three of his essays: “Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics” (44-89), “Structure, History, and the Political” (182-212), and “Constructing Universality” (281-307) in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London: Verso, 2000a.

6 Žižek summarizes this moment as the one in which the subject rejects any infantile claims to uniqueness and irreducibility, and in which “I renounce the treasure within myself and fully admit my dependence on the externality of symbolic apparatuses - that is to say, fully assume the fact that my very self-experience of a subject who was already there prior to the external process of interpellation is a retrospective misrecognition brought about by the process of interpellation” (2000a, 134 fn. 48).

Teddy happily departing for the asylum while the bodies of their victims remain undiscovered in the cellar.

This conclusion (which, despite its moral bankruptcy, is clearly coded as a ‘happy ending’) can be read via the route of two ascending ‘levels’ of Lacanian interpretation *qua* the Act. In the first level we have the symbolic order, the domain of the Law and the Big Other⁷ ‘going about its business’ as it does – the police lieutenant and the director of the asylum arrive at the Brewster home in an attempt to restore the peace. What eventually transpires, however, is far from conventional justice: order is indeed restored (the Brewster sisters cannot add to their collection of dead bachelors), but the considerable detour through which this order passes initially appears to demean its efficacy. Essentially, the Brewster sisters are committed because they are perceived as two doddering old women, but the fact that their penchant for serial killing remains unaddressed by the Public Symbolic Law does not detract from the film’s happy ending. Why is this? In ‘doing the right thing for the wrong reasons’, the symbolic order here evinces that such happy endings are always contingent on the smooth regulation of its own self-deception; what the Public Symbolic Law absolutely cannot sustain is the very ‘whole truth and nothing but the truth’ which it demands of its subjects (to confront it directly would be too disruptive), so it circumvents the truth and, in taking this detour, eventually arrives at some equally valid truth-event. This is a variable outcome what Žižek has termed “the inherent transgression,” wherein the system of symbolic domination generates its own obscene supplements and perverse by-products as a means of maintaining its stability and supremacy (2000c, 6, 7). As such, when the subject positions himself against the symbolic order and attempts to destabilize it by transgressing its boundaries, the Big Other has more than anticipated this attack – it has, in fact, preinscribed the

disturbance into its very constitution, and offers the transgression to the subject as a forced choice. In *Arsenic and Old Lace*, where the truth revealed by the Brewster sisters is mistaken for delusional insanity, murder is

escape persecution, the lieutenant and the asylum director have restored order but remain blissfully unaware of its misguided path): in other words, the Act has cut through symbolic determinism, but the Big Other

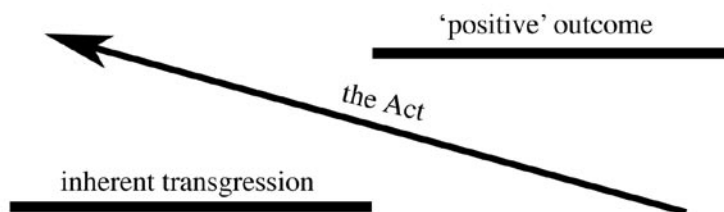


Figure 1

simply an inherent transgression which supports propriety, or the long detour one takes to eventually arrive at a happy, orderly outcome.

The crucial point not to be missed in this restrictive symbolic strategy is that one can effectively break away from it, but only insofar as one is prepared to commit an Act. As was previously discussed, this Act rejects the forced choices or available transgressions offered as symbolic fictions and, more radically, derails the very concept of choice by opting for free action in all its insanity. In the context of this example, it is the Brewster sisters’ decision to commit themselves to an asylum for reasons unrelated to their psychosis⁸ that appears as an authentic Act. The Big Other, here poorly disguised as a literal agent of the Law (lieutenant and asylum director), effectively presents Aunts Abby and Martha with the option to either confess their crimes and suffer the appropriate punishment or to remain silent and continue on as before. Unexpectedly, the Brewster sisters demand incarceration *without* punishment, a choice which the Law does not proffer, but which also does not appear to disturb the smooth operation of the symbolic order (the film ends ‘happily,’ the Brewster sisters

remarkably seems to remain unscathed. This appearance denotes the second level of Lacanian interpretation apropos of the Act.

