# WHAT CAN PSYCHOANALYSIS TELL US ABOUT CYBERSPACE?

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### THE INFORMATIONAL ANOREXIA

Today, the media constantly bombard us with requests to choose, addressing us as subjects *supposed to know what we really want* (which book, clothes, TV program, place of holiday . . .)—"press A, if you want this, press B, if you want that," or, to quote the motto of the recent "reflective" TV publicity campaign for advertisement itself, "Advertisement—the right to choose." However, at a more fundamental level, the new media deprive the subject radically of the knowledge of what he wants: They address a thoroughly malleable subject who has constantly to be told what he wants, i.e., the very evocation of a choice to be made performatively creates the need for the object of choice. One should bear in mind here that the main function of the Master is to tell the subject what he wants—the need for the Master arises in answer to the subject's confusion, insofar as he does *not* know what he wants. What, then, happens in the situation of the decline of the Master, when the subject himself is constantly bombarded with the request to give a sign as to what he wants? The exact opposite of what one would expect: It is when there is no one here to tell you what you really want, when all the burden of the choice is on you, that the big Other dominates you completely, and the choice effectively disappears, i.e., is replaced by its mere semblance. One is tempted to paraphrase here Lacan's well-known reversal of Dostoyevski ("If there is no God, nothing is permitted at all"): If no forced choice confines the field of free choice, the very freedom of choice disappears.

This suspension of the function of the (symbolic) Master is the crucial feature of the Real whose contours loom at the horizon of the cyberspace universe: the moment of implosion when humanity will attend the limit impossible to transgress, the moment at which the coordinates of our societal life-world will be dissolved. At this moment, distances will be suspended (I will be able to communicate instantly through teleconferences with anywhere on the globe); all information, from texts to music to video, will be instantly available on my interface. However, the obverse of this suspension of the distance which separates me from a far-away foreigner is that, due to the gradual disappearance of contact with "real" bodily others, a neighbor will no longer be a neighbor, since he or she will be progressively replaced by a screen specter; the general availability will induce unbearable claustrophobia; the excess of choice will be experienced as the impossibility to choose; the universal direct participatory community will exclude all the more forcefully those who are prevented from participating in it. The vision of cyberspace opening up a future of unending possibilities of limitless change, of new multiple sex organs, etc., etc., conceals its exact opposite: an unheard-of imposition of radical closure. This, then, is the Real awaiting us, and all endeavors to symbolize this real, from utopian (the New Age or "deconstructionist" celebrations of the liberating potentials of cyberspace), to the blackest dystopian ones (the prospect of the total control by a God-like computerized network . . .), are just this, i.e., so many attempts to avoid the true "end of history," the paradox of an infinity far more suffocating than any actual confinement. Is therefore one of the possible reactions to the excessive filling-in of the voids in cyberspace not the *informational anorexia,* the desperate refusal to accept informations?

Or, to put it in a different way, virtualization cancels the distance between a neighbor and a distant foreigner, insofar as it suspends the presence of the Other in the massive weight of the Real: neighbors and foreigners, all are equal in their spectral screen-presence. That is to say, why was the Christian injunction "love thy neighbor like thyself" so problematic for Freud? The proximity of the Other which makes a neighbor a neighbor is that of *jouissance:* When the presence of the Other becomes un-

bearable, suffocating, it means that we experience his or her mode of *jouissance* as too intrusive. And, what is the contemporary "postmodern" racism, if not a violent reaction to this virtualization of the Other, a return of the experience of the neighbor in his or her (or their) intolerable, traumatic *presence*? The feature which disturbs the racist in his Other (the way they laugh, the smell of their food . . .) is thus precisely the little piece of the real which bears witness to their presence beyond the symbolic order.

We are thus far from bemoaning the loss of the contact with a "real," flesh-and-blood other in cyberspace, in which all we encounter are digital phantoms: Our point is rather that cyberspace is *not spectral enough.* One of the tendencies in theorizing cyberspace is to conceive cybersex as the ultimate phenomenon in the chain whose key link is Kierkegaard, his relationship with Regina: In the same way Kierkegaard rejected the actual proximity of the Other (the beloved woman), and advocated loneliness as the only authentic mode of relating to a love object, cybersex also involves the nullification of the "real life" object, and draws erotic energy from this very nullification—the moment I encounter my cybersex partner(s) in real life is the moment of *desublimation,* the moment of the return to vulgar "reality." . . . Convincing as it may sound, this parallel is deeply misleading: The status of my cyberspace sexual partner is NOT that of Kierkegaard's Regina. Regina was the void at which Kierkegaard addressed his words, a kind of *"vacuole" weaved by the texture of his speech,* while my cyberspace sexual partner is, on the contrary, *overpresent,* bombarding me with the torrential flow of images and explicit statements of her (or his) most secret fantasies. Or, to put it in another way: Kierkegard's Regina is the cut of the Real, the traumatic obstacle which again and again unsettles the smooth run of my self-satisfying erotic imagination, while cyberspace presents its exact opposite, a frictionless flow of images and messages— when I am immersed in it, I, as it were, return to a symbiotic relationship with an Other in which the deluge of semblances seems to abolish the dimension of the Real.

In a recent interview, Bill Gates celebrated cyberspace as opening up the prospect of what he called "friction-free capitalism"—this expression renders perfectly the social fantasy which

underlies the ideology of cyberspace capitalism: the fantasy of a wholly transparent, ethereal medium of exchanges in which the last trace of material inertia vanishes. The crucial point not to be missed here is that the "friction" we get rid of in the fantasy of "friction-free capitalism," does not refer only to the reality of material obstacles which sustain any exchange process, but, above all, to the Real of the traumatic social antagonisms, power relations, etc., which brand the space of social exchange with a pathological twist. In his *Grundrisse* manuscript, Marx pointed out how the very material dispositif of a nineteenth-century industrial production site directly materializes the capitalist relationship of domination (the worker as a mere appendix subordinated to the machinery which is owned by the capitalist); *mutatis mutandis,* the same goes for cyberspace: In the social conditions of late capitalism, the very materiality of cyberspace automatically generates the illusory abstract space of "friction-free" exchange in which the particularity of the participants' social position is obliterated.

The easiest way to discern the set of social relations which overdetermine the mode of operation of cyberspace, is to focus on the predominant "spontaneous ideology of cyberspace," the so-called *cyberevolutionism* which relies on the notion of cyberspace (or the World Wide Web) as a self-evolving "natural" organism. Crucial is here the blurring of the distinction between "culture" and "nature": The obverse of the "naturalization of culture" (market, society, etc., as living organisms) is the "culturalization of nature" (life itself is conceived as a set of self-reproducing informations—"genes are memes"). This new notion of Life is thus neutral with respect to the distinction of natural and cultural or "artificial" processes—the Earth (as Gaia) as well as global market, they both appear as gigantic self-regulated living systems whose basic structure is defined in the terms of the process of coding and decoding, of passing informations, etc. The reference to the World Wide Web as a living organism is often evoked in contexts which may seem liberating: say, against the State censorship of Internet. However, this very demonization of State is thoroughly ambiguous, since it is predominantly appropriated by right-wing populist discourse and/or market liberalism: Its main targets are the state interventions which try to

maintain a kind of minimal social balance and security—the title of Michael Rothschild's book (*Bioeconomics: The Inevitability of Capitalism*) is here indicative. So, while cyberspace ideologists can dream about the next step of evolution in which we will no longer be mechanically interacting "Cartesian" individuals, in which each "person" will cut his substantial link to his individual body and conceive itself as part of the new holistic Mind which lives and acts through him or her, what is obfuscated in such direct "naturalization" of the World Wide Web or market is the set of power relations—of political decisions, of institutional conditions—within which "organisms" like the Internet (or market or capitalism . . .) can only thrive.

