**The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious.**

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***Context***

Jacques Lacan’s famous text ‘*The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious’* (henceforth *Subversion*), usually regarded among the most impenetrable of all his *Écrits*, was presented at the conference ‘*La Dialectique’ [‘The Dialectic’*], organized by Jean Wahl and held at Royaumont, France, on September 19-23, 1960. It can be argued that this complex text is organized around three overarching themes which Lacan presents and elaborates in different directions. Firstly, Lacan claims that his psychoanalytic method should be granted scientific status as it is rooted in praxis. Secondly, he argues that the analytic field allows for a thorough critique of the limitations of modern science and philosophy by expanding on the Freudian discoveries in relation to knowledge, subjectivity and desire. Finally, he contends that the subject of psychoanalysis is divided by the intervention of the signifier (language), which brings about desire while reconfiguring the function of the drives. In conjunction with this last contention, *Subversion* marks a major shift in Lacan’s thought by reframing the function of desire as presented in *Seminar VII* (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 1959-1960).[[1]](#footnote-1) Especially in the second part of the text, the dialectic of desire is connoted as a protective mechanism which allows the subject of the unconscious to confront and partly neutralize the threat represented by the inconsistent / lacking status of the Other (the symbolic order of signification). By contrast, the Freudian drives are re-elaborated by Lacan against the background of symbolic castration and are thereby accorded a new role in relation to the non-existence of Other itself.

The title of the conference offers Lacan the opportunity to establish from the outset the central theme of the essay, namely the subversion of the subject as related to the psychoanalytic dialectic of desire. It soon becomes apparent that Lacan intends to set up his understanding of the dialectic against two dominant epistemological fields of his day, namely Hegelian philosophy and the scientific discourse. Throughout his intervention Lacan uses considerable irony to debunk the pretensions of epistemological self-assurance driving discourses on subjectivity that he sees as contrasting the psychoanalytic praxis. As is well known, Lacan’s reading of Hegel’s dialectic was heavily influenced by Alexander Kojève (see Roudinesco 1993/1997: 88-106). This influence undoubtedly transpires through *Subversion*, where Lacan seems to target polemically the widely shared reading of dialectical progress in Hegel as leading to a synthetic and panlogicist apprehension of the coincidence of knowledge and truth. Similarly, he is eager to debunk the Cartesian foundations of scientific empiricism. To put it bluntly, the subject of science only *thinks* he knows what he is doing, ignoring the centrality of that ‘point of ignorance’ (*Subversion* 672, 2) on which Lacan’s entire edifice, as we shall see, is based. In order to counter Hegelianism and scientific discourse, Lacan from the outset of *Subversion* introduces the insubordinate dimension of the subject of the unconscious in its relation to knowledge. The irony, in this respect, is unmistakable. What it targets is the paradox of ‘knowing without knowing’ that, according to Lacan, qualifies both the Hegelian and the scientific accounts of the subject.[[2]](#footnote-2) Hegel, particularly, is a recurrent target in the opening pages of *Subversion*. In Lacan’s eyes, despite the centrality of negation in his dialectic, Hegel is ultimately the philosopher of metaphysical closure, the thinker whose system of tireless *Aufhebung* (sublation) relies on the fact that “the subject knows what he wants” (679, 9).[[3]](#footnote-3) In truth, from the outset Lacan specifies that his reference to Hegel is “entirely didactic” and serves the purpose of showing “where things stand regarding the question of the subject such as psychoanalysis properly subverts it” (672, 4). In this essay I will not attempt to explore or challenge Lacan’s reception of Hegelian dialectics, as this task would take me beyond the remit of my commentary. I will limit myself to note that, while Lacan here marks his departure from Hegel, at the same time he uses the structural composition of Hegel’s dialectic as a springboard to both develop his own dialectic of desire and find a way of engaging with an audience that, as he puts it in the opening paragraph – and not without a touch of sarcasm – “is supposed to be philosophically sophisticated” (671, 1).

***Commentaries on the text***

*Analytical praxis*

Lacan’s introduction of the subversion of the subject is supported, initially, by repeated references to the practical justification of psychoanalysis, which are meant to distance his analytical method from philosophical thought as such, as well as from scientific empiricism. Indeed, Lacan has often referred to his own work as being in essence anti-philosophical, if only because driven by the reference to a recalcitrant dimension of the human psyche that resists theoretical capture. Lacan introduces this argument with a reference to the centrality of structure (“A structure is constitutive of the praxis known as psychoanalysis”, 671, 1) followed by the claim that the subject is conveniently situated on the basis of its relationship to knowledge. The specific aim of *Subversion* is the outlining of the ambiguity upon which the rapport between subject and knowledge is established in psychoanalysis.

As anticipated, the ironic reference to science (671, 6-7 and 672, 1-2) allows Lacan to reassert the primacy of psychoanalysis praxis. First he claims that what qualifies him to follow the psychoanalytic path is “my experience of this praxis. What made me decide to do so […] is a failure of theory coupled with abuses in its transmission, which, while presenting no dangers for praxis itself, result, in both cases, in a total absence of scientific status” (672, 5). While claiming that contemporary theory lacks scientific status, Lacan also conveniently appeases his audience of philosophers with the following remark: “Nevertheless, I shall take advantage of your kindness in assuming we agree that a science cannot be conditioned upon empiricism” (672, 8). Here we arrive, indirectly at least, at a definition of a ‘psychoanalytic science’ which is sustained by analytic experience but refuses blind empiricism. If anything, this is one way of defining the ambiguity of the relationship between subject and knowledge as understood by Lacan, while also introducing the central theme of the essay, namely the *subversion* of the subject. The empirical method of modern science is also the object of Lacan’s scorn in his subsequent references to psychology, which he claims he challenges “precisely because, as I will show, the function of the subject, as inaugurated by Freudian experience, disqualifies from the outset what, going by the name ‘psychology’, merely perpetuates an academic framework, no matter how one dresses up its premises” (672, 9-10). Later he will confirm this view by referring to “the Philistines of general psychology” (695, 4).

Lacan’s position is thus clear from the very start. It is both assertive and polemical, in as much as it challenges “the unity of the subject” (673, 1) as a presupposition of both philosophical enquiry and psychology. In Philippe Van Haute’s words: “According to Lacan, academic psychology can provide no solace here; for it assumes the unity of the subject whose various properties and functions it studies, without pausing even for a moment to consider the scientific validity of this assumption. The emphasis on the unity of an essentially “knowing” subject goes together with the idea that the psyche has to be understood as a functional double (*doublure*) of the organism. The psyche must assist the organism in its attempt to adapt itself to reality. Just like psychoanalytic orthodoxy, academic psychology believes that psychic life must be understood primarily and fundamentally as “adaptation”, or in terms of an “adaptive” problematic” (Van Haute, 2002: xxviii-xxix). The criticism Lacan levels against the academia can legitimately be regarded as an anticipation of the University discourse, which will be introduced in the late 1960s. In a similar vein, Lacan decries the attention given by “a whole body of traditional thought” (673, 2) to empirically-verifiable states of consciousness supposed to represent the limitless or the ineffable which, he adds with proud conviction, find no room in ‘Freudian practice’ (673, 4). He refers specifically to “the states of enthusiasm described by Plato”, namely states of inspired consciousness that find expression in acts of ecstasy and rapture; “the degrees of samadhi in Buddhism”, where consciousness becomes completely absorbed in the object of meditation; and “the experience (*Erlebnis*) one has under the influence of hallucinogens” (673, 2), where the use of the German word *Erlebnis* (translatable roughly as ‘immediate lived experience’) is intended as a reference to phenomenology. What is hereby confirmed is the seemingly “heretical” status of Lacan’s method of enquiry, at once rooted in analytic praxis and yet eschewing empiricism. The reason for this is immediately and, dare I say, intuitively obvious: the praxis of which Lacan speaks in his “return to Freud” concerns unconscious formations rather than self-evident facts, sensory experience or the above-mentioned hypnoid states of mind (673, 4-7 and 674, 1). And the unconscious, as Lacan here confirms, “speaks”, i.e. it is made of language: “I have some difficulty in getting across – in a circle infatuated with the most incredible illogicality – what it means to interrogate the unconscious as I do, that is, to the point at which it gives a reply that is not some sort of ravishment or takedown, but is rather a ‘saying why’” (673, 8). In the unconscious, Lacan adds, one can detect ‘a sort of logic’ in the form, for example, of “an interrogative voice or even the development of an argument” (673, 9).

*Freud’s “Copernican turn”*

After his polemically charged introduction, Lacan turns to Freud’s so called Copernican turn, that is to say the discovery of the unconscious as the central agency of subjectivity (674, 2). However, he immediately warns against any facile appropriation of such metaphor: the very positing of a gravitational centre, whether earth or sun (i.e., whether consciousness or the unconscious), is at risk of generating “a lure”: “by exalting the center, heliocentrism is no less of a lure than seeing the earth as the center”, while “the existence of the ecliptic probably provided a more stimulating model of our relations with truth” (674, 4). At the core of Lacan’s argument lies the notion of *disavowal*, which should be considered the very staple of his dialectic of desire. He makes the meaning of disavowal clear with a mention to Darwin: it is not because men have been told that they originate from monkeys that they stop believing that they are “the best among the creatures, for it is precisely of this that he [Darwin] convinces them” (674, 5). In other words, it is precisely because we know that we are not by natural right at the centre of the universe (as we originate from monkeys) that we are easily lured into believing that we are superior creatures, for instance by way of cultural acquisition. Lacan is here claiming that the relativization of truth through scientific knowledge paradoxically ends up strengthening the *effect* of truth, since the latter has a chance, as it were, to operate stealthily – or, to use the obvious term, unconsciously. This is what Lacan refers to as “the doctrine of double truth”, where knowledge shatters old religious beliefs while at the same time providing a new “regime of truth” (674, 8). Along these lines, we could argue that it is not because we know that our “adaptation” to the socio-symbolic order never fully succeeds that we stop acting as if we were perfectly adapted.

Without Lacan stating it explicitly, the above point can also be deployed in relation to what is commonly referred to as ‘ideology critique’. To put it in a nutshell: beliefs have a chance to operate more effectively when one is convinced that there is nothing worth believing in – when all the evidence that would justify belief is rationally dismantled.[[4]](#footnote-4) It is in this sense that the discovery of the subject of the unconscious – a subject guided by a logic that remains radically disavowed – acquires political weight. Starting from *Subversion*, and especially throughout the 1960s, Lacan becomes increasingly aware that the psychoanalytic discourse offers a uniquely powerful critical arsenal to confront what he regards as the central lure of modernity. In this respect, his argument can be summarized as follows: despite the impact of the discourse of scientific objectivity, with its demolition of the ancient metaphysical truths and concurrent attempted abolition of the subject, ‘things’ (the insertion and manipulation of the subject within the socio-symbolic network) keep functioning efficiently *through belief*. The paradox that psychoanalysis has a chance to express is that without explicit ideological parameters ideology thrives all the better. Put differently, psychoanalysis testifies to the presence of “a new seism” (675, 2) occurring at the border between knowledge and truth – a seism that science cannot register. Here Lacan dedicates a long paragraph to Hegel’s dialectic, criticizing it as a system of thought where “what is disturbing about truth is constantly reabsorbed” (675, 3). In Lacan’s view, the dialectic is defined by its thrust toward an absolute knowledge where the symbolic (i.e. knowledge) connects with “a real from which nothing more can be expected”, giving shape to “a subject finalized in his self-identity” (675, 3). Psychoanalysis, however, as well as “the history of science itself”, presents a different picture, one where “the thesis / antithesis / synthesis dialectic” is constantly proved implausible (675, 4).

Far from establishing a perfect and seamless conjuncture of knowledge and truth, then, psychoanalysis draws attention to “a number of creaks”, reminding us that “it is elsewhere that the moment of truth must sound for this field of knowledge as for others” (675, 5). This psychoanalytic truth is thus akin to a return of the repression of truth in Hegel’s “absolute subject” and in science’s “abolished subject” (676, 2). In the Freudian field, Lacan continues, what emerges is “the skewed relation that separates the subject from sex” (676, 3), in other words the predominance of the subject of the unconscious as opposed to that of the subject of consciousness characterizing psychology as well as phenomenology. By the same token, the unconscious cannot be circumscribed via the negation of consciousness (676, 4), but is instead a “chain of signifiers that repeats and insists somewhere […] interfering in the cuts offered it by actual discourse and the cogitation it informs” (676, 5). At this stage in his teaching, Lacan is keen to insist on the linguistic composition of the unconscious (“the crucial term is the signifier”, 676, 6), going some distance in his attempt to link Freud’s ‘Copernican turn’ with a structuralist agenda that he believes Freud anticipated (given the centrality in Freud of linguistic tropes such as metaphor and metonymy) but could not fully embrace owing to the self-evident historical gap with more recent advances in linguistics.[[5]](#footnote-5) But aside of this question, the central theme for Lacan here is that of the signifier and its relevance for the subject of the unconscious. Crucially for him the signifier does not reflect a pre-existent reality, but it creates meanings out of its combinations with other signifiers. Signifiers are independent from the reality they structure.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Now, for Freud the unconscious is not made of language because it does not refer to reality; it exists independently of reality. This is what Lacan also states by claiming the opposite to Freud, i.e. that the unconscious is constituted by a chain of signifiers (677, 1-2). In both Lacan and Freud, then, the unconscious does not have to do with (historical) reality. On this issue the difference between the two is that Freud conceives of language as inextricably linked to the reality it refers to, whereas for Lacan language (the signifier) is in its deepest connotation autonomous from reality, which nevertheless it intersects and signifies. It is Lacan’s view that language at its most elementary is unconscious, and as such is independent of the historical context while representing the very deadlock of history itself. Because the Lacanian unconscious is made of language, it obeys the linguistic patterns of metaphor and metonymy rather than condensation and displacement as Freud had thought (677, 1-2).

*The split subject of the unconscious*

After this clarification, Lacan is ready to ask the question that no doubt is central to his intervention: “Once the structure of language is recognized in the unconscious, what sort of subject can we conceive of for it?” (677, 2). He claims that if the ‘I’ qua grammatical subject of the statement (or of the enunciated) represents the speaking subject, at the same time it “does not signify him” (677, 3-4). In other words, the ‘I’ is what linguists know as a shifter, a signifier whose role is to ‘anchor’ or ‘root’ the sentence by attributing a subject to it (677, 3). In itself, however – that is to say, irrespective of the enunciated content – it does not signify anything, let alone a speaking subject. To the question ‘Who is speaking?’, then, we can only answer: a divided subject (the unconscious subject of the enunciation as opposed to the subject of the enunciated); a subject who undergoes a fading, and who therefore leads us to a frontier, or a cut, where something is elided, decreeing the fundamental opacity concerning what the signifier ‘I’ actually stands for. To demonstrate how the subject of the enunciation can make its appearance in the statement in different ways than as the shifter ‘I’, Lacan uses here the example of the expletive *ne* in French, a signifier considered superfluous by grammarians whose elision, however, would reduce the emphasis of the enunciation that carries its message. By eliminating the expletive *ne* from a polemical sentence (exemplified by Lacan’s own polemical attack against grammarians), the same sentence would turn into an impersonal assertion deprived of its crucial caustic or mocking edge (677, 4).

In an explicit reference to Freud, Lacan reminds us of how slips of the tongue, jokes and so on provide clear evidence for the ‘insistence’ of this divided subject, to the extent that, as he puts it in another polemical innuendo, this time to Heidegger’s philosophy, “we are astonished the hunt for Dasein hasn’t made any more of it” (678, 1). More to the point, the unconscious subject of the enunciation emerges unexpectedly in the cut of discourse, as “a bar between the signifier and the signified” (678, 2). Only via this cut, Lacan specifies, are we able to locate the subject: “The cut made by the signifying chain is the only cut that verifies the structure of the subject as a discontinuity in the real. If linguistics enables us to see the signifier as the determinant of the signified, analysis reveals the truth of this relationship by making holes in meaning the determinants of its discourse” (678, 3). More succinctly put: the psychoanalytic discourse endorses modern linguistics’ affirmation of the priority of the signifier over the signified, but only insofar as such priority is made to reveal the truthfulness of the failed connection between the two terms. And the subject presents precisely such short-circuiting of signifier and signified.