In my diagram above, the Act is depicted as intersecting the two ascending levels of the inherent transgression and the ‘positive’ outcome which, when undisturbed, bear witness to the efficiency of symbolic fictions (i.e., despite any number of transgressions, the system’s initiation/regulation of these infractions ensures a codified outcome). Yet the Act’s radical intervention does not preclude the likelihood of a ‘happy ending’, even in its retroactive reconfiguration of this very condition of possibility. Furthermore, the appearance of the positive outcome as a triumph of the symbolic order certainly seems to suggest that the Act has effected little more than a minor, inconsequential disturbance – after all, order has been restored, the Brewster sisters are safely locked away, and the Law’s success in self-deception is not undermined by its means of arriving at the ‘wrong truth.’ However, the reader must be cautioned against approaching the Act as such a disturbance, even and especially if the symbolic order appears to

7 A term designating the structurally essential symbolic field, the means by which this field is regulated, and for ‘whom’ we perform. Introduced by Lacan in 1955, the Big Other is simultaneously inscribed in the order of the symbolic and “is the symbolic insofar as it is particularised for each subject. The Other is thus both subject, in his radical alterity and unassimilable uniqueness, and also the symbolic order which mediates the relationship with that other subject” (Dylan Evans. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. East Sussex: Brunner-Routledge, 2003. 133).

8 Their primary reason for demanding to go to the asylum is to accompany their nephew Teddy, but later while signing their own commitment papers they comment that the asylum will be a nice change of pace, that they are dissatisfied with their current neighbourhood since it has “changed so much”, and that it will be a welcome change to not be responsible for the upkeep of a house.

‘regain’ its consistency and return to ‘business as usual’ following the Act’s performance. What is at stake here is a total *structural involution* which pivots or turns on the Act, in the sense that the symbolic order does not simply give ground to sanctioning a rebellious display, but is thoroughly duped into a sense of supremacy. The Act does not designate the dissolution of the symbolic dominion in the conventional sense, where some assertion of anti-authoritarian autonomy or Leftist-utopic insurgency would appear as a ‘shock to the system’ – and nor does the symbolic order work tirelessly to neutralize the harmful effects of the Act or integrate its unsettling subversion into the system the way that political spin-doctors gentrify and clarify the excessive anti-PC blunders of politicians. Rather, despite the fact that the Act is a successful performance in every respect, despite our inability to approach the symbolic order from the same perspective after the Act has repositioned its coordinates, the system of symbolic domination must remain *ignorant* of the Act’s effects.

We can therefore see how the operation works both ways, since the Act occurs beyond the arena of forced symbolic choices and the Public Symbolic Law cannot retaliate against and normalize an Act with the preinscribed efficiency afforded the inherent transgression. Simply stated, what the Act achieves is not a momentary suspension of the hegemonic order to initiate some temporary, imminently threatened change, but rather a subversion of the symbolic order which is so irreversible that the order itself remains unaware and unable to predict/preinscribe the reformation – it is limited instead to historically absorbing the Act’s effects as a matter of course (*Figure 1*). In this sense, when the Brewster sisters demand to be committed to the asylum with Teddy, they ‘change everything’ and effectively turn the symbolic order on its head, but the film ends happily because the Big Other is protected from the damning awareness that it has been upended. As Žižek contends, “the point is not to tell the whole Truth but,

precisely, to append to the (official) Whole the uneasy supplement which denounces its falsity” (2005, 168). And is this not also a fundamental impasse in Ernesto Laclau’s contention that self-relating negativity or ‘desubjectivization’ is synonymous with dehumanization – something which we, as concerned global citizens, must oppose at every level? Indeed, it is not the subject who must be shielded from the totalizing degradation of the Act (its erasure of his gesture and his person from the historical record), but rather the order which is *constitutive* of the subject that requires protection



from the knowledge that the subject can – and occasionally does – return this gesture of constitution.

In *Arsenic and Old Lace*, the very insanity of Aunts Abby and Martha serves as an adequate metaphor for the Act’s relationship to the order of power it rewrites: by the time the world is prepared to accept the Brewster sisters as insane, the truth behind their insanity (the murders) remains unacknowledged and absent from the record – what we witness instead is a semblance of truth which arrives at a similar symbolic destination via a circuitous route, such that some measure of order or truth is achieved, but only by means of a bungled parapraxis. Consequently, the Brewster sisters’ confession of the murders – the ‘real order of things’ – is already too late since the Big Other has accepted their self-diagnosed insanity and

its subsequent restructuring of the symbolic field; simply by virtue of its occurrence, the confession has lost any imaginary or phantasmatic support and cannot now or ever be read to have transpired otherwise. Similarly, by the time we are able to conceive of the Act in its original historical context and question its ‘undecideability’ and potentiality, we are effectively caught in the bind of always-already conceiving this potentiality against the background of the Act – that is, we think differently *qua* the Act.