## WHAT CAN METEOROLOGY TEACH US ABOUT CYBERSPACE?

In what, then, resides the key feature of *la coupure digitale*? Perhaps, the best way to approach it is via the gap which separates the modern universe of science from the traditional knowledge: For Lacan, modern science is *not* just another local narrative grounded in its specific pragmatic conditions, since it does relate to the (mathematical) Real beneath the symbolic universe. Let us recall the difference between the modern satellite meteorology and the traditional wisdom about weather, which "thinks locally." Modern meteorology assumes a kind of meta-language view on the entire atmosphere of the Earth as a global and self-enclosed mechanism, while the traditional meteorology involves a particular viewpoint within a finite horizon: Out of some Beyond which, by definition, remains beyond our grasp, clouds and winds arrive, and all one can do is formulate the rules of their emergence and disappearance in a series of "wisdoms" ("If it rains on the first of May, beware of the drought in August," etc.). The crucial point is that "meaning" can only emerge within such a finite horizon: The weather phenomena can be experienced and conceived as "meaningful" only insofar as there is a Beyond out of which these phenomena emerge following the laws which are not directly natural laws—the very lack of natural laws directly connecting actual weather here and the mysterious Beyond, sets in motion the search for "meaningful" coincidences and correlations. The paradox is that, although this traditional

"closed" universe confronts us with unpredictable catastrophies which seem to emerge "out of nowhere," it nonetheless provides a sense of ontological "safety," of dwelling within a self-enclosed finite circle of meaning where things (natural phenomena) in a way "speak to us," address us.

This traditional closed universe is thus in a sense *more "open"* than the universe of science: It implies the gateway into the indefinite Beyond, while the direct global model of the modern science is effectively "closed," i.e., it allows for no Beyond. The universe of modern science, in its very "meaninglessness," involves the gesture of "going through fantasy," of abolishing the dark spot, the domain of the Unexplained which harbors fantasies and thus guarantees Meaning: Instead of it, we get the meaningless mechanism. This is why, for Heidegger, modern science stands for the metaphysical "danger": It poses a threat to the universe of meaning. There is no meaning without some dark spot, without some forbidden/impenetrable domain into which we project fantasies which guarantee our horizon of meaning. Perhaps, this very growing disenchantment of our actual social world accounts for the fascination exerted by cyberspace: It is as if, in it, we encounter again a Limit beyond which the mysterious domain of the fantasmatic Otherness opens up, as if the screen of the interface is today's version of the blank, of the unknown region in which we can locate our own Shangri-Las or the kingdoms of She.

Paradigmatic here are the last chapters of Edgar Allen Poe's "Narrative of A. Gordon Pym," which stage the fantasmatic scenario of passing the threshold into the pure Otherness of the Antarctic. The last human settlement prior to this threshold is a native village on an island with savages so black that even their teeth are black; significantly, what one encounters on this island is also the ultimate Signifier (a gigantic hieroglyph inscribed into the very shape of the mountain chain). Savage and corrupted as they are, the black men cannot be bribed into accompanying the white explorers further south: They are scared to death by the very notion of entering this prohibited domain. When the explorers finally enter this domain, the ice-cold polar snowscape gradually and mysteriously turns into its opposite, a domain of thick, warm and opaque whiteness . . . in short, the incestuous

domain of primordial Milk. What we get here is another version of the kingdom of Tarzan or *She:* in Rider Haggard's *She,* Freud's notorious claim that feminine sexuality is a "dark continent" is realized in a literal way: she-who-must-be-obeyed, this Master beyond Law, the possessor of the Secret of Life itself, is a White Woman ruling in the midst of Africa, the dark continent. This figure of She, of a woman who exists (in the unexplored Beyond), is the necessary fantasmatic support of the patriarchal universe. With the advent of modern science, this Beyond is abolished, there is no longer a "dark continent" which generates a Secret—and, consequently, Meaning is also lost, since the field of Meaning is by definition sustained by an impenetrable dark spot in its very heart.

The very process of colonization thus produces the excess which resists it: Does the mystery of Shangri-La (or of Tarzan's kingdom, or of the kingdom of She or . . .) not reside precisely in the fact that we are dealing with the domain which *was not yet colonized,* with the imagined radical Otherness which forever eludes the colonizer's grasp? Here, however, we encounter another key paradox. This motif of *She* relies on one of the key mythical narratives of colonialism: After white explorers transgress a certain frontier which is taboo even for the most primitive and cruel aborigines and enter the very "heart of darkness," what they encounter there, in this purely fantasmatic Beyond, is again the rule of a mysterious White Man, the pre-Oedipal father, the absolute Master. The structure is here that of the Möbius strip—in the very heart of Otherness, we encounter the other side of the Same, of our own structure of masterhood. This figure of the white Master who rules in this fantasmatic domain of radical Otherness, is split into two opposites: either the horrifying embodiment of the "diabolical Evil" who knows the secret of *jouissance* and, consequently, terrorizes and tortures his subjects (from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* to the feminine version of it in Rider Haggard's *She*), or the saint who rules his kingdom as a benevolent theocratic despotism (Shangri-La in *Lost Horizon*). The point, of course, resides in the "speculative identity" of these two figures: The diabolically evil Master is "in himself or for us" *the same* as the saintly sage–ruler; their difference is purely formal—it concerns only the shift in the per-

spective of the observer. (Or, to put it in Schelling's [1946, p. 105] terms, the saintly wise ruler is in the mode of potentiality what the evil Master is in the mode of actuality, since "the same principle carries and holds us in its ineffectiveness which would consume and destroy us in its effectiveness.") What the hundreds-years-old monk who runs Shangri-La and Kurtz from *The Heart of Darkness* share, is that they both have cut their links with common human considerations and entered the domain "between the two deaths." As such, Kurtz is the Institution at its fantasmatic pure: His very excess merely realizes, brings to the end, the inherent logic of the Institution (the Company and its colonization of the wilderness of Congo). This inherent logic is concealed in the "normal" functioning of the Institution: The very figure which literally realizes the logic of the Institution is, in a properly Hegelian way, perceived as an unbearable excess which has to be finished off.