Insofar as we are talking about the subject of the unconscious, or of the enunciation, the subjective agency in question is never in complete control of the statement. Quite on the contrary, the subject is spoken by its statement, in the precise sense that the subject materializes the cuts (contradictions, failures, gaps, etc.) produced by the statement itself. This is what causes the fading of the ‘I’ in the grip of “an ever purer signifier” (678, 1) – a signifier that reveals its autonomy from the signifed. In *My Teaching* (Lacan, 2005/2008: 36), Lacan states that the subject of the enunciation is “the subject not insofar as it produces discourse but insofar as it is produced [*fait*], cornered even [*fait comme un rat*], by discourse”. This inversion of the rapport between subject and enunciation is of extraordinary importance if we are to properly grasp Lacan’s discourse theory. The central issue at stake here can be summarized as follows: it is not that the subject constructs a discourse which is by definition ambiguous in relation to its truth-value – from Lacan’s angle, this is the misplaced starting point of any traditional epistemology. Rather, Lacan asserts that the discourse produced by the subject is by definition a discourse that comes from ‘out there’ (from the Other) and which materializes in a cut that is – to put it, *pace* Lacan, in philosophical terms – ontological. This means that we are by definition alienated in the Other: there is always something intrinsically fake in our discourse, since it is always-already operative outside ourselves, and it reproduces itself through us.

However, this take on subjectivity needs to be supplemented with Lacan’s second crucial point regarding the actual emergence of the subject. While our identity is moulded by the Other, the subject as such, i.e. the subject of the unconscious, makes its appearance in those gaps, inconsistencies and contradictions (cuts) through which discourse (language) informs subjectivity. For this precise reason the cut of which Lacan speaks intersects both objectivity and subjectivity. For Lacan, Freud’s famous imperative *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden* owes its significance precisely to this subject of the unconscious which determines the fading of the ‘I’. In Lacan’s interpretation, which updates his previous ones by centering on language, the *Ich* (‘I’) as signifier has a chance to “come into being by disappearing from the statement” (678, 6). It is worth noting that Lacan refers to Freud’s imperative as a “pre-Socratic gnome” (678, 4), in other words a maxim or aphorism that he associates with the wisdom of the pre-Socratic tradition, where being and thinking were considered reciprocal and inseparable.[[7]](#footnote-7)

How else can we grasp this paradoxical disappearing of the ‘I’ from and through the statement? Lacan offers a suggestive definition when he says that it happens “through an enunciation that makes a human being tremble due to the vacillation that comes back to him from his own statement” (679, 2).[[8]](#footnote-8) This means that the truth of any message, insofar as this message is always-already heard by the sender, is the fading of the ‘I’, its disappearance in/from the statement. The implication is that the ‘I’ as signifier is always-already dead – like the ‘dead father’ from the famous dream related by Freud that Lacan here refers to –[[9]](#footnote-9) but sustains itself precisely on its ignorance concerning his non-existence. The ‘I’ “comes on the scene as a subject who is conjugated with the double aporia of a veritable subsistence that is abolished by his knowledge, and by a discourse in which it is death that sustains existence” (679, 5). Here is the double (dialectical) aporia of which Lacan speaks: on the one hand, we have the psychoanalytic knowledge about the ‘I’’s radical inconsistency (the cut embodied by the subject of the unconscious) which deprives the ‘I’ of its “veritable subsistence”; on the other hand, there is a discourse, in which the function of desire is nestled, that sustains the ‘I’ by preventing it from encountering its psychoanalytic truth, namely the fact that it is always-already dead.

It is important to grasp this central Lacanian topos of the mortifying intervention of language, whose dialectical function is to bring life (sense, communication, intersubjectivity, desire, etc.) *through death*, i.e. by enforcing the mortification of being via the statement. What is aporetic is precisely this overlap of existence-through-desire and death: we become ‘desiring subjects’ by dying to our being. The desire that sustains us is correlative to a deadly cut – the cut of the signifier. The novelty of *Subversion* here comes to full fruition: far from leading us straight to the subject of the unconscious – the pure and tragic desiring subject of which Lacan speaks in *Seminar VII* apropos Antigone – desire is connoted as a mortifying and alienating agency, always-already characterized by the deadly spell it carries and with which it envelops the subject, determining the content of its subjectivity. Lacan identifies in this understanding of desire the key difference between Freud and Hegel: “in Hegel’s work it is desire (*Begierde*) that is given responsibility for the minimal link the subject must retain to Antiquity’s knowledge [*connaissance*] if truth is to be immanent in the realization of knowledge” (679, 9). In Freud’s work, on the other hand, such desire to know is always the Other’s desire (679, 11), that is to say it is bound up with the alienating logic through which subjectivity emerges. The elementary paradox at stake here is the emergence of subjectivity (self-consciousness) through what Bruce Fink (2004: 108) calls “a constitutional inscience”: the horizon of knowledge emerges for us as the other side of our constitutive lack of knowledge; knowledge as episteme is the effect of our ignorance about the ontological inconsistency of our being. This means that our desire is first and foremost the cipher of our alienation, the mark of our being dead while believing we are alive, which in turn is indispensable for our self-consciousness. Put differently, it is the alienating acquisition of desire that gives us subjective life, while preventing us from realizing that we are always-already dead.

*Drive and revolution*

At this point (679, 13), Lacan hastens to bring in the death-drive as that crucial psychic component of human subjectivity which, as it were, allows us to get in touch with our own ‘being dead’, i.e. with “the margin beyond life that language assures the human being of due to the fact that he speaks” (680, 1). Lacan is very precise here: it is language that makes us aware of a “margin beyond life”; only language leads us to the death-drive. It is therefore “in the metaphor of the return to the inanimate” (680, 1) that we encounter the truly revolutionary dimension of Freud’s thought, namely his discovery of the centrality of the death-drive (*Todestrieb*) as that which lies beyond the pleasure principle, which is why “to evade the death instinct in his [Freud’s] doctrine is not to know his doctrine at all” (679, 13). The Freudian drive, Lacan avers, brings into contention a *savoir* that cannot be articulated as *connaissance* (680, 3) Lacan conveys the significance of *savoir* by evoking the figure of the messenger-slave from ancient Greek who “carries under his hair the codicil that condemns him to death” – of which he “knows neither the meaning nor the text, nor in what language [*langue*] it is written, nor even that it was tattooed on his shaven scalp while he was sleeping” (680, 3). Slavery, like death, is a central metaphor in Lacan, insofar as it is linked to the intervention of the signifier, thereby implying that each one of us is enslaved to a *savoir* – the unconscious chain of signifiers – which ‘condemns us to death’, in the exact sense that it splits us radically triggering the emergence of the subject of the enunciated. As Lacan underscores in another famous text, *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, “we analysts deal with slaves who think they are masters” – who (slavishly) believe in their ego-centric mastery (242). Lacan’s point is that there is no escaping our condition of slavery, which is inaugurated by the arrival of the signifier and the logic of desire it installs.

It is at this level that we should detect the novelty of Freud’s “Copernican revolution”, which, as Lacan warns, should not be seen in mere correspondence to heliocentrism: the subject proper is the unwanted, accidental *effect* of the intervention of language (discourse) on the speaking being, in as much as this effect also belongs, originally, as a discursive cut, in the Other (bearing witness to the fact that ‘there is no other of the Other’). Revolution, in the specific meaning of ‘celestial revolution’ (i.e., as for planets, bodies returning to the point of departure by completing the rotation on their axis), is a word Lacan uses twice in this essay, in connection with Freud’s discovery of the breach between truth and knowledge, as opposed to (what he believes to be) Hegel’s closure of this breach. He clearly assigns fundamental significance to this understanding of revolution, as it will become evident at later stages in his teaching, and perhaps nowhere more significantly than in *Seminar XVII*.[[10]](#footnote-10) Revolution effectively implies for Lacan locating and identifying with the point of incongruence between conscious knowledge and unconscious truth. This incongruence is “the mobility out of which revolutions arise” (679, 10). And it is highly significant that Lacan links this understanding of revolution to what Freud had designated by death drive. So what does the death drive designate in Lacan? Simply put, that conscious signification is sustained by the holing of meaning it causes, the margin or surplus of sense (corresponding to “the inanimate”) that, at one and the same time, it attempts to repress in order to function. It is the existence of this hole that the death drive makes manifest, and ultimately embodies. More precisely, this hole is “the margin where this being places in signifying position, not only those parts of his body that lend themselves to this because they are exchangeable, but the body itself” (680, 1). The death drive becomes activated as the unconscious libido that emerges in the signifying chain, materializing the cut or impossibility that signals the presence of the subject. It is for this reason that Lacan refers polemically to the supposed relationship between psychoanalysis and physiology (680, 4-6). Since its inception, he claims, psychoanalysis has contributed nothing to physiology, for psychoanalysis’ concern with the real of the body and its “imaginary mental schema” (680, 6) cannot be integrated within a doctrine whose interest lies in the developmental constitution of the body. In such doctrine, the developmental stages “function first and foremost like elements of a heraldry, a heraldry of the body. This is confirmed by the use that is made of them in reading children’s drawings” (680, 3). Lacan’s polemical target here would seem to be object-relation theory, where the developmental (psychogenetic) perspective is confirmed by the observation that the subject’s relation to the partial-objects is progressively assimilated within the relation with the body as a whole – hence the reference to children’s drawings, which would attest to such theory.

*The first graph of desire*

Yet, in order to grasp the full significance of the drive, Lacan needs first to introduce desire in its relation to the subject of the signifier. Again, the aim is to reject the accusation that his psychoanalytic theory has been “lured by a purely dialectical exhaustion of being” (681, 2), since he clearly endorses “desire’s irreducibility to demand”, which is “the very mainspring of what also prevents it from being reduced to need” (681, 3). In fact, it is the awareness of desire’s intrinsic aporia – its being articulated but also its not being fully articulable – that, as we shall see, will lead Lacan to validate what we could call an ethics of the drive. Desire, in other words, is from this point on conceived as intimately connected to the drive. It is at this stage that Lacan introduces his topology (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Lacan’s Graphe 1

[INTRODUCE FIGURE ‘GRAPHE 1’ FROM ECRITS p. 681 ABOUT HERE]

The first formulation of his graph of desire (its “elementary cell”; 681, 5) “will serve here to show where desire is situated in relation to a subject defined on the basis of his articulation by the signifier” (681, 4). Such formulation, which Lacan had already built up in two seminars of the late 1950s (*Seminar V* and *Seminar VI*), and which he will continue to develop in the late 1960s (*Seminar XVI*), is fairly straightforward. It consists, simply put, of the intervention of language upon the indeterminate, pre-linguistic flux of life in which the subject is immersed. We thus have the signifying chain, represented by the vector S→S’ (left to right), and the “fish-hook” or “horse-shoe” vector of subjectivation Δ→*$* (right to left). The key point to underline when looking at the elementary cell of the graph is that the body on its own does not produce any meanings whatsoever; in order to do so, it has to be intercepted by a signifying chain – by language and the symbolization it carries. Furthermore, this sense-creating intervention is ultimately enabled by the signifier qua *point de capiton*,[[11]](#footnote-11) i.e. the loop caused by the signifier that halts the otherwise infinite sliding of the signifying chain (681, 5). The living trajectory of the being of needs (Δ), who merely seeks satisfaction, is intercepted by language, and it is through this “linguistic/cultural” interception that biological needs will be transformed into desires. Thus, the subject of desire, insofar as it is the subject of the signifier, is irreducibly split, ‘out of joint’, never transparent or coincidental with itself (*$*).

Evidence of the alienating grafting of language on the body is the fact that linguistic signification works retroactively through the *point de capiton* (682, 1). To give an example of this retroactive function, Lacan mentions the signification obtained by a sentence through its last term (682, 2): it is only thanks to the choice of a term that puts an end to a given sentence that the latter can, retroactively, secure a meaning. While the definition of the diachronic (retroactive, or “negatively oriented” 682, 1) working of language is relatively unproblematic, synchronically things are more complicated (682, 3). To understand what allows the signifying chain to begin and sustain its course, we must return to the initial operation by which the signifier is raised to its proper function.

Lacan uses as an example the way in which the child deals with a signifier by disconnecting it from its symbolic attributions, an operation which makes room for “the sophistics of signification” (682, 3) precisely by bringing the signifier to its ‘zero level’, its original emptiness. What is at work here is not metonymy, which functions diachronically, but metaphor: “It is metaphor insofar as the first attribution is constituted in it – the attribution that promulgates ‘the dog goes meow, the cat goes woof-woof,’ by which, in one fell swoop, the child, by disconnecting the thing from its cry, raises the sign to the function of the signifier and reality to the sophistics of signification, and in his contempt for verisimilitude, makes necessary the verification of multiple objectifications of the same thing” (682, 3). Here the meaning of metaphor in Lacan’s synchronic conception of the signifier comes to full fruition. Initially, and fundamentally, metaphor means nothing but the power to disconnect from its apparently self-evident attributions in order to bring to the surface the emptiness of the signifier, its *purely literal function*: originally, the signifier means nothing but itself, the materiality of its own ‘letter’. And metaphor at its purest, as evidenced by the child’s disconnecting skills, makes manifest the absolute self-referentiality of the signifier. Thus the child effectively ‘begins from the beginning’, from the zero level of signification, returning the signifier to its constitutive meaninglessness. As Van Haute (2002: 65-66) puts it, underscoring the founding role of metaphorization in the subjective construction of reality: “A child who says that a dog meows and a cat barks disconnects the sound that imitates the cry (onomatopoeia) from the object (dog, cat), and in this way it breaks through the univocal relation between the sound and the object to make the sound into a signifier. […] from now on the child can freely signify reality without taking account of what reality announces at first sight or ‘naturally’ […]. This break is therefore equiprimordial with the process of metaphorization. For in the metaphor, new meanings forever arise from the mere substitution of one signifier by another, independent of any founding reference to a reality that might motivate this substitution”.

A signifying chain, Lacan tells us, cannot sustain itself without this hidden presupposition; that is to say, the constitutive emptiness of the signifier is the synchronous condition of possibility of the diachronous character of signification; such emptiness cannot be eliminated, since it secretly ‘props up’ any signification. The elementary function of the signifier is that of *representing the space of representation itself*: it opens up such space with its empty presence. This is what Freud intended to signal with the expression *Vorstellungrepräsentanz*, translated as “ideational representative” in the Standard Edition of his work. It is in this hidden or disavowed function that Lacan situates the subject proper. As such, the subject does not represent (the supposition of) knowledge – which we find in the Other qua “rubbish dump of the representatives representing the supposition of knowledge” (S9, 1961-1962, session 15 November 1961) – but rather it represents *representativeness itself*, embodying the very condition of possibility of symbolic representation.

By now it should be clear that Lacan departs from Ferdinand de Saussure’s conceptualization of the sign by detaching the signifier from the signified, and giving priority to the former. Crucially, it is at the level of the signifier that he locates the subject. However, which signifier? As it will be further clarified in the first Seminars of the 1960s, the signifier in question is the unary trait, which owing to its structural necessity precedes the formation of the subject. See for example the following statement from *Seminar X*: “There is no conceivable appearance of a subject as such than starting with the first introduction of a signifier and of the simplest signifier […] the unary trait. The unary trait is before the subject. In the beginning was the word means in the beginning there was the unary trait” (Lacan, S10, 1962-1963: 21). So here we already have, *in nuce*, the fundamental necessity yet also ambiguity of the unary trait, which later will be defined as master signifier: it creates meaning by halting the signifying chain, but at the same time it is the radically empty and meaningless (*insignifiante*) signifier which secures the identification of the subject of the unconscious (683, 1). A successor of Freud’s ego-ideal, the unary trait is for Lacan strictly necessary for the emergence of the subject of the unconscious. In this respect, the Other as “treasure trove of signifiers” (682, 5) is the locus where signifiers can be found and collected according to a simple logic of opposition, since no signifying chain is therein initially constituted.