The Thing That Acts: Monstrosity and Aphanisis in the Act

One particular liberal-humanist criticism which is often levied at Žižek’s conception of the Act (and one with which I am in marginal agreement), points towards Žižek’s tendency to abandon his exemplary acting agents (Keyser Soze, Mary Kay Letourneau, and so on) in favour of removed philosophical treatises, thus appearing to exclude the ‘all too human’ achievements of master criminals, scorned child-killing women, and libidinal schoolteachers. This methodological flaw can be partially attributed to high theory’s ‘natural’ reliance on lofty absolutes and coincident resistance to exception, but it is more problematically imputed to Žižek’s often unclear position on the acting subject’s relationship to the Other. In certain accounts (*Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*), Žižek’s arguments suggest that the acting subject himself – and not merely the Act he commits – is an exceptional revolutionary figure who effectively ‘escapes’ or even triumphs over the system of symbolic domination, and “finds himself... by cutting himself loose from the precious object through whose possession the enemy kept him in check” (2000a, 122)⁹. In other writings (*The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*), Žižek’s position is similar to the one outlined in the previous section, as he asserts that the Big Other “retreats” in the face of the Act but does not disappear entirely (1999a, 369). And

⁹ The ‘object’ to which Žižek refers in this context is the precious object which the subject sacrifices in opting for free action (Stella Dallas’ reputation and loving relationship with her daughter, Medea’s children, and so on).

finally – and most perplexingly – Žižek occasionally contends that the Act is nothing but a violent suspension of the status quo in which the Other ‘speaks through’ the acting subject, essentially dramatizing the Derridian concept of “the Other’s decision in me” (Derrida, 87). It is, however, in the context of this particular (post) structuralist position that Žižek presents what is likely his

materialize in every interaction but are always in counterpoint to one another, each essentially pacifying the other’s effects to ensure against an unbearable excess of relativity. For example, one’s relationship with a lover simultaneously accounts for the imaginary support of the relationship itself, for symbolic signification (the very titles which designate the

against the Other – the basis is not in relativity, as it is in his everyday interactions – but rather in an absolute, fully-assumed monstrosity in which, “for a brief, passing moment... [he] directly *is* the Thing” (163). While the symbolic (Big) Other eventually – and, as previously discussed, tardily – ‘responds’ to this Act precisely by misrecognizing it, this secondary



Figure 2

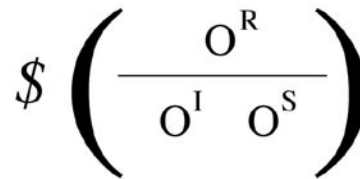


Figure 3

most cogent explication of the acting subject’s interrelation with Otherness. I have included a diagrammatical representation of my conception of this interaction to which I will refer throughout.

In the subject’s standard or day-to-day interactions with an Other (Figure 2) which simultaneously exists within him (as a precondition of his subjectivity) and radically external to him¹⁰, the Other itself is positioned on three interdependent levels: the symbolic Big Other (OS), which was previously discussed as a social substance, the domain of the Public Symbolic Law; the imaginary Other (OI), which manifests itself in other people with whom the subject interacts – the people “‘like [him]’, [his] fellow human beings with whom [he is] engaged in the mirror-like relationships of competition, mutual recognition, and so on” (2002, 163); and the Real Other or Other as Thing (OR), the “‘inhuman partner’, the Other with whom no symmetrical dialogue, mediated by the symbolic order, is possible” (*ibid*). All of these various facets of Otherness, distinct as they may be,

parameters of one’s identity, such as ‘lover’, ‘couple’, ‘snookums’, and so on), and for a monstrous, unfathomable, and traumatic Real Otherness that must be gentrified by the “‘impersonal symbolic order” (165) so as to retain some minimum of distance or cognate humanity. The interrelatedness of the three dimensions simply illustrates the fact that, beneath the lover as social symptom, there always exists an “‘unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, of a monstrous Thing that cannot be ‘gentrified”” (164-165) – but also that, beyond the lover’s impenetrable actuality as Thing, there exists a “‘normal fellow human”” (*ibid*.) who is illuminated by the symbolic order.

However, in the performance of an Act, this regulatory tripartite semblance of the subject *qua* Other dissolves, leaving only the radical dimension of the ‘Other of the Real Thing’ (Figure 3). The difference which makes this encounter so extraordinary and “‘unprecedented”, Žižek asserts, is that in the insane free choice of the Act, the subject does not merely position or define himself

dimension exists only as divisible by the subject’s direct identification with the Thing (Figure 3). This total, traumatic identification with the Thing therefore exempts the subject from symbolic regulations and allows him to Act ‘as if’ from nowhere, “‘without reflection [or]... deliberation” (162). The Act as such is not at all “‘pathologically motivated”” (Žižek 1992, 36), since its agent’s reconstitution in absolute monstrosity (the Other-Thing) temporarily precludes symbolic identification and imaginary/phantasmatic support¹¹, and effectively ‘opens the space’ for a total “‘empty set”” (*ibid*) – a Real event “‘which occurs *ex nihilo*”” (Žižek 1999a, 374). Not only does this formulation account for the Big Other’s ignorance of its own subversion in the Act (its unawareness can be attributed to a structural disconnect given that the subject as Other-Thing excludes the symbolic register from ‘involvement’), but it likewise justifies the Act’s ‘identity’ as anti-ideological. It is not that the Act – as Ernesto Laclau would have us believe – appears in response to ideology, deliberately and terroristically ‘dehumanizing’

10 The mathematical construction of the diagram uses brackets to represent the field of Otherness as both a ‘given set’ and one against which the subject must be ‘counted’ or multiplied.