What, then, does all this tell us about cyberspace? Cyberspace, of course, is a thoroughly technological–scientific phenomenon, it develops the logic of modern meteorology to extreme: Not only is there no place for the fantasmatic screen in it, it even generates the screen itself by way of manipulating the Real of bytes. However, it is by no means accidental that *the modern science, inclusive of meteorology, inherently relies on the interface screen:* In the modern scientific approach, processes are *simulated* on the screen, from the models of atomic subparticles, through the radar images of clouds in weather reports, up to the fascinating pictures of the surface of Mars and other planets (which are all manipulated by computer procedures—added colorization, etc.—in order to enhance their effect). The outcome of the suspension of the dark spot of Beyond in the universe of modern science is thus that the "global reality" with no impenetrable dark spot is something accessible only on screen: The abolishment of the fantasmatic screen which served as the gateway into the Beyond, turns *the entire reality* into something which "exists only on screen," as a depthless surface. Or, to put it in ontological terms: The moment the function of the dark spot which maintains open the space for something for which there is no place in our reality is suspended, we lose our very "sense of reality."

The problem with today's social functioning of cyberspace is thus that it potentially fills in the gap, the distance between the subject's public symbolic identity and its fantasmatic background: Fantasies are more and more immediately externalized in the public symbolic space, the sphere of intimacy is more and more directly socialized. The inherent violence of cybersex does not reside in the potentially violent content of sexual fantasies played out on the screen, but in the very formal fact of seeing my innermost fantasies being directly imposed on me from without.

## OEDIPUS OR ANTI-OEDIPUS?

So, again: How, then, does cyberspace affect the status of subjectivity? What are the consequences of cyberspace for Oedipus, i.e., for the mode of subjectivization that psychoanalysis conceptualized as the Oedipus complex and its dissolution? The fact that cyberspace involves the suspension of the symbolic function of the Master seems to confirm the predominant *doxa* according to which cyberspace explodes or at least potentially undermines the reign of Oedipus: It involves the "end of Oedipus," i.e., what occurs in it is the passage from the structure of symbolic castration (the intervention of the Third Agency which prohibits/disturbs the incestuous dyad and thus enables the subject's entry into the symbolic order), to some new post-Oedipal libidinal economy. Of course, the mode of perception of this "end of Oedipus" depends on the standpoint of the theoretician: First, there are those who see in it a dystopian prospect of individuals regressing to presymbolic psychotic immersion, of losing the symbolic distance which sustains the minimum of critical/reflective attitude (the idea that computer functions as a maternal Thing which "swallows" the subject who entertains toward it an attitude of incestuous fusion)—in short, today, in the digitalized universe of simulation, Imaginary overlaps with the Real, at the expense of the Symbolic (Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio).

This position is at its strongest when it insists on the difference between appearance and simulacrum: "Appearance" has nothing in common with the postmodern notion that we are entering the era of universalized simulacra in which reality itself

becomes indistinguishable from its simulated double. The nostalgic longing for the authentic experience of being lost in the deluge of simulacra (detectable in Virilio), as well as the postmodern assertion of a Brave New World of universalized simulacra as the sign that we are finally getting rid of the metaphysical obsession with authentic Being (detectable in Vattimo)—they both miss the distinction between simulacrum and appearance: What gets lost in today's digital "plague of simulations" is not the firm, true, nonsimulated real, but *appearance itself.* So what is appearance? In a sentimental answer to a child asking him "How does God's face look?" a priest answered that, whenever the child encounters a human face irradiating benevolence and goodness, whomever this face belongs to, he gets a glimpse of His face. . . . The truth of this sentimental platitude is that the Suprasensible (God's face) is discernible as a momentary, fleeting appearance, a "grimace," of an earthly face. It is THIS dimension of "appearance" which transubstantiates a piece of reality into something which, for a brief moment, irradiates the suprasensible Eternity that is missing in the logic of simulacrum: in simulacrum which becomes indistinguishable from the real, everything is here and no other, transcendent dimension effectively "appears" in/through it. We are back at the Kantian problematic of the sublime: In Kant's famous reading of the enthusiasm evoked by the French Revolution in the enlightened public around Europe, the revolutionary events functioned as a sign through which the dimension of transphenomenal Freedom, of a free society, *appeared.* "Appearance" is thus not simply the domain of phenomena, but those "magic moments" in which the other, noumenal, dimension momentarily "appears" in ("shines through") some empirical/contingent phenomenon. Therein resides also the problem with cyberspace and virtual reality (VR): What VR threatens is NOT "reality" which is dissolved in the multiplicity of its simulacra, but, on the contrary, APPEARANCE itself. To put it in Lacanian terms: simulacrum is imaginary (illusion), while appearance is symbolic (fiction); when the specific dimension of symbolic appearance starts to disintegrate, imaginary and real become more and more indistinguishable. The key to today's universe of simulacra in which real is less and less distinguishable from its imaginary simulation resides in the re-

treat of the "symbolic efficiency." This crucial distinction between simulacrum (overlapping with the real) and appearance is easily discernible in the domain of sexuality, as the distinction between pornography and seduction: Pornography "shows it all," "real sex," and for that very reason produces the mere simulacrum of sexuality, while the process of seduction consists entirely in the play of appearances, hints, and promises, and thereby evokes the elusive domain of the suprasensible sublime Thing.

On the other hand, there are those who emphasize the liberating potential of cyberspace: Cyberspace opens up the domain of shifting multiple sexual and social identities, potentially at least liberating us from the hold of the patriarchal Law; it, as it were, realizes in our everyday practical experience the "deconstruction" of old metaphysical binaries ("real Self" versus "artificial mask," etc.). In cyberspace, I am compelled to renounce any fixed symbolic identity, the legal/political fiction of a unique Self guaranteed by my place in the socio-symbolic structure—in short, according to this second version (Sandy Stone, Sherry Turkle), cyberspace announces the end of the Cartesian *cogito* as the unique "thinking substance." Of course, from this second point of view, the pessimist prophets of the psychotic "end of Oedipus" in the universe of simulacra simply betray their inability to imagine an alternative to Oedipus. What we have here is another version of the standard postmodern deconstructionist narrative according to which, in the bad old patriarchal order, the subject's sexual identity was predetermined by his or her place and/or role within the fixed symbolic Oedipal framework—the "big Other" took care of us and conferred on us the identity of either a "man" or a "woman," and the subject's ethical duty was limited to the effort to succeed in occupying the preordained symbolic place. (Homosexuality and other "perversions" were perceived as simply so many signs of the subject's *failure* to succeed in going through the Oedipal path and thus achieving "normal"/"mature" sexual identity.) Today, however, as Foucault allegedly demonstrated, the legal/prohibitive matrix of Power which underlies the Oedipal functioning of sexuality is in retreat, so that, instead of being interpellated to occupy a preordained place in the socio-symbolic order, the subject gained the

freedom (or at least the promise, the prospect of freedom) to shift between different socio-symbolic sexual identities, to construct his Self as an aesthetic *oeuvre*—the motif at work from the late Foucault's notion of the "care of the Self" up to deconstructionist feminist emphasis on the social formation of gender. It is easy to perceive how the reference to cyberspace can provide an additional impetus to this ideology of aesthetic self-creation: Cyberspace delivers me from the vestiges of biological constraints and elevates my capacity to construct freely my Self, to let myself go to a multitude of shifting identities . . .