Lacan (682, 5) emphasizes the dissymmetry between A (the Other) and *s*(A) (the signification emerging through the Other via the *point de capiton*, the mechanism whereby meaning is created out of infinite signifying possibilities or differentiations). These are the two points where the subjective vector intersects the signifying chain in the first graph. It is in the trajectory covering these two points that the subject effectively ‘submits to the signifier’ (682, 8), though this submission never completely works out. First, the subject encounters A as the “treasure trove of signifiers”: language in its disconnected, uncoordinated status, the locus where signifiers exist outside signification and yet, by simply being there, function as a break with the real (think, again, of the child’s utterly baffling first encounter with language). It is only through this self-distancing of the Real, effected through the encounter with signifiers, that the possibility of signification, and truth, begin to materialize. Then, we have the second encounter with the signifying vector in the form of what, as Lacan states, is not a locus (a place), but “a moment (a scansion, rather than a duration)” – in other words it embodies a different temporality (682, 6). This second encounter, which retains a retroactive value inasmuch as it casts meaning upon the first intersection with the signifying chain, corresponds to the precarious temporal point at which language begins to make sense; as such, it corresponds to “the punctuation, in which signification ends as a finished product” (682, 5).

The subject’s submission to the signifier, then, is completed when the subject encounters the signifier qua *point the capiton*, whose strength lies, paradoxically, in both *embodying* and *negating* the fundamental meaninglessness of the signifier itself as initially encountered in the first stage of the trajectory of subjectivation. What we should note here is Lacan’s conviction that meaning arises not from the connection between language and reality, but, strictly speaking, between language and itself – i.e. from the very articulation of the signifiers, which as such is not predicated upon the direct signification of external reality. The basic ambiguity of this operation can be described as follows: on the one hand, the existence of the subject depends on the encounter with the system of signifiers; on the other, such encounter will never return a fully consistent subjectivity, since the subject will never fully coincide with the Other. Ultimately, the movement between A and *s*(A) cannot be completed owing to its being profoundly tautological, i.e. founded on nothing other than itself (it has only itself as guarantee of its production of sense). And the subject inhabits this very inconsistency that underlies the process of subjectivation.

*Circular retroactivity*

Lacan at this stage adds a significant twist to his argument by claiming that the movement between the two points of interception is not only retroactive, but circular, for meaning is formed “in the circuit that goes from *s*(A) to A and back from A to *s*(A)” (682, 8). The emphasis on retroactivity is clearly aimed at stressing the profoundly illusory character of signification, which relies on the ruse whereby language erases the traces of its own ontological inconsistency, that is to say it closes the gap initially opened by the signifier itself when attempting to inscribe a break in the meaningless continuity of the real. However, while the movement from *s*(A) to A captures the birth of signification through the ‘necessary imposture’ of the concealment of lack, the second movement, from A to *s*(A), is equivalent to a sort of ‘sealing’ of such signification, insofar as with that movement the subject erases the traces of retroactivity and identifies with the (falsely) linear, chronological formation of meaning.

It is interesting, in the context of Lacan’s aforementioned critique of Hegelian dialectics, to observe how this circular movement effectively consists of a sort of ‘double illusion’, which can be seen to correspond to Hegel’s notion of ‘negation of negation’[[12]](#footnote-12) the third and much debated moment in the dialectic. While the second intersection – *s*(A) – is equivalent to a first negation of the status of the signifier (‘the signifier is/was not meaningless’), it is only with the attempt at squaring the circle that we get the ‘negation of negation’, which truly bolsters signification while creating an unconscious ‘surplus of sense.’ For this second negation does not merely assert that the signifier *was not meaningless*, but, rather, *it negates the very possibility of meaninglessness* by constructing the illusion of the signifier as always-already inserted in a consistent signifying chain. The second negation, i.e. the movement ‘back forward’ from A to *s*(A), is thus the truly generative moment in that it allows the subject to gain a distance from the traces of meaninglessness that still haunted the first negation (inasmuch as meaninglessness was still a predicate, albeit in a negative modality). However – and this is the key Hegelian issue at stake – the whole point of Lacan’s insistence on the double movement constitutive of signification is that it produces, ultimately, the opposite of what it seeks to produce: the very deadlock of signification; in other words, it creates the inconsistency that affects language, thwarts any communication, and ends up splitting the subject (since is the end result of the double intersection between subject and language).

To recapitulate: the subject first encounters language in its uncoordinated meaninglessness (A), and yet to be in a position to perceive such meaninglessness as antagonism or deadlock it has to assume the burden of signification, which is what takes place with the intervention of the *point de capiton* and consequent determination of *s*(A). Only at this stage does negativity truly surface (as with Hegel’s ‘negation of negation’): the attempt at squaring the circle by ‘sublating’ a given predicate (the meaninglessness of the signifier) opens up the abyssal inconsistency that the predicate alone could not represent.

In Lacan, then, the fundamental ambiguity concerning the rapport between ‘subject’ and ‘signification through the Other’ is of the dialectical kind: on the one hand, to form an identity the subject must submit to language; on the other hand: “[t]his squaring of the circle is nevertheless impossible, but solely because the subject constitutes himself only by subtracting himself from it and by decompleting it essentially, such that he must, at one and the same time, count himself here and function only as a lack here” (683, 3). What Lacan alludes to here is the paradox of ‘including oneself out’, which captures perfectly the dialectic at work in the formation of subjectivity. The subject of the unconscious, in other words, is the very lack or gap within signification that must be repressed or disavowed (included out) if signification is to emerge. The question of the simultaneity of the signifier qua lack and the endless shifting of signification is therefore confirmed here as central to Lacan’s theory of the subject. Put differently, the ‘passage through the Other’, with its potentially endless shifting of signification, is the necessary move that enables us not only to begin to form our subjectivity, but also to apprehend such subjectivity as deeply antagonized by the subject at its heart, which incarnates the impossibility to ‘square the circle’. This means that the structural consistency obtained at the subjective level via the detour through the Other is predicated upon the ultimate meaninglessness of the signifier. Although what we get back from the immersion in the battery of signifiers is the precious gift of signification, the key point underscored by Lacan is that such gift is strictly co-terminus with the signifier as foundational lack of signification, which materializes in the unconscious – thus confirming that the subject is at once included in and subtracted from the signifying chain itself.

*To feign feigning*

In this way Lacan effectively does away with any psychological notion of depth, since he tells us that the formation of our subjectivity, inclusive of its unconscious underside, takes place through a process of radical externalization, or self-ejection. It is from the Other that we acquire those significations that determine us insofar as they are, as it were, suspended upon the signifier, whose meaninglessness is constitutive of the process of signification while also making such process deeply inconsistent and destined to fail. The importance of the Other cannot be underestimated and is repeatedly highlighted by Lacan (683, 4-5), and particularly when he claims that it plays the role of “Truth’s witness” (683, 6). Why? Because what makes the Other the ultimate guarantor of signification is that *it redoubles the deception of language*, working as the fictional (mythical) framework where all available signifiers are supposed to be found. As such, the very fact that we speak is turned into the ultimate truthful horizon of the human condition.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Here, again, it is impossible not to notice the radical ambiguity of Lacan’s contention. While the Other is the lure that secures meaning, by the same token (i.e. precisely because it is a lure) it also captures the intrinsic instability of language. This ambiguity is inscribed in famous Lacanian propositions such as ‘there is no meta-language’ or ‘there is no Other of the Other.’ While asserting that there is no alterity sustaining our linguistic (fictional) essence effectively corroborates the truth about such essence, at the same time it makes it deeply inconsistent: it makes truth and inconsistency coincide. In other words, language is truthful in its radical inability to secure meanings. Yet another way of reading Lacan’s formulation regarding the Other is by saying that it frames us by framing the language that frames us; what is at stake in the functioning of the Other is therefore a double frame which turns the very act of framing enforced by language into self-framing. While alienating us, language is always-already self-alienated, immersed in its own intrinsic and therefore unsurpassable otherness. The Other works as a sort of detached background (akin to the eye of a witness) to the deceptiveness of language, without which the “the deceptiveness of Speech would be indistinguishable from the feint” (683, 6). This means that if language promotes and sustains the formation of subjectivity through alienation, at the same time there is no alternative to such alienation, inasmuch as language is rooted in the form of its otherness alone, the unwritten symbolic presupposition (witness) of language’s efficacy. Lacan’s point is that reality for us emerges as a result of the illusion (language qua fiction) being sustained only by its own fictional horizon. The feint, for humans, is always redoubled in the feigning of the feint, which is what makes the Symbolic the true horizon of our lives.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In brief, the Other’s function is, as Lacan puts it, to “feign feigning” (683, 6)[[15]](#footnote-15) – every deception at the level of the statement is a pretension of deception, since the signifier by definition lies at the level of the statement (or enunciated) but tells the truth insofar as this lie is always-already part of the symbolic lure designated by the Other. It is exactly through its role as that which redoubles deception into a pretense of deception that the Other functions as the locus of truth, for if there was only the first (linguistic) deception, then truth would be elsewhere This is why, as Lacan states, the signifier “requires another locus – the locus of the Other, the Other as witness, the witness who is Other than any of the partners – for the Speech borne by the signifier to be able to lie, that is, to posit itself as Truth” (684, 1). Again, it is only as a fiction inserted in a fictional structure that language reaches its function – in order to work, it has to rely on this Other qua fictional repository of all signifiers: “Truth draws its guarantee from somewhere other than the Reality it concerns: it draws it from Speech. Just as it is from Speech that Truth receives the mark that instates it in a fictional structure” (684, 2).

*The second graph of desire*

At this stage Lacan proceeds to introduce the second stage of the graph of desire (Figure 2), where the fish-hook vector of subjectivity, which indicated the passage from the subject of needs to the barred subject (Δ🡪*$*), is replaced by a vector (also negatively oriented) that signals the move from the barred subject to the ego-ideal as the first substantial identification of the subject (*$*🡪I(A)). As ego-ideal, the matheme I(A) stands at the point of symbolic identification outside myself, where I see myself from another’s point of view.[[16]](#footnote-16) Lacan specifies that what is described in this second graph “is a retroactive effect by which the subject, at each stage, becomes what he was (to be) [*était*] before that, and ‘he will have been’ is only announced in the future perfect tense” (684, 6). So we are dealing with the stadium of symbolic identification, which the subject catches a glimpse of by looking back upon itself after having arrived at *$* as described in the first graph.

Figure 2: Lacan’s Graphe 2

[INTRODUCE FIGURE ‘GRAPHE 2’ FROM ECRITS p. 684 ABOUT HERE]

The main novelty of the second graph therefore consists of the outline of the imaginary capture’ which supplements the founding role of language in the formation of subjectivity. It is important to note how, by 1960, the imaginary dimension, which had been Lacan’s central category in the 1930s and 1940s, comes in after the elementary symbolic capture (first graph), the latter being a theme that had concerned Lacan throughout the 1950s. Indeed, by the time of *Subversion* Lacan views the role of the Imaginary as secondary with respect to that of the Symbolic. The Imaginary is recast as a determination of the Symbolic; it plays its role in the formation of the ego only as a consequence of the initial, founding intervention of language qua untranscendable symbolic horizon. This is why apropos his second graph Lacan claims: “Here arises the ambiguity of a misrecognizing that is essential to knowing myself [*un méconnaître essentiel au me connaître*]” (684, 7). Effectively, the graph tells us that the split subject (*$*) looks back and all he can be sure of “is the anticipated image – which he had caught of himself in his mirror – coming to meet him” (684, 7).

Without rehearsing his theory of the mirror stage, which occupies the lower part of the second graph, Lacan reminds his audience that, insofar as it established the imaginary dimension of the initial formation of the ego, that theory was meant to debunk the psychoanalytic belief in the autonomy of the ego that at the time prevailed in American ego-psychology.[[17]](#footnote-17) For our purpose we shall recall that Lacan’s mirror theory is built on an inerasable ambiguity: while the mirror provides for the child an image of the precarious unity of its biological body – *i(a)*, that is to say the ideal ego as imaginary projection of the ego – one that is comforting by anticipating a sense of selfness, at the same time this unity is perceived as detached, other, external to the child’s body and its actual sensations. Apropos this reassuring yet failed or illusory identification between the body and its image, Lacan in his famous 1949 paper on the mirror stage had spoken about a “primordial Discord” (78) affecting the human being’s relation to itself as well as to nature. Hence the fundamental Lacanian assertion that any self-knowledge is accompanied, or is equivalent to, a misrecognition. Despite promoting identification, the ideal ego is the bearer of an essential misrecognition which will never be eliminated.

Lacan is particularly unequivocal about the (inevitable) narcissistic consequences of accepting the ideal ego as the first image of one’s consistent self: “what the subject finds in this altered image of his body is the paradigm of all the forms of resemblance that will cast a shade of hostility onto the world of objects, by projecting onto them the avatar of his narcissistic image, which, from the jubilation derived from encountering it in the mirror, becomes – in confronting his semblables – the outlet for his most intimate aggressiveness” (685, 2). In short, Lacan confirms Freud’s theory of aggressiveness as deriving from narcissistic (primary) identification – whether the aggression is directed against others or is turned against the ego itself. Because any relation to others is predicated upon imaginary identification, the subject is by definition at odds with others, prone to aggressive behavior; by the same token, the externalization of such aggressiveness provides evidence of the “primordial Discord” pertaining to the subject’s relation with his own reflected image. A whole range of affects, from jealousy to love, hatred, fear, pity and so on are thus strictly correlated to imaginary misrecognition.

All this leads Lacan to assert that the ego is “a function of mastery, a game of bearing, and constituted rivalry” (685, 3). It is, in other words, a battlefield where the signifying material garnered from the Other attempts to mask its own duplicity, which is none other than the duplicity of the signifier inasmuch as it does not correspond seamlessly to the signified. It is a mistake, according to Lacan, to assume that consciousness is “immanent in the ego”, for instead it functions transcendentally via the ego-ideal – I(A) – qua unary trait (684, 3-4). The imaginary contribution to the process of ego formation, then, consists of the mirror stage as indicated by the vector linking *i(a)* and *m* (for the French *moi*, the ego). It is important to underline that, at this stage in his teaching and in the development of the graph, Lacan claims that this imaginary vector is doubly inscribed in the dialectics of ego formation. Firstly, it subsists as a “short circuit” of the wider vector of identification that goes from *$* to I(A); secondly, and most importantly, it functions as a “return route” of the upper vector from A to *s*(A), thus crucially attempting to secure meaning for the subject *after* the subject’s first encounter with language: “This shows that the ego is only completed by being articulated not as the *I* of discourse, but as a metonymy of its signification” (685, 4).

As a short circuit which bypasses the encounter with the Other, in other words, the vector of mirror-like imaginary identification by definition fails. Instead, imaginary identification takes its cue from the “treasure trove of signifiers”. As exemplified correctly by Van Haute (2002: 92), one should think of an infant carried in front of a mirror by a parent who accompanies the infant’s imaginary identification with sentences such as “Isn’t John lovely?”, “What a big boy you are!”. Here we witness a clear conflation of symbolic and imaginary identificatory processes, which captures nicely the functioning of the imaginary in Lacan’s second graph. The other, in this case a parent, is not merely a semblable, a mirror-like image of the child; rather, the parent qua Other possesses the ability to satisfy the child’s needs and therefore retains a symbolic authority that is key to the achievement of the ego-ideal. It is indeed difficult to overestimate the importance of the influence of language even in primary identification: it is thanks to those uttered significations – whether real or imagined – that the infant is able to secure for him/herself a place in the symbolic order. For this reason, the verbal tense that defines the subject is, as Lacan emphasizes, the future perfect. Each one of us effectively “will have been”, in the sense that *we become what we were for others*, the formation of the traits of our subjectivity should be placed in strict correlation with what we heard from others about us before we had any consistent subjectivity at all.