11 As illustrated by Figure 3, these conditions are only made available successively, essentially as ‘divisible by the Real.’

or ‘apoliticizing’ everything in its wake, but rather that ideology always implies an Other that is ‘caught up’ in the imaginary and symbolic fields. Conversely, the Other as Thing is aligned with the absolute void of the Act, its resistance to imaginary support

Žižek hints at the presence of this apparently “irreducible” gap when he claims that the Act’s primary, traumatic impasse is located in our shared inability to actively conceive it:

Lacan as the necessary “fading” of the subject, his “manifest[ation] of himself in this movement of disappearance” (1981, 208), one can certainly trace self-erasure’s relatedness to the Act, but the aphoristic potential of this ‘definition’ (and here it should be noted that Lacan often provides several – sometimes opposing – definitions of his psychoanalytic terminology) has resulted in the critical appropriation of *aphanisis* as a ‘condition’ – or, more specifically, an event or happening – which is synonymous with amnesia, mass annihilation (genocide, massacres), suicide, and rebirth. As such, the moment of *aphanisis* in contemporary literature and film analysis can equally designate a conditional absence or vanishing (Beckman, 192), a specifically textual “pleasurable anxiety” (where withheld narrative information grants unexpected agency to the reader himself) (Sajé, 167), or the “self-erasure of the subject when she approaches her fantasy too closely (Žižek 1997, 175) – as well as a myriad of other symptoms and effects which concurrently signify disappearance and subjectivization. Suffice it to say that the inconsistencies in definition surrounding *aphanisis* have yielded its dissemination across a range of scholarly fields, from clinical psychoanalysis and psychotherapy to narrative studies. Simultaneously existing as symptom, outcome, and structuring semblance, a psychic event and a narrative conceit, *aphanisis* belies and indeed often vitiates the delimited specificity of its definition as a symbolizing process through which the subject’s desire must pass in order to be sustained or solidified in the signifier. Indeed, the subject’s only ‘hope’ of “[setting himself] up as a subject, as something other than the product, the effect, of the signifying division” (Harari, 247) is to essentially *fade* in the overwhelming presence of demand and in the face of the object (Lacan 1981, 221). Ironically, then, what truly ‘counts’ in this process is the subject’s approach to, approximation of, or even his dangerous self-awareness of, his own fading.

While Žižek certainly makes frequent mention of *aphanisis* in a variety of conceptually discrete contexts (rape, death, the Stockholm

“How can one commit an Act? By fully assuming a position as the Other-Thing. How can one fully assume a position as the Other-Thing? By committing an Act.”

and symbolic gentrification, and its status as the point at which “every ‘foundation’ of acts in ‘words’, in ideology, fails: this ‘foundation’ simply falls short of the abyss announced in it” (Žižek 1992, 35).

what is so difficult to accept is not the fact that the true act in which noumenal and phenomenal dimensions coincide is forever out of our reach; the true trauma lies in the opposite awareness that there are acts, that they do occur, and that we have to come to terms with them (1999a, 375).

Although this explanatory passage in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions on the (Mis)use of a Notion* certainly clarifies Žižek’s position on the specific Other-identity to whom the subject is ‘subjected’ in the Act (i.e., neither the Big Other of symbolic domination/state-imposed control nor the linguistically-construed Other of structuralism), Žižek’s reasoning nonetheless appears somewhat circuitous upon further inspection. How can one commit an Act? By fully assuming a position as the Other-Thing. How can one fully assume a position as the Other-Thing? By committing an Act. It is my contention that such obliqueness institutes a premature short-circuit between the Act and its ideological ground, since something is evidently ‘lost’ in the imaginary space between the two diffuse repetitions of a tautology. In this sense, what is required to ‘fill the gap’ is a third agency which falls between the Other-Thing and the Act’s occurrence, between impossibility and politicization, and which recovers this missing dimension by addressing the subject at the level of his original (primordial) subjectivization.

The implication of the subject’s aptitude to *act* is a significant component of the aforementioned third agency of subjectivization. And while Žižek’s statement is certainly true in the context of the Act’s perpetually surprising/unexpected appearance ‘as if from nowhere’, the above citation also represents a rare Žižekian suspension of the *strico senso* Act – the Act as absolutely phenomenal at the expense of its noumenal auxiliary components – in favour of addressing the more elusive dimension of the subject’s potential as an agent of the Act: the term which I should like to invoke to indicate such potentiality in the subject is *aphanisis*.