However, opposed to both versions of "cyberspace as the end of Oedipus" are some rare, but nonetheless penetrating theoreticians (see Flieger, 1997) who assert the continuity of cyberspace with the Oedipal mode of subjectivization: Cyberspace retains the fundamental Oedipal structure of an intervening Third Order which, in its very capacity of the agency of mediation/mediatization, sustains the subject's desire, while simultaneously acting as the agent of Prohibition which prevents its direct and full gratification—on account of this intervening Third, every partial gratification/satisfaction is marked by a fundamental "this is not THAT." The notion that cyberspace as the medium of hyperreality suspends the symbolic efficiency and brings about the false total transparency of the imaginary simulacra coinciding with the Real, while effectively expressing a certain "spontaneous ideology of cyberspace" (to paraphrase Althusser), dissimulates the actual functioning of cyberspace, which not only continues to rely on the elementary dispositif of the symbolic Law, but even renders it more palpable in our everyday experience. Suffice it to recall the conditions of our surfing along in the Internet or participating in a virtual community: First, there is the gap between the "subject of enunciation" (the anonymous X who does it, who speaks) and the "subject of the enunciated/of the statement" (the symbolic identity that I assume in cyberspace, and which can be and in a sense always is "invented"—the signifier which marks my identity in cyberspace is never directly "myself"); the same goes for the other side, for my partner(s) in cyberspace communication—here, the undecidability is radical, I can never be sure who they are: Are they "really" the way they describe themselves, is there a "real" person at all behind a

screen-persona, is the screen-persona a mask for a multiplicity of persons, does the same "real" person possess and manipulate more screen-personas, or am I simply dealing with a digitalized entity which does not stand for any "real" person? In short, INTER-FACE means precisely that my relationship to the Other is never FACE-TO-FACE, that it is always mediat(iz)ed by the interposed digital machinery which stands for the Lacanian "big Other" as the anonymous symbolic order whose structure is that of a labyrinth: I "browse," I err around in this infinite space where messages circulate freely without fixed destination, while the Whole of it—this immense circuitry of "murmurs"—remains forever beyond the scope of my comprehension. (In this sense, one is tempted to propose the proto-Kantian notion of the "cyberspace Sublime" as the magnitude of messages and their circuits which even the greatest effort of my synthetic imagination cannot encompass/comprehend.) Furthermore, does the a priori possibility of viruses disintegrating the virtual universe not point toward the fact that, in the virtual universe also, there is no "Other of the Other," that this universe is a priori inconsistent, with no last guarantee of its coherent functioning? The conclusion thus seems to be that there IS a properly "symbolic" functioning of cyberspace: Cyberspace remains "Oedipal" in the sense that, in order to circulate freely in it, one must assume a fundamental prohibition and/or alienation—yes, in cyberspace, "you can be whatever you want," you're free to choose *a* symbolic identity (screen persona), but you must choose *one* which will always in a way betray you, which will never be fully adequate, you must accept to be represented in cyberspace by a signifying element which runs around in the circuitry as your stand-in. . . . Yes, in cyberspace, "everything is possible," but for the price of assuming a fundamental *impossibility:* You cannot circumvent the mediation of the interface, its "by-pass," which separates you (as the subject of enunciation) forever from your symbolic stand-in.

"L'AUTRE N'EXISTE PAS" . . .

Our contention is that both these versions miss the point; they are either too strong (claiming that cyberspace involves a kind

of psychotic suspension of the "big Other" *qua* the symbolic Law) or too weak (positing a direct continuation of Oedipus in cyberspace). The fact is that today, in a sense, "the big Other no longer exists"—however, in WHAT sense? In a way, with the big Other, it is the same as with God according to Lacan (it is not that God is dead today—God was dead from the very beginning, only that He didn't know it . . .): *It never existed in the first place,* i.e., the inexistence of the "big Other" is ultimately equivalent to the fact that the big Other is the *symbolic* order, the order of symbolic fictions which operate at a level different from direct material causality. (In this sense, the only subject for whom the big Other *does* exist is the psychotic, the one who attributes to words direct material efficiency.) In short, the "inexistence of the big Other" is strictly correlative to the notion of belief, of symbolic trust, credence, of taking what others' say "at their word's value."

In one of the Marx brothers' films, Groucho, when caught in a lie, answers angrily: "Whom do you believe, your eyes or my words?" This apparently absurd logic renders perfectly the functioning of the symbolic order, in which the symbolic mask-mandate matters more than the direct reality of the individual who wears this mask and/or assumes this mandate. This functioning involves the structure of fetishist disavowal: "I know very well that things are the way I see them/ that this person is a corrupted weakling/, but I nonetheless treat him respectfully, since he wears the insignia of a judge, so that when he speaks, it is the Law itself which speaks through him." So, in a way, I effectively believe his words, not my eyes, i.e., I believe in Another Space (the domain of pure symbolic authority) which matters more than the reality of its spokesmen. . . . The cynical reduction to reality thus falls short: When a judge speaks, there is in a way more truth in his words (the words of the Institution of law) than in the direct reality of the person of judge—if one limits oneself to what one sees, one simply misses the point. This paradox is what Lacan aims at with his "*les non-dupes errent*": Those who do not let themselves be caught in the symbolic deception/ fiction and continue to believe their eyes are the ones who err most. . . . What a cynic who "believes only his eyes" misses is the efficiency of the symbolic fiction, the way this fiction structures

our experience of reality. The same gap is at work our most inti-
mate relationship to our neighbors: We behave AS IF we do not
know that they also smell bad, secrete excrements, etc.—a mini-
mum of idealization, of fetishizing disavowal, is the basis of our
coexistence.

Today, with the new digitalized technologies enabling per-
fectly faked documentary images, not to mention virtual reality,
the motto "Believe my words (argumentation), not the fascina-
tion of your eyes!" is more actual than ever. That is to say, the
crucial point here is to keep in sight how the logic of "Whom do
you believe, your eyes or my words?", i.e., of "I know well, but
nonetheless . . . /I believe/," can function in two different ways,
that of the symbolic *fiction* and that of the imaginary *simulacrum.*
In the case of the efficient symbolic fiction of the judge wearing
his insignia, "I know very well that this person is a corrupt weak-
ling, but I nonetheless treat him as if /I believe that/ the symbolic
big Other speaks through him": I disavow what my eyes tell me
and I choose to believe the symbolic fiction. In the case of the
simulacrum of virtual reality, on the contrary, "I know very well
that what I see is an illusion generated by the digital machinery,
but I nonetheless accept to immerse myself in it, to behave as if
I believe it"—here, I disavow what my (symbolic) knowledge tells
me and I choose to believe my eyes only. . . .