What we should reiterate here is the centrality of I(A) qua unary trait as the signifier in the Other that secures the acquisition of meaning in the subject: “Take just one signifier as an insignia of this omnipotence, that is, of this wholly potential power, of this birth of possibility, and you have the unary trait which –filling in the invisible mark the subject receives from the signifier – alienates the subject in the first identification that forms the ego-ideal” (684, 4). The crucial signifier is, as we have seen, often insignificant, and yet it marks that part of the other (e.g. the parent) without which the other would not have any real influence on the subject. The child, for instance, tends to insist on a detail that allows him to identify with the other, and recognize the other as an authoritative source of signification. A child might want – or even insist on wearing – shoes that are “just like mummy’s” (or indeed mummy’s own shoes); another might start imitating a small, almost imperceptible gesture habitually made by the father. In short, subjectivation through the Other is necessarily tied to a process of *metonymical identification* which functions as a sort of anchoring point for the formation of subjectivity and the formulation of the subject’s desires. To put it in a somewhat oversimplified way, it is not enough to say that we are the products of our socio-historical circumstances. What we need to add is that, in so far as we are the flawed outcome of our encounter or intersection with the Other (A in graph 2), we anchor our being in some metonymical element (I(A) in graph 2) which opens up for us the possibility of signification.

Imaginary identification could be said to work as an attempt to compensate for the lack brought about by the subject’s encounter with language. Since the body is never ‘fully covered’ by language, the imaginary register intervenes to attempt to provide an answer (the image of its own unity) to the discord experienced in language. As Van Haute (2002: 98) notes, the imaginary vector runs counter to the symbolic one above it: “For in the imaginary register, the subject structurally *fails to recognize* the transcendence of its origin; it fails to recognize that it borrows its identity from the Other. It believes, rather, that it is master of itself, and it is blind to its alienation in the symbolic.” What ensues is the conflict between ego-ideal (the *trait unaire* as “symbolic introjection”; Thomas, 1997: 52) and the ideal ego (the totalizing outcome of imaginary identification). While, logically, alienation through the ego-ideal in the Other comes first, such symbolic process, at this stage, runs up against what it itself engenders, namely the potential for countless imaginary (immanent) identifications which risk overwhelming the alienating (transcendental) character of symbolization. This explains why, at the end of this process, we get to what Lacan indicates as I(A), namely identification through the ego-ideal in the Other. So when Lacan states that “the ego is only completed by being articulated not as the *I* of discourse, but as a metonymy of its signification” (685, 4), he refers to that metonymical identification with the ego-ideal which “provides a vantage point or a fixed point (even a *point de capiton*) outside the ego that gives the ego its unity” (Fink 2004: 118), and is therefore the decisive aspect of subjectivation.[[18]](#footnote-18)

We should not overlook how, at this stage, the process of subjectivation is only completed through imaginary identification. This is what Won Choi (2012) remarks in his critique of Žižek’s reading of the graph in question: “Although, or precisely because, the symbolic law arrives in advance and thus is experienced by the subject prematurely, it is not experienced in a symbolic way, but merely in an imaginary way. The genuine symbolic identification, which is exactly what is meant by the ‘secondary (Oedipal) identification,’ only comes after the child experiences the ‘castration complex,’ as Lacan later shows in his essay. The primary identification that precedes such a secondary Oedipal identification is, of course, the imaginary identification whose effect is twofold: the formation of the i(a) and that of the I(A). Both formations are the two results of the same process of the identification which is imaginary.” Although I(A) stands for symbolic identification, i.e. identification through language qua Other, at this stage it is still very much dependent on imaginary capture, namely i(a). The above-mentioned example used by Van Haute (the child in front of the mirror with parents talking about him) perfectly conveys this early dependence of the symbolic on imaginary identification: language qua I(A) works precisely because of the imaginary dimension that sustains it.

*Master and slave*

Before examining Lacan’s motto above, let us see how he tackles the Hegelian narrative of the struggle between Master and Slave, since this is no doubt one of the most significant objections Lacan makes to Hegel. As reiterated throughout the essay, Lacan understands Hegel’s ‘cunning of reason’ as the way in which self-consciousness manages to establish “its impersonal reign” (686, 1). It is the rigour of Hegel’s rationality that Lacan finds at fault – a rigour now attributed to the understanding that slavery is supposed to inaugurate, in Hegel, “the road to freedom” (686, 2). This, for Lacan, provides evidence that Hegel’s notion of self-consciousness as presented in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is deeply misleading. More precisely, what emerges in that concept is something “blatantly symptomatic”, i.e. “indicative of repression” (686, 6), which Lacan relates by way of analogy to the aggressiveness that typifies imaginary capture (686, 3). This allows us to infer that Lacan refers to Hegel here to address the central shortcoming of imaginary identification. What Hegel omits when telling the story of the struggle between Master and Slave against the background of death – a struggle which inaugurates the dialectics of self-consciousness – is that death itself is always-already symbolized. Hegel’s point is that the Master prevails due to his readiness to embrace the risk of death. However, Lacan adds, death is not supposed to take place, as that would bring the dialectic to a halt. As he states, “a pact always precedes violence before perpetuating it, and what I call the symbolic dominates the imaginary, allowing us to wonder whether or not murder really is the absolute Master. For it is not enough to decide the question on the basis of its effects: Death. We need to know which death, the one that life brings or the one that brings life” (686, 4-5).

The death involved in the Hegelian struggle between Master and Slave is clearly, according to Lacan, an imaginary one, and therefore it will not lead to the liberation or emancipation of the slave through the assumption of work (686, 7) – as much of the leftist readings of the dialectic tended to argue. In fact, “[t]here can be no more obvious lure than this, politically or psychologically. Jouissance comes easily to the slave, and it leaves work in serfdom” (686, 6) – that is to say: the more the slave works, the more he enjoys, and the more he remains a slave. As Mladen Dolar (2006: 132) has put it: “it is the slave’s enjoyment that comes surprisingly easily, and which presents an obstacle to the slave’s liberation. […] Indeed, enjoyment appears as the one thing that one can never be rid of. It is recalcitrant to negation, and its negation produces a surplus.” Lacan’s point, then, is that the struggle between Master and Slave takes place against the disavowed background of a symbolic pact that has always-already been stipulated between the two actors. This is one way of claiming that, within Hegel’s dialectical logic of self-consciousness, the Symbolic precedes the Imaginary and yet it is not recognised. In this respect, the slave, Lacan argues, situates himself on the side of the Other, simply waiting for something to happen, “thus eliminating all risk to himself – especially the risk of a joust – in a ‘self-consciousness’ for which death is but a joke” (687, 1).

Lacan adds further criticism by observing how the use of the cunning of reason is typical of the obsessive’s forma mentis, which is particularly ripe among the intelligentsia (686, 7). In this respect, both philosophy and psychology, for Lacan, continue to neglect “the enigmatic traumas” of the Freudian discovery, having instead opted to embrace “a practice which has degenerated into an educative banality that is no longer even redeemed by its laziness” (687, 3). What we have here is another hint at that critical assessment of the University discourse that Lacan will unleash a few years later. The obsessive banality of modern education, which has eliminated the last vestiges of potential self-sabotaging - which Lacan here identifies in “laziness” (687, 3) and “humor” (687, 5) - already marks the advent of a new form of mastery based on the hyper-valorization of life itself, inclusive of its “cultural / educational” side, which Lacan refers to as “the contraband flag of ‘culturalism’” (688, 4). The “Freudian discovery” (687, 4), on the other hand, allows him to place significant emphasis on the dimension of a recalcitrant surplus of sense that by definition rejects being turned into a value – that is to say, it resists what Lacan takes to be the Hegelian ‘cunning of reason’.

*The defiles of the signifier*

Once again, however, we need to stress how it is in its linguistic composition that the unconscious defies valorization, thus rejecting the principle of equivalence. As it emerges at different points in *Subversion*, Lacan firmly opposes a transcendentalization of the unconscious, its being imagined, seductively, romantically even, as the abyssal and ineffable ‘stuff’ of some mysterious sensory experience. Instead, he detects in Freud clear indications substantiating the fact that the unconscious belongs to an immanent plane, while preserving there its radical alienness. It is for this reason that Lacan is constantly at pains to reassert the centrality of linguistic structures in establishing the division of the subject, for instance by claiming, against psychology, that need (*besoin*), demand (*demande*) and desire (*désir*) all pass through “the defiles of the signifier” (687, 7): it is by submitting to the signifier that they come to represent the irredeemable contradiction embodied by the unconscious (687, 6).

Needs, Lacan states, constantly pass over into the diversified register of desire, a process that takes place not only through the contingency of traumas, but most importantly thanks to the intervention of linguistic structures (687, 8-9). Lacan mentions “the somatic ananke of man’s inability to move” to stress that if the fate (ananke) of the human being at birth is its inability to move independently, or be self-sufficient, this does not allow anyone to ignore that “this dependence is maintained by a universe of language” (687, 8). By encountering language needs are, as it were, transubstantiated, inasmuch as they are filtered through networks of cultural references which uproot, multiply, diversify them and most crucially elevate them beyond matters of biological functionality (687, 9). And as soon as the signifier allows the dimension of desire to emerge, thus forcing the subject out of its primitive biologism, frustration also sets in, for language institutes a margin beyond the biological body that by definition alienates the subject, precluding forever the possibility of complete satisfaction through biological gratification alone. In Fink’s words (2004: 118-19): “A young bear is given honey to eat by its mother, gorges itself, and lies down for a nap, sated. We receive the blanket we demand from our mother and then dream about cars and dolls and world domination. For us there is always something more to be desired.”

Although the first two graphs of desire do not deal directly with desire as such, this is because Lacan wants first to clarify the extent to which the subject is dependent on the signifier, and then how desire itself is borne out of this dependence. Desire is therefore not merely submitted to, and dependent upon, the ebb and flow of historical contingency, the supposedly natural development of humanity. Its force, as well as its actual definition, derives rather from its being necessarily subjected to jarring symbolic structures. Lacan refers to “moralists”, “theologians” and, more recently, “Sartre – desire, a useless passion” (687, 8), as part of a long list of thinkers who have understood the paradoxical and precarious status of desire in its dependence on language. When he mentions Sartre, he paraphrases a well-known phrase from *Being and Nothingness*, first published in 1943: “Man, a useless passion” (Sartre, 1943/1992: 784). Lacan insists that there is no such thing as a natural or spontaneous desire, since all desires acquire their status via the signifier – something which Freud understood when he admitted that “sexuality had to bear the mark of some hardly natural flaw” (688, 1).

*Need, demand, desire*

Even the Oedipus myth for Lacan signifies nothing but the centrality of language in matters of sexual conflict. For if the father in this myth is in fact “the dead father” (688, 3), as Freud had attempted to demonstrate, Lacan emphasizes how this status should be seen in symbolic terms. He emphasizes this by introducing the term “Name-of-the-father” (688, 3), which is meant to draw attention to the symbolic metaphor the theme of the dead father establishes. Otherness itself is nothing but the place of the signifier: “Let us begin with the conception of the Other as the locus of the signifier. No authoritative statement has any other guarantee here than its very enunciation, since it would be pointless for the statement to seek it in another signifier, which could in no way appear outside that locus” (688, 7). This preludes to and clarifies Lacan’s well-known motto according to which “there is no metalanguage that can be spoken, or, more aphoristically, […] there is no Other of the Other” (688, 7). The law itself owes its authority to its enunciation alone – there is no moral or theological grounding principle that the law might successfully appeal to; yet “the Law itself is not an impostor, nor is he who authorizes his actions on its basis” (688, 8).

At this stage in the discussion, Lacan introduces the figure of the Mother as “the subject who is led to really occupy the place of the Other” (688, 9), despite the Father’s attempt at representing the authority of the law. This in turn allows Lacan to develop his central definition of desire as the desire of the Other (689, 3), which, since the Other is a conflicted battleground, takes on multiple meanings. Lacan introduces his definition of desire as what “begins to take shape in the margin in which demand rips away from need, this margin being the one that demand – whose appeal can be unconditioned only with respect to the Other – opens up in the guise of the possible gap need may give rise to here, because it has no universal satisfaction (this is called ‘anxiety’)” (689, 5). Let us try to unpack this complex statement. Firstly, we must say that, unlike what happens with animals, human needs for Lacan can only be met or answered by another human being, or group of them. Secondly, demands arise when the infant realizes that beyond the satisfaction of bodily needs, he/she requires also the other’s love or affection. It is when the child realizes that demands have no universal satisfaction – i.e. when demand emerges out of need as something different from it, in that it can never be fully satisfied – that desire makes its appearance. Let us say that first a child needs food qua biological function, and is appeased when the other provides it; then, the child begins to demand love (a different kind of food) from this other, but realizes that such demand is problematic since it never achieves full satisfaction; it is at this stage that desire develops out of demand’s difference from need.

The mother’s breast, for instance, provides satisfaction of the child’s need (when he/she is hungry), but it is also an object through which the child measures the (m)other’s readiness to respond to his/her demand for affection: in this sense, the breast becomes an object that signifies the child’s demand for the (m)other’s unconditional love, that is to say for recognition. It is at this stage that symbolic structures start playing a part in the child’s development, in that they radically alter the significance of the object (the breast) whose initial function was ‘merely’ that of satisfying a physiological need. For as soon as the breast becomes the catalyst of the subject’s demand for love, it begins to be uprooted from its functional role in order to be inscribed into a symbolic structure where its meaning is decided metonymically, i.e. by the shifting of the signifier that represents it. This means that suddenly the breast is inserted in a signifying chain – in the flow of language – whose chief feature, however, is that it lacks the signifier that would square the circle, i.e. guarantee the full satisfaction of the demand for love. This is precisely when desire emerges out of the jarring of need and demand. By ripping away from need via the alienating encounter with the signifier, demand opens up the abyssal dimension of lack, which desire strives (in vain) to fill through the endless shifting and diversification of the object itself.

*From anxiety to desire*

Things here become more interesting, but also considerably more complicated. The unconditional nature of the demand that develops out of need’s encounter with symbolic structures, Lacan says, also brings in anxiety, which, in terms of the child’s awareness, implies being exposed to the enigmatic desire of the first other, who is therefore perceived as omnipotent. Since in the eyes of the child the (m)other is the bearer of a thoroughly enigmatic and capricious will, the child’s automatic reply to this enigma (‘what does she want, *especially* from me?’) is to imagine that he/she is the missing object of the (m)other’s desire. The risk involved in this identification is particularly high, namely that of reducing the child to being a mere object whose function is to satisfy the mother’s desire.

This ‘becoming the object of the other’s desire’ is precisely what qualifies Lacan’s understanding of anxiety as that which arises out of demand’s splitting off from need. And desire is what, normally, is produced by this deadlock, namely the attempt to gentrify or diffuse the situation whereby I posit myself as the object that fills in the lack in the other. Let us take the following example: a child who insistently demands sweets is not simply trying to satisfy a need; more than that, he/she articulates a somewhat absolute demand that, as such, exposes the child to the threat of anxiety. Why? Because what resonates in that unwavering request is the unconditional form of demand, which, by presupposing the omnipotence of an other who is supposed to satisfy the demand, objectifies the child in relation to that other. Thus, by asking insistently for the same object the child effectively gives him/herself up to the other. As such, this persistence speaks for the child’s failure to articulate the logic of desire, which is built on the fantasy of an autonomous subjective position vis-à-vis the proliferation of different objects.