The term *aphanisis* has an extensive and somewhat controversial history in the psychoanalytic canon. Introduced by Ernest Jones in 1928 as a variation on Freud’s concept of primary anxiety, the term in the 1950s developed a clinical association with schizophrenia, and was refined by Jacques Lacan in his seminars (1956-57 and 1964) to designate a psychic aporia which forces the subject to assume an absent position or undergo erasure while simultaneously and vitally ‘subjectifying’ him and shaping his relationship to desire. Also defined by

Syndrome), his discussion of *aphanisis* apropos of the Act is comparatively minimal. For Žižek, *aphanisis* designates the moment that the subject approaches too closely that which is essentially resistant to symbolization in him – the phantasmatic kernel of his being – whereupon he loses his

irreversible obliteration/erasure. Were the subject to experience *aphanisis* before his undertaking of the Act and not after it (as Žižek suggests), would he not essentially bypass the entire symbolic dimension of the inherent transgression and truly ‘act’ – in an unprecedented and truly anti-

This anti-ideological hypothesis is addressed in Todd Haynes’ 1995 film *Safe*, which details the gradual deterioration of a blank and psychologically inaccessible San Fernando Valley housewife, Carol, to a mysterious illness. Finding herself increasingly unable to tolerate toxins

“aphanisis designates the moment that the subject approaches too closely that which is essentially resistant to symbolization in him – the phantasmatic kernel of his being – whereupon he loses his symbolic consistency, ‘it disintegrates’”

symbolic consistency, “it disintegrates” (1999b, 97). This conception differs substantially from the Act, in which the subject makes no initial ‘claim’ to the symbolic order, let alone a need for its regulating/normalizing effects, and Žižek clarifies this distinction between the Act and *aphanisis* by perceiving the latter only as a possible outcome of the former. In this sense, when the subject approaches his Act too closely, he has no choice but to ‘fade’ in its overwhelming, irreducible presence, abandoning his own symbolic consistency and essentially integrating or ‘losing himself’ in the Act, becoming its cause. Žižek states that,

The standard subject’s reaction to the act is that of *aphanisis*, of his/her self-obliteration, not of heroically assuming it: when the awareness of the full consequences of ‘what I have just done’ hits me, I want to disappear (1997, 223).

However, is it not also possible to imagine *aphanisis* as a certain *condition of possibility* in the Act’s authenticity, a mediator between (theoretical) impossibility and (actual) politicization? Considering that the true measure of an Act does not aim at some “momentary enthusiastic outburst” (1999a, 135) but at a total historical obliteration, the subject’s ability to “accept and endorse his own ‘second death’, to ‘erase himself totally from the picture’” (379), it therefore follows that *aphanisis* is itself such an

ideological fashion – from an empty place?

The familiar paradox involved in claiming an anti-ideological stance is that such an assertion is itself ‘ideological’ to its very core, such that any attempt at asserting free action prematurely ‘overloads’ the empty set of the Act with symbolic qualifiers. According to the position that ideology is inescapably ‘everywhere’, one can only assume a legitimately anti-ideological stance in a state of ignorance, and this position confirms the relationship between an Act and the agent’s ‘forewarned’ knowledge of it: namely, the agent’s awareness of his potential for radicality will effectively preclude the successful performance of the Act. To invoke Žižek’s example:

Oedipus didn’t know what he was doing (killing his own father), yet he did it. Hamlet knew what he had to do, which is why he procrastinated and was unable to accomplish the act (1999a, 386).

Yet is it at all possible to test this ideological hypothesis against an Act and, more specifically, against an instance of *aphanisis*? If a subject has already effectively ‘disappeared’, is he privy to the same dangerous knowledge/awareness, or does his self-erasure allow him to assume the space of free action precisely because he *does not know*?

and pollutants, Carol succumbs to what is eventually (and tenuously) identified as an ‘environmental illness.’ When her condition makes life in the city unbearable (seizures, nosebleeds, allergic reactions to her favourite foods, inability to breathe), Carol locates a healing centre which accommodates people with her condition, and leaves her husband and stepson for the Wrenwood Centre. This compound-like retreat inspires suspicion (one initially assumes that the staff of Wrenwood and its charismatic director Peter Dunning will be exposed as manipulative swindlers) and a certain relief in the spectator – now that Carol is amongst fellow sufferers and experts on ‘environmental illnesses’, perhaps an accurate diagnosis will finally be made? Haynes’ narrative strategy, however, is patently uninterested in the medical aspect of Carol’s illness – we are never explicitly informed as to why she became ill, and nor do we know what actually constitutes her illness – and instead focuses on the social dimension of the compound.