This reversal signals the fact that, today, the big Other's in-
existence has reached a much more radical dimension: What is
more and more undermined is precisely this symbolic trust
which persists against all skeptical data. Perhaps the most eye-
catching facet of this new status of the "nonexistence of the big
Other" is the sprouting of "committees" destined to decide upon
the so-called ethical dilemmas which pop up when technological
developments in an ever-increasing way affect our life-world: in
medicine and biogenetics (at what point does an acceptable and
even desirable genetic experiment or intervention turn into an
unacceptable manipulation?), in the application of universal hu-
man rights (at what point does the protection of the victim's
rights turn into an imposition of Western values?), in sexual
mores (what is the proper, nonpatriarchal, procedure of seduc-
tion?), not to mention the obvious case of cyberspace (what is
the status of sexual harassment in a virtual community? How

does one distingish here between "mere words" and "deeds"?).
So, to resolve the deadlock, one convenes a committee to formu-
late, in an ultimately arbitrary way, the precise rules of conduct.
. . . The work of these committees is caught in a symptomal vi-
cious cycle: On the one hand, they try to legitimate their deci-
sions in the most advanced scientific knowledge (which, in the
case of abortion, tells us that a fetus does not yet possess self-
awareness and experience pain; which, in the case of a mortally
ill person, defines the threshold beyond which euthanasia is the
only meaningful solution); on the other hand, they have to evoke
some nonscientific ethical criterion in order to direct and posit
a limitation to inherent scientific drive.

## . . . ET POURTANT, IL REVIENT DANS LE REEL

The first paradox of this retreat of the big Other is discernible
in the so-called "culture of complaint," with its underlying logic
of *ressentiment:* Far from cheerfully assuming the inexistence of
the big Other, the subject blames the Other for its failure and/
or impotence, as if *the Other is guilty for the fact that it doesn't exist,*
i.e., as if impotence is no excuse—the big Other is responsible
for the very fact that it wasn't able to do anything: The more the
subject's structure is "narcissistic," the more he puts the blame
on the big Other and thus asserts his dependence on it. The
basic feature of the "culture of complaint" is thus a call, ad-
dressed at the big Other, to intervene and to set things straight
(to recompense the damaged sexual or ethnic minority, etc.)—
how, exactly, this to be done is again a matter of different ethico-
legal "committees." Is thus the "culture of complaint" not to-
day's version of hysteria, of the hysterical impossible demand
addressed to the Other, a demand which effectively *wants to be
rejected,* since the subject grounds his or her existence in his or
her complaint—"I am insofar as I make the Other responsible
and/or guilty for my misery"? The gap is here insurmountable
between this logic of complaint and the true "radical" ("revolu-
tionary") act which, instead of complaining to the Other and ex-
pecting it to act, i.e., displacing the need to act onto it, suspends
the existing legal frame and *itself accomplishes the act.* . . . So what
is wrong with the complaint of those who are really deprivi-

leged? The fact that, instead of undermining the position of the Other, they still address themselves to it: By way of translating their demand into the terms of legalistic complaint, they confirm the Other in its position in the very gesture of attacking it.

Furthermore, a wide scope of phenomena (the resurgent ethico/religious "fundamentalisms" which advocate a return to the Christian patriarchal division of sexual roles; the New Age massive resexualization of the universe, i.e., the return to premodern pagan sexualized cosmo-ontology; the growth of "conspiracy theories" as a form of popular "cognitive mapping") seem to counter this retreat of the big Other. It is all too simple to dismiss these phenomena as simply "regressive," as new modes of the "escape from freedom," as unfortunate "remainders of the past" which will disappear if we only continue to proceed even more resolutely on the deconstructionist path of historicization of every fixed identity, of unmasking the contingency of every naturalized self-image. These disturbing phenomena rather compel us to elaborate much more in detail the contours of the retreat of the big Other: The paradoxical result of this mutation in the "inexistence of the Other"—of the growing collapse of the symbolic efficiency—is precisely the *reemergence* of the different facets of *a big Other which exists effectively, in the Real,* not merely as a symbolic fiction.

The belief in the big Other which exists in the Real is, of course, the most succint definition of paranoia; for that reason, two features which characterize today's ideological stance—cynical distance and full reliance on paranoiac fantasy—are strictly codependent: The typical subject today is the one who, while displaying cynical distrust of any public ideology, indulges without restraint in paranoiac fantasies about conspiracies, threats, and excessive forms of enjoyment of the Other. The distrust of the big Other (the order of symbolic fictions), the subject's refusal to "take it seriously," relies on the belief that there is an "Other of the Other," that a secret, invisible and all-powerful agent effectively "pulls the strings" and runs the show: Behind the visible, public Power, there is another obscene, invisible power structure. This other, hidden agent acts the part of the "Other of the Other" in the Lacanian sense, the part of the meta-guarantee of the consistency of the big Other (the symbolic or-

der that regulates social life). It is here that we should look for
the roots of the recent impasse of narrativization, i.e., of the
motif of the "end of large narratives": In our era when—in poli-
tics and ideology as well as in literature and cinema—global, all-
encompassing narratives ("the struggle of liberal democracy with
totalitarianism," etc.) seem no longer possible, the only way to
arrive at a kind of global "cognitive mapping" seems to be the
paranoiac narrative of a "conspiracy theory"—not only for the
right-wing populism and fundamentalism, but also for the liberal
center (the "mystery" of Kennedy's assassination) and left-wing
orientations (see the old obsession of the American Left with
the notion that some mysterious government agency is experi-
menting with nerve gases that enable the Power to regulate the
behavior of the population). The large majority of movies which,
in the last two decades, were able to attract the public interest
on account of their plot, not of the firecracking action, were
different versions of conspiracy theory. And it is all too simplis-
tic to dismiss conspiracy-narratives as the paranoiac proto-Fascist
reaction of the infamous "middle classes" which feel threatened
by the process of modernization: It would be much more pro-
ductive to conceive "conspiracy theory" as a kind of floating
signifier which, as we have just seen, can be appropriated by
different political options, enabling them to obtain a minimal
cognitive mapping.