The child, then, places plenty of expectation on the other, including what Lacan calls its “phantom of Omnipotence” (689, 5). This point is worth pondering: the fantasy of omnipotence is not on the side of the uncoordinated child, as Freud had surmised, but on the side of the other as seen with the eyes of the child. It is precisely from this fantasy that arises “the necessity that the Other be bridled by the Law” (689, 5). The obvious case in point here are Freud’s two fathers as described in *Totem and Taboo*: the *Urvater*, who enjoys fantasmatic status as the omnipotent one, and the father as representative of the law, who intervenes to ‘bridle’ his own excess. Desire, Lacan tells us, “reverses the unconditional nature of the demand for love, in which the subject remains in subjection to the Other, and raises it to the power of absolute condition (in which ‘absolute’ also implies ‘detachment’)” (689, 6). Given the Latin root of ‘absolute’ (*absolvere*, i.e. ‘to free’), Lacan suggests that the acquisition of desire as the untranscendable condition of being human is predicated upon the detachment from the unconditional, anxiety-laden dimension of demand (689, 7). Put differently, by articulating desires the child is able to find a way out of that ‘desperate’ demand for the (m)other’s love which, inevitably, kept him/her at the mercy of the mother’s enigmatic and unfathomable whim. And the law that brings in desire is language itself, the signifier. More precisely, the signifier introduces that lack (the rift that disarticulates the unconditionality of demand) which, in turn, gives the subject a chance to develop a desiring relationship vis-à-vis the other. Thus, the order of the law coincides with the order of language, in as much as language symbolizes the lack already experienced at the level of the Imaginary (demand), thereby gentrifying it, turning it into something that can potentially be filled by metonymically different objects.

Lacan mentions, in passing, that one of the first manifestations of the object of desire is what has been identified by British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicot as the “transitional object” (for instance, “the shred of blanket or beloved shard the child’s lips or hands never stop touching”, 689, 7), whose role is to mediate between a subject still in the thralls of the (m)other and the outer world of objects. The transitional object, in other words, provides some much-needed respite from the threat of anxiety, inasmuch as it embodies an other who is not the (m)other qua terminus for unconditional demand for love. Insofar as it emerges through a process of metaphorization (i.e. of signification) the transitional object for Lacan is emblematic of the child’s encounter with the symbolic order, which on the one hand opens up the possibility of freeing oneself from the clutches of demand, but on the other delivers the subject to the infinite sliding of the signifier – and therefore to the frustration that typifies desire. The outcome of this process of detachment from the mother as first “representative of representation” (Freud’s *Vorstellungrepräsentanz*), i.e. the one who provides the very framework for the possibility of representation (meaning), is that we end up with desire, whose roots are off-limits as they belong in the unconscious (689, 8).

The emancipation from demand, then, is achieved through desire, whose cause remains radically excluded from the subject’s knowledge. While the object of desire can be isolated and, strictly speaking, known, the cause of such desire remains foreclosed.[[19]](#footnote-19) In other words, while the object of one’s desire can be a positive and identifiable object, the cause of that desire is the very ‘thing’ the object masks, namely the lack embodied by the unconscious in its radical alterity. In this sense, Winnicot’s transitional object and Lacan’s *objet a* can be seen to fulfill the same function, that of delivering the subject from the unconditionality of demand. At this point, having asserted how desire characterizes itself by its attachment to an object-cause that remains unconscious, Lacan proceeds to explain, in line with the driving emphasis of the essay, that such unconscious roots of desire do not actually dwell within us, buy concern the Other – the Other in its utterly enigmatic status.

*Desire is the other’s desire*

Lacan’s famous maxim about desire is as follows: “le désir de l’homme est le désir de l’Autre”, “man’s desire is the desire of the Other” (690, 2). The ambiguity of this definition rests with the interpretation of the French preposition *de* (of) in *de l‘Autre*. To start with, as an “objective determination” (690, 1) such preposition indicates that desire has to do with the otherness, that is to say the enigma, in/of the Other. This is the most intuitive and to an extent commonplace understanding of desire as something which is triggered by what the subject finds elusive and therefore fascinating in the Other. However, this also amounts to a superficial reading which needs to be taken into a different direction if we are to grasp the actual reflexivity of desire, the fact that it does not point to something innate but rather acquired. Lacan quickly adds that the preposition *de* should also be understood as a “subjective determination” (690, 2) meaning ‘possessed by the Other’, from which it derives that desire takes on a reflexive significance charged with ambiguity. This means that far from being natural, our desires are alien to us, inasmuch as they are borne out of our necessary encounter with the symbolic order that splits us by creating a lack “embodied” by the unconscious. Our desires, then, are testament to the mark that the Other leaves on us in the form of a division into conscious and unconscious knowledge. And it is precisely the invasion of the ‘alien’ signifiers forming the unconscious which, ultimately, determines our desires and therefore shapes our existence, unbeknownst to us. The desires rooted in the radically other signifying chain of the unconscious follow a path that, by definition, has no pre-established object, in the sense that the ever-shifting objects of desire are so many (infinite) answers to the unbridgeable rift inscribed in subjectivity by the signifier.

Firstly, then, *le désir de l’homme est le désir de l’Autre* means that our desire is a desire for the recognition of the Other. As we have seen, the terminus I(A) in the second graph stands for our identification with the gaze of an other, the ego-ideal, from which we see and recognize ourselves. This means that what we desire is to be acknowledged by a signifier outside ourselves; we desire to be desired. At this level, desire is the first embodiment of the rift inscribed in demand and, to an extent, overlaps with the latter; desire emerges from the deadlock of the demand for unconditional love. Secondly – and it is here that we can gauge the originality of Lacan’s position – desire as the other’s desire also signifies a ‘second-hand’ desire, a ‘desired desire’: ours is always-already the desire that belongs to/in the Other. Put simply, we desire what (we suppose) the Other desires, i.e. we learn to desire through the Other. This reading adds a new layer of complexity to the initial interpretation of *de* as an “objective determination”: when we desire the other in its fascinating elusiveness we in fact desire what the Other desires. As Lacan (1967/2008: 38) will put it in a lecture: “Desire full stop is the desire of the Other. Which basically means that we are always asking the Other what he desires.” It can therefore be seen how Lacan strips the concept of desire of its supposed authenticity, laying bare the fact that what we believe to be the most intimate and genuine locus of our subjectivity is in fact borrowed from the Other, something that was already out there even before we came into the world. Also intended as a question (‘What does the Other want (from me)?’), the subject’s desire is violently deprived of its supposed authenticity.

*Chè vuoi?*

For this reason Lacan claims that “the Other’s question […] which takes some such form as ‘Chè vuoi?,’ ‘What do you want?,’ is the question that best leads the subject to the path of his own desire” (690, 3). Lacan takes the phrase from the eighteenth-century novel *Le diable amoureux* (The Devil in Love, 1772), by Jacques Cazotte, and uses it for the first time in Seminar IV, where it is meant exactly as in Cazotte’s novel, namely as a question that the Other (the Devil) asks of me. In Seminar VI, however, Lacan turns around the direction of the question, which now, as in the case of *Subversion*, is posed to the Other (see also: Pluth, 2007: 69-72). Lacan’s point is that the child who is asked what he/she wants, unconsciously tends to answer such question by questioning the asker, i.e. attempting to answer the following question: ‘what does this person who is interrogating my desire actually want?’; or, more precisely: ‘what can I give this person to satisfy her desire to know what I want?’ Thus, the child’s desire is moulded on the other’s desire (690, 3). And the point is that only through this somewhat perverse loop does the subject join the path of his/her desire.

What is certain is that desire will continue to frustrate the subject, since no ultimate answer to the question *Chè vuoi?* can ever be given. In fantasy, the child attempts to find this answer, but what resonates in every such fantasy (until the end of one’s life) is nothing other than its own inadequacy, its impossibility to fill the gap opened by desire. Fantasy then seeks to establish a degree of determinacy for the utterly enigmatic character of desire as the other’s desire. This is undoubtedly a radical Lacanian contribution to the definition of subjectivity, since it posits the latter as a field whose inconsistency is to be conceived in strict dialectical correlation with the socio-symbolic universe it inhabits. Desire as such does not lead us to assert the singularity of our subjective position vis-à-vis the world; quite on the contrary, it tells us that the world we inhabit possesses the keys to our subjectivity. This awareness should bring the ego to confront its own constitutive dislocation – the fact that the significations it purports are not unique and exclusive, but are instead caught in a mechanism that defines what the Other already is/wants.

There is also a third way of conceptualizing the subjective meaning of Lacan’s maxim on desire, one that branches off from the second and leads us to the later ‘Lacan of the Real’, effectively returning us to the initial ‘objective determination’ of desire. According to this third reading, desiring the other’s desire also means being fascinated not so much by the elusiveness of the other (my first interpretation of Lacan’s maxim) but by the other’s *jouissance*. The objective component here is preserved alongside the subjective, since we have an object of desire (*jouissance*, an enigmatic tension that attracts us) which is at the same time the substance of the other’s desire, the “stuff” of his/her subjectivity. We can therefore list four readings of Lacan’s motto:

1. I desire the other (insofar as it embodies otherness to me).

2. I desire to be desired (recognized) by the other.

3. I desire what the other desires.

4. I desire the very fascinating/disturbing desirousness (*jouissance*) that I detect in the other.

In each of these definitions the other can be written with either a lower case “o” (e.g. another person) and with the capital “O” (the big Other, the network of unwritten significations that sustains our being in the world). What of course should be taken into consideration is that “o” is always contained within “O”: the otherness of our counterparts or semblables in the world is by definition, when desire is at stake, dependent on its relation with the big Other.

*The third graph of desire*

Lacan’s further developed graph of desire (Graph 3), then, culminates with the question “Chè vuoi?”, which emerges out of the Other and leads to the formula of fantasy that sustains the precarious consistency of subjectivity: *$*◊*a* (Figure 3). As Lacan underscores (690, 4), the very curvature of the upper part of the graph, emerging from the place of the Other, deliberately recalls the shape of a question mark.

Figure 3: Lacan’s Graphe 3

[INTRODUCE FIGURE ‘GRAPHE 3’ FROM ECRITS p. 690 ABOUT HERE]

Fantasy (*$*◊*a*), as we have seen, is the answer to the (unconscious) desire of the Other – the answer the subject formulates when faced by the lack experienced through the other’s desire (the “chè vuoi?” intended as “what does he/she want from me?”). In this sense, as Lacan will put it in his unpublished *Seminar XIV* (*The Logic of Fantasy*, 1966-1967, session 16 November 1966), fantasy is an *axiom*, that is to say a self-evident and uncontestable formation whose role is to attempt to fill such lack. It is in relation to fantasy that Lacan elaborates on the constitutive ambiguity of what we desire. True, the subject is left in an alienated position, but he has a chance “to butt up against the question of his essence” (690, 6). This means that if misrecognition is the bread and butter of subjectivity, at the same time the subject “may not misrecognise that what he desires presents itself to him as what he does not want” (690, 6 - 691, 1). If Lacan tells us that, in its essence, the subject desires what he/she does not want, this is not only because the desired object is always-already what the Other wants, but because, to put it plainly, the object-cause of desire is ultimately a lack; or, to use Lacan’s words, “a form assumed by negation in which misrecognition is inserted in a very odd way, the misrecognition, of which he himself is unaware, by which he transfers the permanence of his desire to an ego that is nevertheless obviously intermittent, and inversely, protects himself from his desire by attributing to it these very intermittences” (691, 1). To an attentive reading, this convoluted sentence summarizes the undecidable nature of the relation between subject and desire, insofar as it is qualified by the presence/absence of *objet a* (rendered simply as *a* in Lacan’s algebra). The object-cause of desire is precisely the “form assumed by negation” of which Lacan speaks. As a materialization of the lack that sustains desire, this object embodies “in a very odd way” the misrecognition that sustains desire and, by the same token, the ego – despite the fact that, owing to the negativity lurking within such object, the ego itself is constantly negotiating the “intermittences” (the inconsistencies or contradictions) that characterize the functioning of desire.

*The subversion of the subject*

We can now appreciate how, in finalizing his graph of desire, Lacan introduces the possibility of the *subversion of the subject*. This possibility has to do with situating within the formula of fantasy, which is at the cusp of the graph of desire, “the moment of a fading or eclipse of the subject – which is closely tied to the *Spaltung* or splitting he undergoes due to his subordination to the signifier – to the condition of an object” (691, 3). Here we have a chance to grasp the Lacanian lesson concerning the meaning of subversion: the whole trajectory that charts the subject’s necessary “subordination to the signifier” (691, 3) ends up with a formula that, if on the one hand confirms that the subject is alienated in the Other’s desire (and, in this sense, fantasy is nothing but a coping mechanism, an axiomatic way to deal with such alienation), it also suggests that it is only by radicalizing alienation that subversion might ensue. Paradoxically, then, the only way for the subject to subvert its own alienation is by giving in completely to it, i.e. by grasping itself as a metonymy of lack, as *objet a* in its most radical meaning (a “form assumed by negation”). The “fading of the subject” – it collapsing into *objet a* – of which Lacan speaks in relation to subversion, then, is predicated upon the subject’s full submission to the signifier, inasmuch as such operation conveys to the subject that it has no content of its own. Subjective subversion, for Lacan, consists of this radicalization of alienation, and not in its overcoming through a supposedly dis-alienating process of subjective identification. All this, Lacan adds, is symbolized by the algorithm of fantasy: “The graph shows that desire adjusts to fantasy […] but the graph also shows the inversion of the misrecognitions on which the one and the other are based, respectively” (691, 6), which confirms that fantasy also leads us to the subject of the unconscious qua *objet a* (where misrecognition is inverted). Having established a link with the subject of the unconscious, Lacan can now fully engage with it by calling the drive into question.

*The complete graph of desire*

Lacan therefore completes his graph by adding the drive and its formula, *$*◊D (Figure 4). Significantly, the drive is defined in relation to demand (D) in a formula highlighting the fading of the subject (*$*) in relation to a demand that also gives way, “except that the cut remains [...] in what distinguishes the drive from the organic function it inhabits” (692, 2). The drive is, in other words, a demand where the subject fades, and in so doing makes room for a ‘different demand’, one characterized only by the cut as represented in Freud’s erogenous zones. Through the drive, then, we can make sense of the subject of the unconscious inasmuch as it is designated by a statement the subject knows nothing about: “Hence the concept of the drive, in which the subject is designated on the basis of a pinpointing that is organic, oral, anal, and so on, which satisfies the requirement that the more he speaks, the further he is from speaking” (692, 1). Freud had already established that the drive, which is partial, belongs to the body and seeks satisfaction by way of connecting with its various objects (the breast for the oral drive, feces for the anal drive, and so on). More precisely, the drive captures a limit-position situated between the psychic and the somatic. Starting from the Freudian drive, Lacan maintains that the drive’s dependence on an organic function does not make it less symbolic, less tied to linguistic structures. In fact, drives isolate the erogenous zones by subtracting them from their sheer metabolic function and investing them with symbolic significations. For example, it is abundantly clear that, apart from providing an immediately pleasurable experience to the child who sucks a dummy or his thumb, the mouth is also associated by the infant to a regulatory relation with the other which involves nourishment, making certain noises, speech, etc. In other words, Lacan claims that the significance of the erogenous zones where the drives are situated derives from the subject’s link with the Other, in so far as this Other is constituted by signifiers. Hence the intrinsic relation of drive and demand: “The drive is what becomes of demand when the subject vanishes from it. It goes without saying that demand also disappears, except that the cut remains” (692, 2). It is not surprising, then, that in the graph’s final version the drive qua signifying chain giving shape to the unconscious desire of a subject is located right above, and connected with, the Other as the “treasure trove” of signifiers. Significantly, this connection is provided by desire, which is now doubly articulated since it also leads, as we have seen, to the fantasy.