Initially, it appears that there is no particular directorial agenda pertaining to Wrenwood, and the absence of any ‘position’ on Haynes’ part institutes a deeply unsettling feeling that itself occasionally ‘fills in’ the empty set that is the compound: what the spectator assumes is a sinister feature

of Wrenwood, an empirically-present or positive condition subversively articulated by Haynes, is actually an absence of any articulation at all. The patients and staff are not malicious or ill-intentioned people, but are simply a community and, as such, intimate all the perverse component qualities entailed by such a designation (amalgamated identity, distressingly

patient finally confronts himself and his illness in a state of total Zen-like emptiness), they ensure in advance that this will never occur. And this is also the horizon against which we should read Haynes' direction, or that open presentation of his viewpoint as a neutral gaze which refuses to evaluate/reduce Carol or the inhabitants of Wrenwood: the very assumption of

psychologically impenetrable self-destruction of a Viennese family. We are subjected to their monotonous daily routines in a claustrophobic aesthetic of tightly-framed medium shots which often record the repetitive activities of hands but crop heads and faces from the frame; we become familiar with a variety of soulless bourgeois features of their house, such as their generic

“The result is not the subject’s aphanized fading in the face of his illness...but rather an excess of symbolization, a total bombardment of the subject with the very symbolic coordinates he is attempting to escape.”

intense faith in their belonging, inspirational singalongs, and so on).

This lacking formal dimension is mimicked in the New Age gnosticism which regulates the lives of the patients and urges them to ‘find themselves’ and ‘learn to love’ their illnesses. Each patient is encouraged to designate for himself an empty space – necessarily spiritual but possibly physical – in which he can retreat to escape the overwhelming ‘toxicity’ of the world and be alone (with his illness). However, as Carol herself seeks out ever ‘safer’ spaces, we realize that there truly is something sinister at work here; because these spaces have been emptied in advance, because they are intended as spaces in which the patient is entirely alone and unburdened by the troubles of the world – ultimately *because* and not *despite* of these reasons – the ‘safe’ spaces to which the patients flee from pollutants and toxins are ultimately not ideology-free zones. The result is not the subject’s aphanized fading in the face of his illness (the New Age variant presented to the patients involves an ‘emptying’ of the self which opens the space for a redemptive new beginning), but rather an excess of symbolization, a total bombardment of the subject with the very symbolic coordinates he is attempting to escape. In other words, because these safe spaces position themselves as hospitable to some redemptive Act (in which the

this anti-ideological stance already guarantees the triumph of ideology, and Haynes’ deft formal traversal of the space between deliberation and an aphanistic emptiness coincides seamlessly with the film’s equally duplicitous narrative content.

In this sense, it appears that one’s assumption of an aphanized obliteration of self-conception is not an adequate means of evacuating that self-defeating ‘knowledge’ of his own potential to Act. *Aphanisis* is therefore not to be opposed to knowledge as such, since the erasure is itself a ‘forewarned’ knowledge, an effective depreciation of revolutionary potential in favour of an insistent return to an ideological dimension.

Everything but the Kitchen Sink: The Family Aphanized

Yet is it nonetheless possible to conceive of this ironic knowledge and ‘agency’ against the background of a subject who has undergone *aphanisis* and is now acting ‘from an empty place?’ A particularly explicit representation of *aphanisis* as the antecedent-guarantor of, or condition of possibility for, an Act’s performance occurs in the conclusion to Michael Haneke’s 1989 film *The Seventh Continent*. This film, which superficially occupies a place in the postmodern ‘traumatic tedium’ canon¹², details the calm, orderly, and

art prints, enormous and glacial fish tank, and the television set which, when turned on, blares American hit parade programmes and fixates everyone’s attention – although we have no conception of the physical space of their home. When Georg (the father) and Anna (the mother) decide to kill themselves and their young daughter Eva, we are given no indication of motivation, but suspect that it involves a desperate retaliation against their azoic bourgeois existence. However, the standout feature of this film is its drawn-out conclusion – less for the family’s ugly suicide-by-poison than for the total destruction which precedes it. Totalling at approximately seventeen minutes of footage, this extended sequence mimics the visual style of its monotonous forebears by consisting almost entirely of tightly-framed medium shots of hands as they methodically and efficiently destroy everything in sight: tearing and shredding piles of clothing, cutting photographs in two, snapping records, smashing furniture and appliances, and flushing money down the toilet.