   This, then, is one version of the big Other which continues
to exist in the wake of its alleged disappearance. Another version
is operative in the guise of the New Age Jungian resexualization
of the universe ("men are from Mars, women are from Venus"):
According to it, there is an underlying, deeply anchored arche-
typal identity which provides a kind of safe haven in the flurry
of contemporary confusion of roles and identities; from this per-
spective, the ultimate origin of today's crisis is not the difficulty
in overcoming the tradition of fixed sexual roles, but the dis-
turbed balance in the modern man who puts an excessive em-
phasis on the male-rational-conscious, etc., aspect, neglecting the
feminine-compassionate, etc., aspect. Although this tendency
shares with feminism the anti-Cartesian and antipatriarchal bias,
it rewrites the feminist agenda into a reassertion of archetypal
feminine roots repressed in our competitive male mechanistic

universe. . . . Yet another version of the *real* Other is the figure of the father as sexual harasser of his young daughters, which stands in the very center of the so-called "false-memory syndrome": Here, also, the suspended father as the agent of symbolic authority, i.e., the embodiment of a symbolic fiction, "returns in the real." (What causes such controversy is the contention of those who advocate recovery of memories of childhood sexual abuses that sexual harassment by the father is not merely fantasized or, at least, an indissoluble mixture of fact and fantasy, but a plain fact, something that, in the majority of families, "really happened" in the daughter's childhood—an obstinacy comparable to Freud's no less obstinate insistence on the murder of the "primordial father" as a real event in the humanity's prehistory.) A further aspect of this "return in the real" of the father is undoubtedly the growing obsession of the popular pseudoscience with the mystery of the alleged Christ's tomb and/or progeny (from his alleged marriage with Mary Magdalene) which focuses on the region around Rennes-le-Château in the south of France, weaving into a large coherent narrative the Grail myth, Cathars, Templars, Freemasons, etc.: These narratives endeavor to supplant the diminishing power of the *symbolic fiction* of the Holy Ghost (the community of believers) with the *bodily Real* of Christ and his descendants.

## THE DIGITAL PERVERSION

So, back to cyberspace: These complications seem to indicate how both standard reactions to cyberspace (cyberspace as involving a kind of break with the Oedipal symbolic Law; cyberspace as a continuation of Oedipus with other means) are deficient. There is, however, in the psychoanalytic clinic, a third, intermediary concept between these two extremes: that of *perversion.* The key point is clearly to delineate the specific intermediate status of perversion, in-between psychosis and neurosis, in-between the psychotic's foreclosure of the Law and the neurotic's integration into the Law. According to the standard view, the perverse scenario stages the "disavowal of castration": Perversion can be seen as a defense against the motif of "death and sexuality," against the threat of mortality as well as the contin-

gent imposition of sexual difference—what the pervert enacts is a universe in which, as in cartoons, a human being can survive any catastrophe; in which adult sexuality is reduced to a childish game; in which one is not forced to die or to choose one of the two sexes. As such, the pervert's universe is the universe of pure symbolic order, of the signifier's game running its course, unencumbered by the Real of the human finitude.

In a first approach, it may seem that our experience of cyberspace fits perfectly this universe: Is cyberspace not also a universe unencumbered by the inertia of the Real, constrained only by its self-imposed rules? However, according to Lacan, what this standard notion of perversion leaves out of consideration, is the unique short circuit between Law and *jouissance* which characterizes the innermost structure of perversion: In contrast to the neurotic who acknowledges the Law in order occasionally to take enjoyment in its transgressions (masturbation, theft . . .), and thus obtains satisfaction by way of snatching back from the Other part of the stolen *jouissance,* the pervert directly elevates the enjoying big Other into the agency of Law. The pervert's aim is to *establish,* not to undermine, the Law: The proverbial male masochist elevates his partner, the Dominatrix, into the Law-giver whose orders are to be obeyed. A pervert fully acknowledges the obscene underside of the Law, since he gains satisfaction out of the very obscenity of the gesture of installing the rule of Law, i.e., of "castration." In the "normal" state of things, the symbolic Law prevents access to the (incestuous) object, and thus creates the desire for it; in perversion, *it is the object itself* (say, Domina in masochism)*, which makes the law.* The theoretical concept of the masochist perversion touches here the common notion of a masochist who "enjoys being tortured by the Law": A masochist *locates enjoyment in the very agency of the Law which prohibits the access to enjoyment.* To put it in yet another way: In contrast to the "normal" subject, for whom the Law functions as the agency of prohibition which regulates (the access to the object of) his desire, for the pervert, *the object of his desire is Law itself*—the Law is the Ideal he is longing for, he wants to be fully acknowledged by the Law, integrated into its functioning. . . . The irony of this should not escape us: The pervert, this "transgressor" par excellence who purports to violate all the

rules of "normal" and decent behavior, effectively longs for the very rule of Law.

So what is effectively at stake in perversion? There is an agency in New York called "Slaves are us," which provides people who are willing to clean your apartmnent for free, and want to be treated rudely by the lady of the house. The agency gets the cleaners through ads (whose motto is "Slavery is its own reward!"): Most of them are highly paid executives, doctors, and lawyers, who, when questioned about their motives, emphasize how they are sick of being in charge all the time—they immensely enjoy just being brutally ordered to do their job and shouted at, insofar as this is the only way open to them to gain access to Being. And the philosophical point not to be missed here is that masochism as the only access to Being is strictly correlative with the modern Kantian subjectivity, with the subject reduced to the empty point of self-relating negativity. The scope of the Kantian revolution can be discerned through an interesting detail from literary history: the sudden change in the perception of the theme of *double.* Till the end of eighteenth century, this theme mostly gave rise to comic plots (two brothers who look alike are seducing the same girl; Zeus seducing Amphitrion's faithful wife disguised as Amphitrion, so that, when Amphitrion unexpectedly returns home, he encounters *himself* leaving his bedroom; etc.); all of a sudden, however, in the historic moment which exactly fits the Kantian revolution, the topic of the double becomes associated with horror and anxiety—encountering one's double or being followed and persecuted by him is the ultimate experience of terror, it is something which shatters the very core of the subject's identity.

The horrifying aspect of the theme of the double thus has something to do with the emergence of the Kantian subject as pure transcendental apperception, as the substanceless void of self-consciousness which is *not* an object in reality. What the subject encounters in the guise of his double is himself *as object,* i.e., his own "impossible" objectal counterpoint. In the pre-Kantian space, this encounter was not traumatic, since the individual conceived himself as a positive entity, an object within the world. Another way to make the same point is to locate in my double, in the encountered object which "is" myself, the Lacanian *objet*

*petit a:* What makes the double so uncanny, what distinguishes it from other inner-worldly objects, is not simply its resemblance to me, but the fact that he gives body to "that which is in myself more than myself," to the inaccessible/unfathomable object that "I am," i.e., to that which I forever *lack* in the reality of my self-experience. . . .