Figure 4: Lacan’s complete Graphe

[INTRODUCE FIGURE ‘COMPLETE GRAPHE’ FROM ECRITS p. 692 ABOUT HERE]

There is, therefore, a homology between the body’s erogenous zones and the Other’s signifiers, one which is instituted on the notion of ‘cut’: on the one hand, all the erogenous zones present themselves with “the anatomical characteristic of a margin or border: the lips, ‘the enclosure of the teeth’, the rim of the anus, the penile groove, the vagina, and the slid formed by the eyelids, not to mention the hollow of the ear” (692, 3); on the other hand, the signifier cuts into the body so as to extract the drives from their privileged places of anatomical inscription.[[20]](#footnote-20) The result of the encounter between the signifier and the body is inevitably one which sees the paradoxical emergence of meaning upon a foundational lack of meaning. The subject ‘lost’ among signifiers, i.e. irredeemably split by them (*$*), ultimately coincides with the missing cause of desire insofar as this corresponds to *objet a*, which concretely represents lack in the psychic economy.

As we have seen, the two terms are mediated by fantasy, which, precisely by providing a filling connection between the two lacks, is by definition a precarious and fragile, and yet axiomatic, psychic formation. To give an example, words fail us when we try to describe the reason for our passionate attachment to a given person or cause: we are, literally, lost between two or more signifiers, which never fully render the reason for our attachment. At the same time, the cause of such attachment materializes through concrete elements in the object which have a hold on us beyond our awareness. Thus, while our love cannot be fully expressed in words (*$*), at the same time it is inexplicably embodied by seemingly irrelevant ‘objective’ features (*a*) in the other – such as the specific way of looking, smiling, certain meaningless gestures, and so on *ad infinitum*. Crucially, the two lacks (subjective and objective) find a way of connecting through fantasy, which fills their radical elusiveness with a plethora of plausible and in principle reassuring imaginary contents. Thus, when I fantasise about a person I do so by providing an imaginary answer to the lack that triggers my affection in the first place – which is why the vector of desire that reaches the fantasy while avoiding the drive leads us back downward toward s(A) and eventually I(A). In other words, it provides a symbolic meaning, whereas by moving upward it encounters the impossibility of providing a meaning. Whatever the direction taken by the vector of desire, Lacan makes it clear that the fantasy as such always effects a substantial gentrification of the missing cause of desire thereby obscuring the subject’s inability to justify it, while *a* should be thought as the ‘vanishing mediator’ between fantasy and lack. As the fishhook vector of subjectivity indicates, *a* materializes as a remainder of the failed process of signification through the Other, which allows one to desire and consequently achieve subjective status.

*The subject as object of the drive*

Insofar as *a* ultimately captures the inconsistency of the desiring subject, Lacan’s point here is that the subject encounters itself qua *$* precisely as the meaningless leftover (*a*) of the process of subjectivation.[[21]](#footnote-21) In drive, then, the conscious subject vanishes, and in this vanishing we are given evidence of the fact that the drive has mobilized the signifier. This is confirmed if we consider that the various objects of the drive, such as the gaze (which in Lacan enjoys a privileged status) “have no specular image, in other words, no alterity. This is what allows them to be the ‘stuff’ or, better put, the lining – without, nevertheless, being the flipside – of the very subject people take to be the subject of consciousness” (693, 2). Fantasy, then, connects with *a* precisely by ‘imaginizing’ what is by definition not of the imaginary order, since *objet a*, despite being an object, has no specular image. Think, for instance, of the dialectics inaugurated by the Lacanian gaze as the proverbially invisible pair of eyes which, despite being unlocatable, are always-already ‘on us’, potentially looking at us. Through this dialectic Lacan claims that we see things, and are thus able to establish meaningful relations with them, precisely because there is always a point in our visual field that we cannot see, which, for this very reason, embodies the gaze as object of the scopic drive. The subject of the unconscious is therefore captured by the drive insofar as it is the object of the drive itself. And for this reason the subject qua object of the drive is also exposed to the threat of anxiety. Lacan recurs to a vivid exemplification of such correspondence: “Ask someone with writer’s block about the anxiety he experiences and he will tell you who the turd *is* in his fantasy” (693, 2). The anxiety that seizes someone with writer’s block has to do with perceiving oneself as, literally, the (turd-like) object of the Other’s whim. Put differently, it is rooted in the neurotic’s belief in the existence of the Other, whose invisible gaze, and associated enjoyment, makes writing impossible insofar as, vis-à-vis such gaze, any written word becomes the source of an unbearable sense of guilt. Anxiety, however, does not lie, since the subject is nothing other than the partial object of the drive inasmuch as it “cannot be grasped in the mirror” (693, 3): a negative concretion that defies representation. For this reason Lacan claims that the subject of the unconscious is not “the flip side” (693, 2) of the subject of consciousness: it is, rather, radically eccentric with regard to consciousness, a non-subsumable point of ontological indeterminacy which at once sets up and disrupts consciousness.

To simplify things a little: what Lacan effectively tells us in the final part of his text is that the drive addresses the same deadlock inherent to desire; yet, differently from desire, it has a chance to bring about ‘the object which is the subject of the unconscious’ – it is capable, in other words, to cause the subversion of the subject. As Fink (2004: 124) puts it, in the upper part of the complete graph Lacan attempts to figure out “what there is that goes beyond structure in human beings, what goes beyond the automatic functioning of the signifying order.” While desire is mediated by the ambiguity of *chè vuoi?*, which signals an impasse at least partially recuperated by fantasy, drive goes a step further by taking us directly to S(A), the “signifier of a lack in the Other” (693, 4) that simultaneously captures the subject of the unconscious and is situated next to *jouissance* as precisely that which disrupts the automatic functioning of the signifying order. While it is true, if we look at Lacan’s graph, that desire coupled with fantasy might encroach upon S(A), Lacan’s topology makes it clear that desire can also join the path of the drive thereby directly leading the subject to S(A). Just like with desire, then, with drive the Other is called upon to answer for the value of the meanings it holds (the “treasure trove of signifiers”); the difference, however, is that it has to do so “with the signifiers constitutive of the upper chain – in other words, in terms of the drive” (693, 4). Desire and drive offer two significantly different pathways concerning the outcome of the neurotic connection between subject and Other. While with desire the Other is generally able to safeguard its consistency *vis-à-vis* the neurotic, under the heavy blows of drive it is more likely to reveal its foundational lack, which is aptly defined by Lacan with the maxim “there is no Other of the Other” (693, 5).

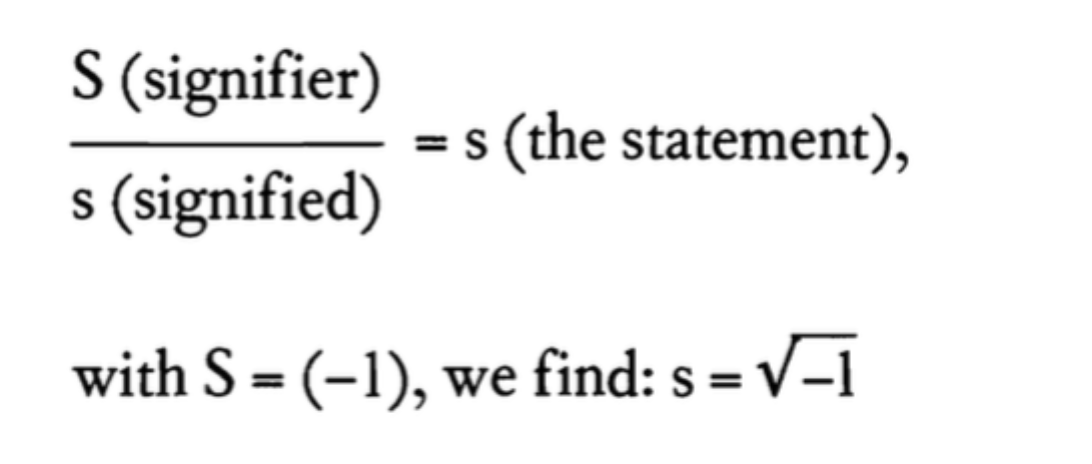
*From S(A) to jouissance…*

The key signifier S(A) – the signifier of what is lacking in the Other – potentially annuls signification while at the same time grounding it, since, as Bruce Fink (2004: 125) has it, “what is *not* included in the Other as the collection or set of all signifiers is that which grounds the very functioning of signifiers.” As such, it represents the decisive element in Lacanian psychoanalysis. So much so that Lacan assigns to it a position homologous to that of “the dead Father in the Freudian myth” – that is to say, of what he had renamed the Name-of-the-Father. To emphasize the foundational role of S(A), Lacan adds: “No doubt a corpse is a signifier, but Moses’ tomb is as empty for Freud as Christ’s was for Hegel” (693, 7). Lacan’s implication is that for both Freud and Hegel the founding signifiers of religion are signifiers of lack rather than of some fullness. It is for this reason, however, that S(A), although “a characteristic of truth’s Faithfulness”, is not “the last word worth giving in answer to the question, ‘What does the Other want from me?’” (693, 5). Rather, as the completed graph specifies, S(A)announces castration to be intended as the impossibility of full / absolute *jouissance*, in turn represented by the phallus.

To help us orient ourselves in the jungle of homologies embodied by S(A), Lacan specifies that the signifier at stake in this matheme is rendered by the following maxim: “a signifier is what represents the subject to another signifier” (694, 1). This maxim conjoins signifier and subject by suggesting that the latter has no way of being represented by a signifier alone, since its existence is dependent on the endless metonymical displacement of one signifier by another. The subject is located ‘in between signifiers’, and in this respect S(A) stands for the indeterminacy of the subject who has to pass through the Other. No signifier in the Other can establish once and for all the meaning of the subject; for this reason the subject is defined by a lack of meaning which corresponds to the endless shifting of its desire from one signifier to the next. As anticipated in the above quotation from Fink, the paradox of the emergence of an ever shifting signification from the lack in the Other – the ever-deferred space in between signifiers – is rendered by Lacan when he points out that one of the signifiers in the Other must be excluded for meaning to arise: “This [a given signifier] can be symbolized by the inherence of a (-1) in the set of signifiers. It is, as such, unpronounceable, but its operation is not, for the latter is what occurs whenever a proper name is pronounced” (694, 2-3). As Lacan exemplifies in the following formula (Figure 5), a statement is always the result of the signifier’s priority over the signified, where the signifier (S) is to be understood precisely as (-1), the excluded signifier, while the signified equals the imaginary number, the square root of minus one (694, 4), insofar as signification is ‘plagued’ by the impossibility of symbolizing the signifier. If this is what takes place within every statement, then this impossibility is “what the subject is missing in thinking he is exhaustively accounted for by his cogito – he is missing what is unthinkable about him” (694, 5). Put differently: it is by relating to what it lacks that the subject is able to refer to itself as cogito.

Figure 5: Lacan’s formula of the statement

[INTRODUCE FOLLOWING FROM ECRITS p. 694 ABOUT HERE]



But, Lacan asks (694,5), where does the signifier of lack come from? Certainly the subject of the enunciated, the ‘I’, is unable to account for it (694, 6). At most, this ‘I’ can ‘prove to the Other that he exists […] by loving him, a solution introduced by the Christian kerygma’ (694, 7). Through the reference to the Greek term *kerygma*, meaning ‘to preach’ or ‘proclaim’, Lacan is suggesting that Christianity (and, I would add, religions in general) has found a solution to the inherent deadlock of signification by shifting the whole issue to that of the existence of the Other (e.g. God), which does not necessarily depend on knowledge (“the proofs of the existence of God with which the centuries have killed him”, 694, 7), but on love, or faith, of which *kerygma* is evidence. Lacan immediately adds, however, that this solution is “too precarious” and will not help to “circumvent our problem, namely: What am *I*?” (694, 8).

Through the following enigmatic claim, Lacan effectively proposes that the signifier of lack is none other than the subject: “*I* am in the place from which ‘the universe is a flaw in the purity of Non-Being’ is vociferated” (694, 9). The ‘I’ qua subject of the enunciation (the subject of the unconscious) occupies the place of the lack in the Other, the very flaw that represents the ‘less than nothing’ about which Žižek (2012) has written in relation to Hegel. Here Lacan plays his trump card: in his schema, this “less than nothing”, this flaw within nothingness itself, goes by the name of *jouissance*: “This place is called Jouissance, and it is Jouissance whose absence would render this universe vain” (694, 10). The paradox of the “less than nothing” is rendered very clearly: without unconscious enjoyment qua flaw that the ‘I’ cannot account for – i.e., without the signifier in its unpronounceable and undetectable guise – the universe would lose its elementary consistency for the subject, who would therefore also vanish. This is indeed of fundamental dialectical importance: the signifier of lack – the disturbing insistence in our lives of a dimension that cannot be grasped – is precisely what keeps our universe together by ‘forcing’ the signifier to connect with the signified. This must be borne in mind whenever any simplistic equation between *jouissance* and subversion is put forward: in itself, *jouissance* is the indispensable ingredient of our world insofar as it guarantees that we must keep trying to make sense of it. Furthermore, Lacan adds that although *jouissance* is forbidden to me – I can never fully reach it – I am nevertheless responsible for it (694, 11). Why? Quite simply because the Other – whom I tend to blame for the disturbances generated by *jouissance* – does not exist. Which, in turn, explains why we tend to put the blame back on the ‘I’ via the myth of the original sin (695, 2) – also in Freud’s version of the latter, namely the Oedipus myth (695, 2) – that shirking being responsible for *jouissance*.

*… and castration*

In order to render the proper significance of the subversion of the subject, Lacan leaves *jouissance* aside and turns to the wound called castration, which is ushered in precisely by S(A). Castration provides the key to grasp the meaning of the subversion of the subject as the ultimate aim of Lacan’s psychoanalytic method: “In the castration complex we find the mainspring of the very subversion I am trying to articulate here by means of its dialectic” (695, 3). By embodying the ontological cut that *is* the subject, castration provides the coordinates to grasp its subversion – although this has generally been avoided in psychoanalysis, which has resulted in “providing grist for the mill of the Philistines of general psychology” (695, 4). Castration “essentially constitutes in the subject the gap that all thought has avoided, skipped over, circumvented, or stopped up whenever thought apparently succeeds in sustaining itself circularly, whether the thought be dialectical or mathematical” (695, 5). More precisely, it designates the place “where logic is disconcerted by the disjunction that breaks through from the imaginary to the symbolic” (695, 6). This disconcertment results from the fact that castration effectively captures the lack of the imaginary phallus (ϕ), which is why in Lacanian algebra castration is expressed as -ϕ. It is, furthermore, “the phantom known as the cause” intended as “the purest symbolization of the imaginary” (695, 7), inasmuch as it is correlative to the signifier of the lack in the Other, S(A), which Lacan, disagreeing with Claude Lévi-Strauss, refuses to describe as ‘mana’, since it is not a “zero symbol” but “the signifier of the lack of this zero symbol” (695, 9). This reliance on the signifier is what justifies Lacan’s distortion of a mathematical algorithm qua symbols, inasmuch as these symbols – like √-1 – cannot “be used automatically in subsequent operations” (696, 1); in other words, as signifiers they are withdrawn from symbolic signification.