What fascinates about this sequence is its explicit presentation of a shared self-erasure, an *aphanisis* which ‘infects’ an entire family unit as a necessary precondition of their suicide. This *aphanisis* is necessary precisely in the sense that the family unit assumes the authentic (political) position of an absolute absence in

their Act – a Schellingian ‘*ex nihilo*’ which extends to even the acting agent – and ‘opens a space’ for the Act’s performance through an antecedent erasure.¹³ Regardless of whether one elects to read either the family’s eventual suicide or the smashing of their house and accouterments as

is being/has been eradicated, and so on), while the money has no personal significance. In other words, while most of the wrecked items can be ascribed some signification and can effectively aid in pathologizing the family’s *aphanisis* and Act (i.e., the spectator’s self-deception that everything was

shifting linguistic boundaries of a given social set and its opponents of ‘immutable’ state-imposed control, philosopher Giorgio Agamben sets forth the argument that the ‘active absence’ of any identity in a subject is precisely that which cannot be endured by the State: “What the State

“the family’s orderly attack on their earthly possessions aims precisely at this intent, but actually achieves it...in advance of the Act: nothing can succeed the family after it finally self-destructs, and they leave no legacy of their humanity – only a zero-point.”

the film’s ‘authentic’ Act, it is self-erasure’s double-scansion of fading and figuration which ultimately guarantees meaning ‘over the family’s dead bodies’¹⁴: that is, between the Act’s impulses of impossibility and politicization, self-erasure’s appearance heralds the subject’s performance from “Another Space which can no longer be dismissed as a fantasmatic supplement to social reality” (2000b, 158). Furthermore, this sequence of aphanistic destruction evinces the guarantee of permanence and irreversibility endemic to every authentic Act by efficiently accomplishing the total dissolution of symbolic consistency and instituting a zero-point, a second death, *in advance*. The destruction of the family photographs and the money are particularly effective in this aim of preemptive obliteration, since the photographs are loaded symbolic and imaginary supports, the destruction of which is portentous (the family

destroyed for a reason – the clock was a gift from Granny, etc), the object-money itself ‘means’ nothing to the family, and its destruction cannot be justified as retaliatory in the conventional sense. If indeed one of the objectives of the authentic Act is to enjoin in the subject an “accept[ance] and endorse[ment] of his own ‘second death’, to ‘erase himself totally from the picture’” and to “obliterate the dead totally from historical memory” (379), then the family’s orderly attack on their earthly possessions aims precisely at this intent, but actually achieves it (with characteristically dispassionate efficiency) in advance of the Act: nothing can succeed the family after it finally self-destructs, and they leave no legacy of their humanity – only a zero-point.

The Global Act

In the conclusion of *The Coming Community*, a text which explores the

cannot tolerate in any way... is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging” (1993, 86). Differentiating identity (a social bond which ensures belonging) from singularity as such (which, for Agamben, needs not constitute an identity), Agamben makes two claims which are relevant to a discussion of the Act *qua* its agent: primarily, he insists that “a being radically devoid of any representable identity” is nothing less than an enemy of the State (*ibid*), someone who essentially remains radically impervious to symbolic reduction and, by extension, the oppression of the State. Concurrently, the sphere of contemporary politics designates for Agamben a revolutionary undoing which “empties traditions and beliefs, ideologies and religions, identities and communities” (83).

While this formulation may strike

12 Which is also inhabited by directors such as Bruno Dumont (2003’s *Twentynine Palms* and 1999’s *Humanity*), Catherine Breillat (2001’s *Fat Girl*, 1999’s *Romance*), and films such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Why Does Herr R. Run Amok?* (1970) and Gaspar Noé’s *Irreversible* (2002). These films typically call attention to the spectator’s perverse investment in (and desire for) the intrusion of brutality into otherwise monotonous routine. In all of the aforementioned films - including *The Seventh Continent* - extreme but comparatively fleeting moments of violence puncture an otherwise reified, complacent surface (usually at the end of the film) and aim to confront the spectator’s tedious tolerance with an unsettling sense of relief.

13 Additionally, the aphanistic destruction distinguishes Haneke’s film significantly from ‘similar’ postmodern fare such as *Twentynine Palms* or *Fat Girl*. Although the family’s smashing-spree is initially a cathartic release from tightly-wound routine, its grueling temporal duration of 17 minutes (coupled with its insistently tight medium-shot aesthetic) eventually begins to take its toll. Unlike the brief but ‘orgasmic’ and relieving violence of Breillat and Dumont’s films, the family’s outburst in *The Seventh Continent* is as controlled and regulated as their daily lives, and the spectator is eventually left with the realization that things have gone - appropriately in the context of the Act - “from Bad to Worse” (Slavoj Žižek. *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London: Verso, 1999a. pp. 377).