A feature which seems to confirm this hypothesis is the fact that the impact of cyberspace is strictly correlative to the changed status of sadomasochist bodily practices in our society. Let us explain this shift by way of addressing the standard criticism of psychoanalysis, according to which psychoanalytic interpretation reduces a work of art or a religious experience to a pathological perverse, neurotic, or even psychotic formation, to a sublimated expression of some unconscious impetus or conflict, etc. How does Lacan answer this criticism? By turning the terms of such "reductionist" interpretive procedure around: The problem, for him, is not to establish the pathological libidinal roots of a publicly acknowledged symbolic formation (religious vision, work of art, etc.), but the opposite, the question How is the public socio-symbolic space of the "big Other" structured so that an agent who undoubtedly displays the features of psychopathology acquires the status of a public person of great esteem? How is it—to take the classic case—that a woman with traits which, in an Oriental or so-called "primitive" culture, would cause her to be praised as a deep mystic visionary, is in our modern culture dismissed as the hysterical or even psychotic author of hallucinatory ramblings? How is it that a man who finds intense fulfilment in starving and whipping himself was in early Christianity hailed as an ascetic martyr, while today he appears to us as a masochistic pervert? Therein resided the wisdom of the Catholic Church: to allow a space within its institutionalized ranks for the exercise of the *jouissance feminine* irreducible to the paternal symbolic Law (nuns allowed to practice their mystical experiences). At a different level, the same goes for modern art: Say, how is it that today, a pervert ritual of piercing one's body, which even a decade ago would be dismissed as an abhorrent private monstrosity, can be staged in public and presented as an artistic performance? How is it that this is included into the "big Other"? Lacan's notion of perversion (the pervert ritual) as a

process which, far from undermining the symbolic Law, rather stands for a desperate attempt of the subject to stage the scene of installing (setting up) the rule of the Law, of its inscription onto the human body, thus enables us to throw a new light on the recent artistic tendencies of masochist body-performances—are they not an answer to the disintegration of the rule of Law, an attempt to restore the symbolic Prohibition? And, again, since the Law in its capacity of prohibiting direct ("incestuous") access to *jouissance* is getting more and more inoperative, the only remaining way to sustain the Law is to posit is as identical with the very Thing which embodies *jouissance.*

## THE FANTASY WHICH CANNOT BE SUBJECTIVIZED

How does all this concern cyberspace? It is often said that cyberspace opens up the domain to realize (to externalize, to stage) our innermost fantasies. Here, it is again crucial to bear in mind the key dimension of the notion of fantasy. Insofar as, according to Lacan, the subject of the signifier is the "barred," empty subject, *le manque à être,* lacking a support in the positive order of Being, what fantasy stages is precisely the subject's impossible Being lost on account of the subject's entry into the symbolic order. No wonder, then, that the fundamental fantasy is *passive,* "masochistic," reducing me to an object worked upon by others: It is as if only the experience of the utmost pain can guarantee to the subject the access to Being: *la douleur d'exister* means that I "am" only insofar I experience pain. At this point, a brief survey of post-Cartesian philosophy is very instructive: It was haunted by the vestiges of an Other Scene at which the subject—this free, active, self-positing agent—is reduced to an object of unbearable suffering or humiliation, deprived of the dignity of his freedom.

In "Le prix du progres," one of the fragments which conclude *The Dialectic of Enlightenment,* Adorno and Horkheimer quote the argumentation of the French nineteenth-century physiologist Pierre Flourens against medical anaesthesia with chloroform: Flourens claims that it can be proven how the anaesthetic works only on our memorial neuronal network—in short, while we are butchered alive on the operating table, we fully feel the

terrible pain; the point is only that later, after the awakening, we do not remember it. . . . For Adorno and Horkheimer, this, of course, is the perfect metaphor of the fate of Reason based on the repression of nature in itself: His body, the part of nature in the subject, fully feels the pain, it is only that, on account of the repression, the subject does not remember it. Therein resides the perfect revenge of nature for our domination over it: unknowingly, we are our own greatest victims, butchering ourselves alive. Is it not also possible to read this as the perfect fantasy scenario of inter-passivity, of the Other Scene in which we pay the price for our active intervention into the world? A sadomasochist willingly assumes this suffering as the access to Being. Our second example: Kant, in a subchapter of his *Critique of Practical Reason* mysteriously titled "Of the Wise Adaptation of Man's Cognitive Faculties to His Practical Vocation," answers the question of what would happen to us if we were to gain access to the noumenal domain, to Things in themselves:

> . . . instead of the conflict which now the moral disposition has to wage with inclinations and in which, after some defeats, moral strength of mind may be gradually won, God and eternity in their awful majesty would stand unceasingly before our eyes. Thus most actions conforming to the law would be done from fear, few would be done from hope, none from duty. The moral worth of actions, on which alone the worth of the person and even of the world depends in the eyes of supreme wisdom, would not exist at all. The conduct of man, so long as his nature remained as it is now, would be changed into mere mechanism, where, as in a puppet show, everything would gesticulate well but no life would be found in the figures. (Kant, 1956, pp. 152–153)

No wonder that this vision of a man who, on account of his direct insight into the monstrosity of the divine being-in-itself, would turn into a lifeless puppet, provokes such an unease among the commentators of Kant (usually, it is either passed over in silence or dismissed as an uncanny, out-of-place foreign body): What Kant delivers in it is no less than what one is tempted to call *the Kantian fundamental fantasy,* the inter-passive Other Scene of freedom, of the spontaneous free agent, the Scene in which the free agent is turned into a lifeless puppet at the mercy of the perverse God. The lesson of it, of course, is

that there is no active free agent without this fantasmatic support, without this Other Scene in which he is totally manipulated by the Other. In short, the Kantian prohibition of the direct access to the noumenal domain should be reformulated: What should remain inaccessible to us is not the noumenal Real, but our *fundamental fantasy* itself—the moment the subject comes too close to this fantasmatic kernel, it looses the consistency of his existence.

The ontological paradox, scandal even, of *fantasy* resides in the fact that it subverts the standard opposition of "subjective" and "objective": Of course, fantasy is by definition not "objective" (in the naive sense of "existing" independently of the subject's perceptions); however, it is also not "subjective" (in the sense of being reducible to the subject's consciously experienced intuitions). Fantasy rather belongs to the "bizarre category of the objectively subjective—the way things actually, objectively seem to you even if they don't seem that way to you" (Dennett, 1991, p. 132). (Dennett, of course, evokes this concept in a purely negative way, as a nonsensical *contradictio in adjecto.*) When for example, the subject actually experiences a series of fantasmatic formations which interrelate as so many permutations of each other, this series is never complete: It is always as if the actually experienced series presents so many variations of some underlying "fundamental" fantasy which is *never* actually experienced by the subject. (In Freud's "A Child Is Being Beaten," the two consciously experienced fantasies presuppose and thus relate to a third one, "My father is beating me," which was never actually experienced and can only be retroactively reconstructed as the presupposed reference of—or, in this case, the intermediate term between—the other two fantasies.) When, for example, we claim that someone who is consciously well disposed toward Jews, nonetheless harbors profound anti-Semitic prejudices he is not consciously aware of, do we not claim that (insofar as these prejudices do not render the way Jews really are, but the way they appear to him) *he is not aware how Jews really seem to him?* This brings us back to the mystery of "commodity fetishism": When a critical Marxist encounters a bourgeois subject immersed in commodity fetishism, the Marxist's reproach to him is not "Commodity may seem to you a magical object endowed

with special powers, but it really is just a reified expression of relations between people"; the actual Marxist's reproach is rather "You may think that the commodity appears to you as a simple embodiment of social relations (that, for example, money is just a kind of voucher entitling you to a part of the social product), but *this is not how things really seem to you*—in your social reality, by means of your participation in social exchange, you bear witness to the uncanny fact that a commodity really appears to you as a magical object endowed with special powers." . . .