Here Lacan makes visible the connection between *jouissance* and castration: “We must keep in mind that jouissance is prohibited [*interdite*] to whoever speaks, as such – or, put differently, it can only be said [*dite*] between the lines by whoever is a subject of the Law, since the Law is founded on that very prohibition” (696, 2). Castration qua law therefore tells the subject that the imaginary phallus is lacking; as such, it comes before *jouissance*, to the extent that *jouissance* can only be predicated on the prohibition instated by the law; hence Lacan’s pun about the Law’s order to enjoy (“Jouis!”) and the subject’s only possible reply as “J’ouïs” (I hear), “in which the jouissance would no longer be anything but understood” (696, 3). However, Lacan specifies that “it is not the Law itself that bars the subject’s access to jouissance – it simply makes a barred subject out of an almost natural barrier” (696, 4). The law then mobilizes the “almost natural barrier” that Freud had discovered and named ‘pleasure principle’: “For it is pleasure that sets limits to jouissance, pleasure as what binds incoherent life together” (696, 4). Note here the differentiation between pleasure and *jouissance*: the latter is a consequence of the former’s “almost natural” protection against chaos, incoherent life – namely the pre-symbolic Real. But the deadlock between pleasure and its ‘beyond’ (*jouissance*) is predicated upon the castration complex: “The latter is the sole indication of this jouissance in its infinitude, which brings with it the mark of its prohibition, and which requires a sacrifice in order to constitute this mark: the sacrifice implied in the same act as that of choosing its symbol, the phallus” (696, 6).

Insofar as it stands for “the image of the penis” – the penis imagined as a detachable object – the imaginary phallus for Lacan “is negativized where it is situated in the specular image” (696, 7). The implication here is that the phallic function symbolizing potency (ϕ) can only function against the background of the impotence of its imaginary dimension (-ϕ), i.e. against the background of castration (696, 6). In this sense there is no difference (at least in *Subversion*) between S(A) and the symbolic phallus, since the latter is synonymous with the signifier that, on account of its ‘exceptional’ status as signifier of the lack in the Other, makes the articulation of meaning possible. Lacan elaborates upon Freud’s theory of castration thus: the child’s submission to the law represented by the Name-of-the-Father is the outcome of the child’s failed attempt to construct its own identity by completing the (m)other’s lack, i.e. by offering itself up as the imaginary phallus (which is what defines the structure of perversion). In castration, then, the child realizes that desire can only be (partially) satisfied by the signifier qua Name-of-the-Father, which implies the endless dissatisfaction associated with the sliding of the signifier itself. Lacan’s name for the intervention of the symbolic law is ‘paternal metaphor’, which highlights precisely how the symbolic (‘metaphor’) substitutes the imaginary deadlock embodied by the phallus in the child’s relation to the first other (the mother). Only at this stage, i.e. after the intervention of the paternal metaphor qua castration, does the phallus illuminate the meaning of S(A), since the signifier of the lack in the Other now speaks for the impossible fulfillment of desire. Prior to the intervention of the signifier, then, the phallus for the child functioned at the level of the imaginary as an object potentially endowed with the ‘magical’ power to satisfy the other’s desire thus being potentially conducive to complete fulfillment. In contrast to imaginary castration, which still relied on the possibility of restoring what was lost in a bid for complete fulfillment, in symbolic castration the signifier establishes the impossibility of desire reaching its complete satisfaction. As such, the endorsement of symbolic castration qua S(A) is the ultimate goal of psychoanalysis.

Both Freud and Lacan tell us that the specular image is fundamental for object cathexis, which governs narcissism. But the phallus, Lacan claims, complicates things substantially inasmuch as it is not merely an imaginary object, but is instead the missing point in the specular image which embodies “the most intimate aspect of autoeroticism” (696, 8). With the intervention of the paternal metaphor, this lack is mediated by the signifier, thus potentially becoming the lack that signifies the non-existence of the Other, and therefore the radical finitude and contingency of the subject. By saying that there is no specular image of the phallus qua image of the penis, Lacan therefore introduces the theme of the necessity of symbolic castration, which brings into contention the fact that there is ‘no other of the Other’: the Other is radically inconsistent since it can only rely upon the signifier. “The fantasy of it falling off”, says Lacan about the imaginary phallus, is equivalent to the lack that constitutes the “world of objects” (696, 8 - 697, 1). And, by the same token, the phallus works in creating signification precisely on condition that its constitutive lack is veiled, hidden, repressed.

Lacan can now establish the link between the phallus and *jouissance* as predicated upon the lack in the Other, which in turn will lead him to introduce the issue of sexuation. “It is thus that the erectile organ – not as itself, or even as an image, but as a part that is missing in the desired image – comes to symbolize the place of jouissance; this is why the erectile organ can be equated with the√-1, the symbol of the signification produced above, of the jouissance it restores – by the coefficient of its statement – to the function of a missing signifier (-1)” (697, 2). The square root of minus 1 is here called into question as an ‘impossible’ number that stands for the missing signifier and parallels the function of the phallus in structuring meaning. Insofar as it is an imaginary number, √-1 does not exist, that is to say it is only imagined, and it is precisely through this imaginary function that “it can be equated” with the meaning of the phallus. The point Lacan is trying to make is that through its non-existence, or imaginary status, the phallus elevates *jouissance* to the place of the missing signifier. Just like an impossible/imaginary number, the phallus is therefore pure semblance devoid of any content, and as such it structures meaning.[[22]](#footnote-22) Lacan adds that the volatility of the imaginary phallus is also what “reduces all coveted jouissance to the brevity of autoeroticism” (697, 3): the subject’s attempt at gaining jouissance, in other words, is to be understood first and foremost in autoerotic (narcissistic, masturbatory) terms, since the first presentation of the phallus is the specular one. Lacan here briefly mentions the connection between anatomy and autoeroticism by referring to “the further perfected hand of the monkey”, linking this to Mauss’ reading of Freud as belonging to “the tradition of ‘bodily techniques’” (697, 3). However, he suggests that, rather than lending themselves to be interpreted in terms of cynicism, these autoerotic techniques should rather be linked with the emergence of guilt, insofar as the latter “is related to the reminder of the jouissance that is not found in the service rendered to the real organ” (697, 4). In other words, guilt appears with the subject’s experience of the prohibition of jouissance introduced by castration, i.e. the “consecration of the signifier’s imaginary function of prohibiting objects” (697, 4). This instance of prohibition also ties in with other ways of interpreting the role of the phallus, which can be seen, for example, in the traumatic “sanctification of the organ” represented by “circumcision” (697, 5).

After this passage on the connection between autoeroticism and castration, Lacan states that the symbolic equivalent of the imaginary phallus is ϕ. The fact that the imaginary phallus is located in the specular image of the male erectile organ as its lacking part leads the subject to assume that the jouissance associated with the phallus belongs to the Other; we can therefore once again see the correlation between ϕ (imaginary phallus) and Φ (symbolic phallus). The symbolic dimension of phallic function, Lacan continues, “explains both the particularities of women’s approach to sexuality, and what makes the male sex the weaker sex with regard to perversion” (697, 6). Here he hints at two important issues relating to the function of the phallus as symbol of power: its sustaining feminine desire, and its embodying the masculine tendency toward perversion (since, as we have seen, the pervert fills the lack in the Other, aiming to create the illusion of a fully consistent and all-powerful Other).

An important difference between Freud and Lacan concerns precisely the issue of sexuation. If for Freud sexual difference is still very much developed on biological grounds, for it relies on the conundrum of the imaginary phallus, in Lacan it is clearly an outcome of the encounter with the paternal metaphor, which, as we have seen, assigns the phallus a signifying role. For Lacan masculinity and femininity are ultimately the result of how the subject positions itself vis-à-vis the phallus qua signifier of an impossible signified. This thesis, however – at least in *Subversion*, as it can be evinced from the above reference to perversion – does not do away with sexual anatomy per se, since Lacan, like Freud, here seems to believe that the initial problematic relating to the imaginary phallus is inevitably based on the presence / absence of the penis.[[23]](#footnote-23)

*The psychopathological positions of the subject of the unconscious*

Lacan’s mention of perversion is brief but highly pertinent. He says that in sexuality the masculine position is by definition very close, indeed dangerously close, to perversion: “[perversion] barely accentuates the function of desire in man, insofar as desire institutes the dominance – in the privileged place of jouissance – of objet *a* in fantasy, which desire substitutes for A” (697, 7). Instead of being aimed at the inexistence of the Other, masculine fantasy stops too short of such ontological lack, namely at the ‘little other’ (*a*), the at least minimally objectified and singularized detail in the Other, thus running the risk, as it happens in perversion, of becoming “the instrument of the Other’s jouissance” (697, 7). We have seen that faced by the enigmatic presence of the Other, the subject ends up asking the following question: ‘What do you want (from me)?’ At this stage, that question can be reformulated self-reflexively as such: ‘What am I in relation to the *jouissance* of the Other?’; or: ‘What position am I expected to occupy vis-à-vis such *jouissance*?’ By answering these questions, the subject of the unconscious effectively assumes a certain psychopathological position, which, structurally, can be catalogued as either that of psychosis, neurosis or perversion.

In the case of psychosis, we witness the failure or rather the foreclosure of the paternal metaphor, which means that the subject remains at the mercy of the Other’s *jouissance*. Because of the lack of distance between the subject and the Other, in psychosis (e.g. paranoid or schizophrenic) meanings do not slide as they do after the intervention of the Name-of-the-Father, but instead retain a fixation which translates into the absolute certainty about what one says or does. Differently from psychosis, in both neurosis and perversion the gap between subject and Other has been inscribed by the paternal metaphor, which means that the subject is constantly grappling with lack – the lack introduced by the signifier qua law. Both the neurotic and the pervert, in other words, have relinquished themselves from the grip of an omnipotent Other, and yet – this is the common source of their different psychopathologies – they are not free from their belief in the existence of this Other and, specifically, its *jouissance*. In brief, differently from psychotics they are not prisoners of the Other and yet they feel its threatening presence.

How, then, do they react? More precisely: what sort of defenses do they set up against the encumbering *jouissance* of the Other? According to Lacan, the pervert does not foreclose the Name-of-the-Father, he disavows it. Rather than accepting the alienating role of the paternal metaphor, the pervert tries to deny the incidence of that role, believing instead that he can occupy the place of the phallus for the (m)other in a bid to achieve full *jouissance*. He effectively attempts to safeguard the ‘dream of wholeness’ concerning enjoyment. Masochism in this respect offers the clearest perverse scenario, with the masochist subject conceiving of himself as the instrument of the Other’s *jouissance*. Similarly, the sadist believes himself to be the Other and as such capable of limitless *jouissance* (as with Sade’s characters). As Lacan puts it: “the pervert imagines he is the Other in order to ensure his own jouissance” (699). The pervert, then, thinks he knows what it is that triggers desire; his position is characterized by his presumed knowledge and control over libido as such.

With neurosis, on the other hand, perversion is generally avoided, since “one identifies the Other’s lack with the Other’s demand, Φ with D” (698, 2), which leads directly to the catalogue of the neurotic’s drives qua *$*◊D (698, 3). The neurotic’s drives, in other words, are the consequence of his fantasies about the demands made by the Other on him. This predominance of the Other’s demand in neurosis is, Lacan adds, a strategy to hide the Other’s desire qua lack, which, however, “cannot be misrecognized when it is covered by the phobic object alone” (698, 4). The implication is that, “whether hysteric, obsessive, or, more radically, phobic” (698, 2),[[24]](#footnote-24) the neurotic tends to maintain, though in a skewed and deeply problematic manner, the Other as its interlocutor. For the neurotic, castration has indeed taken place (700, 3), but the lack that castration has brought in is not fully accepted, since the neurotic continues to believe that it can be overcome. While the lack is there, inscribed in the domain of the symbolic, it causes problems for the neurotic precisely because he secretly holds on to the possibility of overcoming it. As Lacan puts it at the end of *Subversion*, beneath his strong ego “the neurotic hides the castration he denies” (700, 4). In other words, the neurotic represses castration, secretly continuing to believe in the possibility of a relationship with the Other *not* over-determined by lack – one where the Other actually exists in an autonomous capacity. While symbolic castration has definitely taken place for the neurotic, his problem is that he relates to it in imaginary terms, as a problem that could be resolved.[[25]](#footnote-25) In this respect, the neurotic’s “strong ego” is a reaction against the threat of anxiety (the Other’s *jouissance*) that originates in symbolic castration (700, 6). The object of the neurotic’s fantasy is still the Other’s demand – what does the Other want from me? – which in turn activates his drives. Yet, the neurotic tends to perceive himself as the object of the Other’s desire. In this respect the real problem of the neurotic is that, unconsciously, he imagines that the Other is after his [the neurotic’s] castration in order to realize its own *jouissance*. This unbearable *jouissance* of the Other, in which he would vanish, is what the neurotic, whether obsessive or hysterical, is constantly struggling with. Ultimately, “although, deep down, he feels he is the most vain thing in existence”, the neurotic refuses to “sacrifice his difference (anything but that) to the jouissance of an Other” (700, 7).

Lacan’s argument can be summarized as follows: when confronted by the prospect of anxiety, the neurotic defends himself by concealing his castration (*$*) either via identification with the ‘ideal father’ and consequent assumption of the imaginary phallus (ϕ); or by direct identification with the imaginary phallus itself, which is expected to fill the lack in the Other. The first position describes the obsessional neurotic’s fantasmatic scenario, the second the hysteric’s (698, 4). Both these positions can therefore be seen as defense mechanisms against the threatening desire of the Other, which registers in their psychic economies but is simultaneously repressed.

With the obsessional neurotic, the Other’s desire is constantly negated in a bid to avoid, in fantasy, the vanishing of the subject. The obsessional neurotic is apparently in control of everything because, as anticipated, he identifies with the ideal father and the mastery therein embodied (698, 6). This accounts for the slavish dimension typical of his position: without the imaginary ‘backing’ of the ideal father, he is lost. At the same time, however, the obsessive tends to represent the Other as the ‘dead father’, a father who occupies a purely symbolic role, and therefore cannot enjoy (698, 7). In this manner the obsessive attempts to control the threat of *jouissance*, which would compromise his presumed control over reality. With the hysteric, on the other hand, the relation to the Other’s enjoyment is more subtle, for the aim of this type of neurosis is to sustain one’s fantasy by constantly “slipping away” (698, 4) from the position of object of the Other’s desire – and yet at the same time, in fantasy, positing oneself as filling the lack in the Other, which is perceived as temporary. The hysteric, for instance, tends to experience sexuality as a threat to her own subjectivity, fearing that she will disappear in the *jouissance* of the Other, turning into a passive object of the Other’s desire. At the same time, however, she believes the Other can only be completed by her.

The elementary subjective position as constituted in fantasy, in all three psychopathological cases, remains that of object of the Other’s desire. Take the obvious connection between what is normally known as ‘stage fright’ (anxiety in relation to performances in front of an audience) and neurosis. Here are the three possible neurotic outcomes: 1) The speaker cannot perform because anxiety (perceiving oneself as the object of the audience’s desire, especially through their gaze) is unbearable (phobic). 2) The speaker assumes a domineering position and tries not to interact with the audience (for instance, speaking incessantly, or avoiding eye contact) in order to keep their desire at bay (obsessive). 3) The speaker deliberately frustrates the audience so as to avoid ‘congealing’ into the object of their desire (hysteric). With regard to the last two positions, Lacan says: “These features are confirmed by the obsessive’s fundamental need to be the Other’s guarantor, and by the Faithlessness of hysterical intrigue” (698, 5). More generally, “the image of the ideal Father is a neurotic’s fantasy”, inasmuch as “the true function of the Father […] is fundamentally to unite (and not to oppose) a desire to the Law”. The neurotic wishes the Mother (“demand’s real Other”) would “tone down” her desire, while the Father he idealizes is, ultimately, “the dead Father” (698, 6-7) – since the dead Father is symbolically active (in the role designated by Lacan as the ‘Name-of-the-father’) to master the excessive dimension of the subject’s desire. As Lacan notes, this is “one of the stumbling blocks the analyst must avoid”, which by implication means that it is also “the crux of the interminable aspect of transference” (698, 8). Lacan here warns the analyst against the risk of turning into the father qua master of the neurotic’s desire, a “stumbling block” with obvious consequences for transference. More precisely, he adds that “the analyst must safeguard the imaginary dimension of his nonmastery and necessary imperfection for the other”, insofar as this represents “as important a matter to deal with as the deliberate reinforcement in the analyst of his nescience regarding each subject who comes to him for analysis, of an ever renewed ignorance so that no one is considered a typical case” (699, 1). This means that the analyst must make every effort to preserve, for the patient, the image of his own (the analyst’s) fallibility – a point that is as important as preserving the analyst’s ignorance as the appropriate starting point of any session.