14 This turn of phrase is borrowed from Žižek’s *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch’s Lost Highway*. Seattle: Walter Chapin Simpson Centre for the Humanities, 2000c. pp. 9.

one as somewhat nihilistic in its apparent enjoinder of the reader to thwart the State by dissolving his own symbolic consistency (however 'illusory' it may be), this nihilism is – in a sense – constitutive of Agamben's very project to approximate a political language (*experimentum linguae*) with which we can finally 'reveal nothing' or "reveal the nothingness of all things" (82). For Agamben, what truly 'counts' in contemporary politics is a self-consciousness in speech which, in "bringing language to language" (*ibid.* 83), takes nihilism *to its endpoint* or "carries it to completion", but crucially does so "without allowing what reveals to remain veiled in the nothingness that reveals" (*Ibid.*). Agamben's position is not explicitly Lacanian, and he does not index the Act in any concrete way, but his statements in this global linguistic context certainly recall the Act's propensity for retroactive transformation (as is evinced by Medea's cry in Pasolini's film). It is particularly Agamben's encouragement to pursue this 'nihilism' or global variant of "Nothing is possible anymore!" to its end which is striking since – like the Act – this *experimentum linguae* only reveals its potentiality in that moment of 'ending', or, more precisely, in that moment where it retroactively 'becomes' something else/new entirely.

The notion of the Act as a harbinger of positive political change is certainly not a dazzling new epigram, especially since historical Acts of the past are always being revisited and (re)inscribed into political consciousness – but my project throughout this paper has aimed less at the identification of Acts than at the very background against which we are always recreating the conditions of an Act's appearance. In this respect, I have not set forth a model of 'how to successfully commit an Act' or how to become a meaningfully radical global citizen via the Act, but have rather proposed a structural horizon of agency which acknowledges the subject in his capacity to Act, while also accounting for his subjection to this Act. What I would like to caution against in this sense is an overly effusive, sentimentally humanist approach to the Act's agent which posits him as an imperiled iconoclast who is

goaded into rebelling against the symbolic order. This, I believe, is the same position which would inspire the assertion that we 'need' the Act today more than every (i.e., in our current age of totalitarian 'anti-terrorist' measures, fear-mongering, the complacency and alienation of cyberspace, etc). Rather, acknowledging from an ethico-political perspective that we 'need' the Act in our current global climate is contingent on our realization that the Act has always been necessary, but never at any point has it been 'more necessary' than ever before.

Works Cited:

Beckman, Karen. *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film, and Feminism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Butler, Judith and Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London: Verso, 2000a.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Politics of Friendship*. Trans. George Collins. London: Verso, 1997.

Durand, Regis. "On Aphanisis: A Note on the Dramaturgy of the Subject in Narrative Analysis." *MLN*. Vol. 98, No. 5 (December 1983): 860-870.

Evans, Dylan. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. East Sussex: Brunner-Routledge, 2003.

Harari, Roberto. *Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: An Introduction*. New York: Other Press, 2004.

Jones, Ernest. "The Early Development of Female Sexuality." *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*. Volume VIII, Part 4 (October 1927): 459-472.

Lacan, Jacques. *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Anthony Wilden. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968.

-----. *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1981.

-----. *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Dennis Porter. London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1986.

-----. *Seminar II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain

Miller. Trans. Sylvana Tomaselli. London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1988.

Laplanche, Jean and J.B. Pontalis. *The Language of Psycho-analysis*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Norton, 1974.

Maslin, Janet. "Shed a Tear for Stella, Still Noble but Senseless." *The New York Times*. Sunday February 11, 1990. [http://movies2.nytimes.com/mem/movies/review.html?_r=1&title=STELLA%20DALLAS%20\(MOVIE\)&title2=&reviewer=Janet%20Maslin&pd ate=&v_id=&oref=login](http://movies2.nytimes.com/mem/movies/review.html?_r=1&title=STELLA%20DALLAS%20(MOVIE)&title2=&reviewer=Janet%20Maslin&pd ate=&v_id=&oref=login)

Rasmussin, Eric Dean. "Liberation Hurts: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek." *Lacan.com*. September 29, 2003. <http://www.lacan.com/zizekillinois.html>

Sajé, N. "Artful Artlessness: Reading the Coquette in 'Roderick Hudson.'" *The Henry James Review*. 18:2 (Spring 1997): 161-172.

Žižek, Slavoj. *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. London: Verso, 1991a.

-----. *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

-----. *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*. London: Verso, 1996.

-----. *The Plague of Fantasies*. London: Verso, 1997.

-----. *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London: Verso, 1999a.

-----. *The Žižek Reader*. Eds. Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright. London: Blackwell Publishing, 1999b.

-----. "When the Party Commits Suicide." *New Left Review* 238, November/December 1999: 26-47

-----. *The Fragile Absolute: Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* London: Verso, 2000b.

-----. *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway*. Seattle: Walter Chapin Simpson Centre for the Humanities, 2000c.

-----. *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism: Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion*. London: Verso, 2002.

-----. "The Antinomies of Tolerant Reason: A Blood-Dimmed Tide is Loosed." *Lacan.com*. 2005. <http://www.lacan.com/zizantinomies.htm>

-----. *The Parallax View*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006.