This is also one of the ways in which to specify the meaning of Lacan's assertion of the subject's constitutive "decenterment": Its point is not that my subjective experience is regulated by objective unconscious mechanisms which are "decentered" with regard to my self-experience and, as such, beyond my control (a point asserted by every materialist), but rather something much more unsettling—I am deprived of even my most intimate "subjective" experience, the way things "really seem to me," that of the fundamental fantasy which constitutes and guarantees the kernel of my being, since I can never consciously experience it and assume it. . . . According to the standard view, the dimension which is constitutive of subjectivity is that of the phenomenal (self) experience—I am a subject the moment I can say to myself: "No matter what unknown mechanism governs my acts, perceptions and thoughts, nobody can take from me what I see and feel now." Lacan turns around this standard view: The "subject of the signifier" emerges only when a key aspect of the subject's *phenomenal* (self) experience (his "fundamental fantasy"), becomes *inaccessible* to him, i.e., is "primordially repressed." At its most radical, the Unconscious is the *inaccessible phenomenon,* not the objective mechanism which regulates my phenomenal experience. So, in contrast to the commonplace, according to which we are dealing with a subject the moment an entity displays signs of "inner life," i.e., of a fantasmatic self-experience which cannot be reduced to external behavior, one should claim that what characterizes human subjectivity proper is rather the gap which separates the two, i.e., the fact that fantasy, at its most elementary, becomes inaccessible to the subject—it is this inaccessibility which makes the subject "empty" ($). We thus obtain a relationship which totally subverts the standard notion of the

subject who directly experiences himself, his "inner states": an "impossible" relationship between the *empty, nonphenomenal subject* and the *phenomena which remain inaccesible to the subject.*

## THE FROG AND THE BOTTLE OF BEER

Let us specify the status of these strange phenomena which cannot be subjectivized by a recent English publicity spot for a beer. Its first part stages the well-known fairy-tale anecdote: A girl walks along a stream, sees a frog, takes it gently into her lap, kisses it, and, of course, the ugly frog miraculously turns into a beautiful young man. However, the story isn't over yet: The young man casts a covetous glance at the girl, draws her toward himself, kisses her—and she turns into a bottle of beer which the man holds triumphantly in his hand. . . . For the woman, the point is that her love and affection (signaled by the kiss) turn a frog into a beautiful man, a full phallic presence (in Lacan's symbols, the big Phi); for the man, it is to reduce the woman to a partial object, the cause of his desire (in Lacan's symbols, the object small *a*). On account of this asymmetry, "there is no sexual relationship": We have either a woman with a frog or a man with a bottle of beer—what we can never obtain is the "natural" couple of the beautiful woman and man. . . . Why not? Because fantasmatic support of this "ideal couple" would have been the inconsistent figure of *a frog embracing a bottle of beer.* (Of course, the obvious feminist point would be that what women witness in their everyday love experience is rather the opposite passage: One kisses a beautiful young man and, after one gets too close to him, i.e., when it is already too late, one notices that he is effectively a frog . . .). This, then, opens up the possibility of undermining the hold a fantasy exerts over us through the very overidentification with it, i.e., by way of *embracing simultaneously, within the same space, the multitude of inconsistent fantasmatic elements.* That is to say, each of the two subjects is involved in his or her own subjective fantasizing—the girl fantasizes about the frog who is really a young man, the man about the girl who is really a bottle of beer. What modern art and writing oppose to this is not objective reality but the "objectively subjective" underlying fantasy which the two subjects are never able to assume,

something similar to a Magrittesque painting of a frog embracing a bottle of beer, with a title "A man and a woman" or "The ideal couple." (The association with the famous surrealist "dead donkey on a piano" is here fully justified, since surrealists also practiced a version of traversing the fantasy.) And is this not the ethical duty of today's artist—to confront us with the frog embracing the bottle of beer when we are daydreaming of embracing our beloved? In other words, to stage fantasies which are radically desubjectivized, which cannot ever be assumed by the subject?

This, then, is the point we were aiming at all along: Perhaps, cyberspace, with its capacity to externalize our innermost fantasies in all their inconsistency, opens up to the artistic practice a unique possiblity to stage, to "act out," the fantasmatic support of our existence, up to the fundamental "sadomasochistic" fantasy which cannot ever be subjectivized. We are thus invited to risk the most radical experience imaginable: the encounter with our "noumenal Self," with the Other Scene which stages the foreclosed hard core of the subject's Being. Far from enslaving us to these fantasies and thus turning us into desubjectivized blind puppets, it enables us to treat them in a playful way and thus to adopt toward them a minimum of distance—in short, to achieve what Lacan calls *la traversee du fantasme,* "going-through, traversing the fantasy."

So let us conclude with a reference to the (in)famous last proposition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus:* "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, davon muss man schweigen." This proposition renders in the most succinct way possible the paradox of the Oedipal Law which prohibits something (incestous fusion) that is already in itself impossible (and thereby gives rise to the hope that, if we remove or overcome the prohibition, the "impossible" incest will become possible). If we are effectively to move to a region "beyond Oedipus," Wittgenstein's proposition is to be rephrased into "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, davon muss man SCHREIBEN." There is, of course, a long tradition of conceiving art as a mode or practice of writing which augurs that which "one cannot speak about," i.e., the utopian potential "repressed" by the existing socio-symbolic network of prohibitions. There is also a long tradition of using writing as a means to com-

municate a declaration of love too intimate and/or too painful to be directly asserted in a face-to-face speech act. Not only is the Internet widely used as a space for the amorous encounters of shy people; significantly, one of the anecdotes about Edison, the inventor of the telegraph, is that he himself used it to declare love and ask the hand of his secretary (being too shy to do it directly, by means of a spoken word). However, what we are aiming at is not this standard economy of using cyberspace as a place in which, since we are not directly engaged in it, i.e., since we maintain a distance toward it, we feel free to externalize and stage our innermost private fantasies. What we have in mind is a more radical level, the level which concerns our very fundamental fantasy as that "wovon man nicht sprechen kann": The subject is never able to assume his or her fundamental fantasy, to recognize himself or herself in it in a performance of a speech act; perhaps, cyberspace opens up a domain in which the subject can nonetheless externalize/stage his/her fundamental fantasy and thus gain a minimum of distance toward it. . . .

This, however, in no way entails that inducing us to "traverse the fantasy" is an automatic effect of our immersion into cyberspace. What one should do here is, rather, to accomplish a Hegelian reversal of epistemological obstacle into ontological deadlock: What if it is wrong and misleading to ask which of the four versions of the libidinal/symbolic economy of cyberspace that we outlined (psychotic suspension of the Oedipus; the continuation of the Oedipus with other means; the perverse staging of the Law; traversing the fantasy) is the "correct" one? What if these four versions are the four possibilities opened up by the cyberspace technology, so that, ultimately, the choice is ours? How will cyberspace affect us is not directly inscribed into its technological properties; it rather hinges on the network of socio-symbolic relations (of power and domination, etc.) which always–already overdetermine the way cyberspace affects us.

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