At this stage Lacan turns to perversion in more detail. Freud’s claim that neurosis is the inverse of perversion is endorsed by Lacan: what the neurotic represses is the unconscious fantasy of being the object of the Other’s *jouissance*, which, as we have seen, is precisely what qualifies the position of the pervert. The unconscious fantasies of the neurotic, then, have a perverse content: “let us say that the pervert imagines he is the Other in order to ensure his own jouissance, and that this is what the neurotic reveals when he imagines he is a pervert – in his case, to ensure control over the Other. This explains the supposed perversion at the crux of neurosis. Perversion is in the neurotic’s unconscious in the guise of the Other’s fantasy” (699, 2-3). In perversion, on the other hand, the fantasy of being the object of the Other’s *jouissance* is openly endorsed because it fulfills the opposite function with regard to neurosis: while in the latter it embodies the threat of the disappearance of the subject overwhelmed by *jouissance*, against which neurosis is a defense, in perversion it strengthens the ego by creating the scenario of a fulfilled, harmonious relation to the Other, that is to say a relation governed by a law and therefore guarded from the incursions of *jouissance*. Since it is the Other that holds the key to desire and *jouissance*, the pervert identifies directly with this Other, attempting to annul the difference and complexity of his subjective position.

The link between neurosis and perversion, Lacan insists, is an important one to stress. A neurotic is always in danger of becoming a pervert, for the pervert’s position, as anticipated, is implicit in the neurotic’s. Rather than maintaining the gap between subject and Other (neurosis), the pervert enters directly the domain of the Other by imagining himself as the object of the Other’s jouissance. This is how he enjoys. Nevertheless, Lacan quickly remarks that the pervert’s unconscious is not “out in the open” as in psychosis; this suggests that the pervert’s structure is far from subversive since, despite appearances, he aims at setting a limit against boundless and deadly *jouissance*: “He, too, defends himself in his desire in his own way. For desire is a defense, a defense against going beyond a certain limit in jouissance” (699, 3).[[26]](#footnote-26)

The above statement about the protective function of desire is crucial if we are to understand Lacan’s position vis-à-vis subversion. By hooking *objet a*, desire effectively operates through a lure, namely that the Other, in its radical openness, can be replaced by *objet a*. Such operation secures the fantasy in its comforting modality, thus making sure the subject keeps at a safety distance from the lack in the Other qua *jouissance*. Lacan elaborates on how this operation is based on the avoidance of the phallus as signifier of lack, a point he relates to Plato’s *Symposium* and, specifically, to the figures of Socrates (qua analyst) and Alcibiades (qua analysand): “Included in object *a* is *agalma*, the inestimable treasure that Alcibiades declares is contained in the rustic box the figure of Socrates is to him. But let us note that a minus sign (-) is attributed to it. It is because Alcibiades has not seen Socrates’ prick – permit me to follow Plato here, who does not spare us the details – that Alcibiades the seducer exalts in Socrates the *agalma*, the marvel that he would have liked Socrates to cede to him by avoiding his desire” (699, 5). It is “the absence of the penis” (699, 6) that is responsible for the circulation of desire (as Alcibiades’ fascination with Socrates’ *agalma* is sustained by the fact that he “has not seen his prick”),[[27]](#footnote-27) since such absence is what embodies the essence of the phallus (negativized specular image of the penis) as object of desire. The phallus, then, is what the fascinating appearance of *objet a* ultimately hides, and as such it captures the position of women in relation to masculine sexuality: “it is the absence of the penis that makes her the phallus, the object of desire” (699, 6). Lacan then continues to link this logic – the dialectic of desire as sustained by *objet a* – to transference in analysis. He does so by returning to Plato’s *Symposium*, where Socrates, “the precursor of psychoanalysis” (699, 7) eventually shows his young adulator Alcibiades that his feelings are caused by his mistaken supposition that Socrates possesses the *agalma*; by contrast, Socrates demonstrates that Alcibiades’ real object of desire was not himself but “Agathon the transferential object” (699, 7). In other words, the analyst sets up a strategy whereby he directs the analysand’s desire toward himself only to show the analysand how wrong that direction is, since it is based on the assumption that the analyst possesses what is in fact ontologically absent – *agalma* is only a veil over lack. This strategy allows castration (the impossibility to achieve full *jouissance*) to take place, thus opening up the way to the dialectic of desire incarnated by Alcibiades’ relation to the transferential object, Agathon.

Now, the neurotic’s fantasy is not only sustained by the gap between himself and the Other, but more precisely by its rapport with *objet a*. In fact, the very presence of *objet a* in the neurotic’s fantasy, quite literally as its anchoring point, reveals that “the neurotic underwent castration at the outset”, which is functional to developing “the strong ego that he is, so strong, one might say, that his proper name bothers him, so strong that deep down the neurotic is Nameless. Yet, it is behind this ego, which certain analysts choose to strengthen still more, that the neurotic hides the castration he denies. But, contrary to appearances, he cleaves to this castration” (700, 3-5). The neurotic opposes the Other in the ways we have discussed because he fears “that the Other demands his castration” – a castration that he wants to preserve, while denying it, because “[w]hat analytic experience attests is that castration is what regulates desire, in both normal and abnormal cases” (700, 7-8). How? Precisely by guaranteeing the connection between the subject and *objet a*: “Providing it oscillates by alternating between *$* and *a* in fantasy, castration makes of fantasy a chain that is both supple and inextensible by which the fixation of object cathexis, which can hardly go beyond certain natural limits, takes on the transcendental function of ensuring the jouissance of the Other that passes this chain on to me in the Law” (700, 9). As a buffer between the barred subject and the lack contained in the object-cause of desire, fantasy makes sure that the subject’s fixation on a given object against the background of lack effectively determines the necessity for the intervention of the law as regulator of the Other’s *jouissance*. As Lacan explains at the end of his piece, desire, fantasy and the law are inextricably linked in dialectical terms. Before turning to his final statement, let us notice that Lacan offers two possible subjective strategies in relation to the Other. First, one starts by experiencing the Other’s will rather than its demand – one must, in other words, break the dependency to demand. From there, it is a matter of either facing this will “as an object, turning into the mummy of some Buddhist initiation”, which constitutes the pervert’s position in as much as it is constituted through the subject’s self-instrumentalisation; or “satisfy the will to castrate inscribed in the Other, which leads to the supreme narcissism of the Lost Cause”, in turn associated by Lacan with Greek tragedy and Claudel’s acceptance of a “Christianity of despair” (700, 10). This latter position defines the structure of neurosis, where castration has firmly installed lack (the “lost cause” and the “Christianity of despair”) within the structure of the subject.

*The inverse scale of the law of desire*

The conclusive assertion of the paper is one of the most-often cited: “Castration means that jouissance has to be refused in order to be attained on the inverse scale of the Law of desire” (700, 11). By interiorizing symbolic castration, which alienates us in/through the Other while turning ‘full or limitless *jouissance*’ into a mythical and deadly entity, we bring in the law that, in turn, reopens for us the possibility of *jouissance*, though this time as co-terminus with lack and embodied by the ineffable object-cause of desire. Without a doubt, one of the central themes of the latter part of *Subversion* is the dialectic of language and *jouissance*. As already mentioned, for Lacan “jouissance is forbidden [*interdite*] to him who speaks, as such – or, put differently, it can only be said [*dite*] between the lines by whoever is a subject of the Law, since the Law is grounded in this very prohibition” (696, 2). The pun is truly dialectical: what is *interdite* (i.e. *jouissance* itself in its full/deadly constitution) is *dite* between the lines, that is to say as the surplus-*jouissance* (*plus-de-jouir*) generated by the intrinsic inconsistency of language, such as expressed in the formations of the unconscious. And language sustains itself precisely through the *plus-de-jouir* it generates, which by definition cannot be said. In this sense, the lack represented by surplus-*jouissance* is at the heart of Lacan’s ‘subversion of the subject’, since it stands for the ontological impossibility that, on the one hand, through its gentrification (*objet a*), lends a minimum of consistency to both subject and Other, while on the other hand it also confronts the subject with the possibility of the radical reconfiguration of her desire. Thus the impossibility of *jouissance* qua ontologically lacking surplus also stands, in a dialectical manner, for the possibility of subverting one’s mode of enjoyment.

***Conclusion***

Having reached this final stage, two significant perspectives need to be highlighted. First, the idea that the swipe of symbolic castration, via the law of the signifier, is the necessary passage through which the subject learns to avoid being swamped by *jouissance* – which in this sense, as Lacan reiterates in *Subversion*, should be thought of as the *jouissance* of the Other, since the subject disappears in it. Think, for instance, of the aforementioned inescapability of demand, where the child has to gain a distance from the intrinsically overbearing demand that qualifies its relation to its first other (the mother). Avoiding the *jouissance* of the Other, then, leads to the formation of fantasy and desire, both of which depend on the mediation of language, i.e. of the paternal metaphor. And the ego owes its existence precisely to the subject’s capacity to desire, i.e. to protect itself from being inundated by the maelstrom of *jouissance*, which in its final configuration coincides with death.

In Lacan, then, the intervention of the paternal metaphor can be compared to a sort of ‘pulling the brakes’ in respect of the subject’s initial and constitutive tendency to be drawn in the Other’s *jouissance*, which is by definition destructive. Thus, it would seem that the law of castration in Lacan effectively accomplishes the same ‘job’ of the pleasure principle in Freud: it prevents the subject of the signifier to be inundated with *jouissance*. Here, however, we must register an important change in the constitution of *jouissance* as conceptualized by Lacan. What happens to it after symbolic castration is that it appears for what it truly is, namely a senseless surplus, an ‘impossible’ surplus of sense which as such forces every desire to experience its frustration and incessant iteration. Another way of putting this is that, after castration, *jouissance* becomes at all effects the *jouissance* of the Other. Via this emphasis on the centrality of castration we get to Lacan’s ‘ethics of desire’, which no doubt characterized his work until *Seminar VII* and can be summed up with the well-known motto of that seminar: ‘do not give up on your desire’.

There is, however, a more radical way of grasping Lacan’s theorization of *jouissance* in *Subversion*, which, I claim, is what makes this famous *Écrit* a veritable turning point in Lacan’s oeuvre. As anticipated, it is a matter of conceiving of the passage from demand to desire and *jouissance* as a trajectory which, ultimately, does not stop at the regulatory function of castration and the concurrent ethics of desire, but takes us further to an understanding of subversion erected upon the connection of drive and *jouissance* rather than desire and *jouissance*. While *jouissance* retains here its crucial convergence with lack, as instituted by the signifier, at the same time it leads the subject to confront S(A), namely the signifier of the non-existence of the Other, which implies the reconfiguration of one’s subjective content insofar as it is linked to this Other. If we look at the final version of Lacan’s graph in *Subversion*, we note that the upper chain is constituted by two vectors. The first goes from *jouissance* to castration, from left to right, in the by now familiar trajectory whereby the drives are, as it were, tamed and forced back into the path of desire and the fantasy therein associated. However, this is certainly not the last word on *jouissance*, since Lacan adds a second vector that moves back from castration to *jouissance* through drive, eventually encroaching upon S(A). My conclusive point is that the importance of *Subversion* should be associated to this last and highest of vectors that does not stop at castration but, after the latter’s necessary intervention, reactivates the drive in such a way as to bring about the destabilizing lack in the Other.

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1. *Seminar VII* (see Lacan 1959-1960) ended on July 6 1960, just over two months before the Royaumont conference, so inevitably there are overlaps between the content of that seminar and *Subversion*. *Seminar VII* is itself generally regarded as marking a very significant shift in Lacan’s thinking – namely a shift toward the Real. While in the years immediately prior to *Seminar VII* Lacan had tirelessly emphasized the central function of the register of the Symbolic in the structuring of the unconscious and subjectivity, the end of the 1950s sees the rise of the register of the Real as a new focus of Lacan’s thought. From this point on phenomena resisting or thwarting the signifying powers of the socio-symbolic order, such as especially *jouissance*, became increasingly central in Lacan’s seminars and thought in general. However, it seems clear to me that *Subversion* supplements the key theme of *Seminar VII*, namely the ethics of pure desire as that which we should not compromise or give up on, with a new focus on the drive. As Alenka Zupancic (2000: 239) has put it apropos the passage from *Seminar VII* to *Subversion*: “In order to arrive at the drive, one must pass through desire and insist on it until the very end.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “The thesis that being a philosopher means being interested in what everyone is interested in without knowing it has the interesting peculiarity that its relevance does not imply that it can be settled either way” (671, 2); “Now this subject who must know what he is doing, or so we presume, does not know what is already, in fact, of interest to everyone regarding the effects of science” (672, 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “*Aufhebung* is one of philosophy’s pretty little dreams” (S20, 1972-1973: 86). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Slavoj Žižek has successfully repoliticized the notion of ideological belief precisely by incorporating the Lacanian insight. He warns us that it is when the explicit ideological injunction begins losing its grip on its subjects that we should be most vigilant against ideological manipulation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In passing, Lacan remarks that “the pilot science of structuralism in the West has its roots in Russia, where formalism first flourished. Geneva 1910 and Petrograd 1920 suffice to explain why Freud did not have this particular instrument at his disposal” (676, 6). The point, then, is that the Freudian unconscious is implicitly informed by linguistic notions that Freud himself could not fully develop. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “The world about which we speak and in which we live is no ‘brute’ reality; it is itself already mediated and structured by the signifiers of language, which allow it to appear as a meaningful and differentiated environment (*Umwelt*)” (Van Haute 2002: 10-11). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See also Lacan’s references to Parmenides and Heraclitus in *Seminar XX* (Lacan, 1972-1973: 114). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This statement recalls Lacan’s famous proposition, in his text ‘Seminar on the “Purloined Letter”’, about intersubjective communication: “the sender […] receives from the receiver his own message in an inverted form” (30, 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lacan (678, 8 – 679, 5) refers to Freud’s 1911 article ‘Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning’, which ends with Freud commenting on the dream of one of his neurotic patients concerning a father who was talking to him without being aware of being already dead. While Freud uses this dream to expose his understanding of the unconscious death-wish against the father in neurosis, Lacan gives it a further spin by linking the ‘dead father’ with the ‘symbolically dead’ status of the signifier. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In this seminar Lacan (S17, 1969-1970: 42) admonishes the leftist students involved in the 1968 upheavals that they should “sound the depth of their commitments” vis-à-vis the idea of revolution conceived as the radical emptying of one’s subjective / pathological content. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Literally ‘the upholstery button’, this expression has been translated in different ways (‘quilting point’, ‘anchoring point’), with Fink opting for “button tie”, 681, 5) in a bid to conjure up Lacan’s intention to capture the idea of a given signifier that unifies a field of meaning. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The dialectical figure of the “negation of negation” is central to the entire *Science of Logic* (1916/2010: 89-90, 108-19, 144-45, 360, 530-32, 566). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. If, taking the cue from Lacan’s mention of the figure of the witness, we think of a crime story, we could argue that the locus of the Other encompasses both the figure of the criminal (language in its performative function; the fact that ‘the letter kills’) and that of the innocent bystander who witnesses the crime. It is thanks to the innocent Other as bystander that crime is sublated into a higher truth; that is to say, the Other turns language into the ultimate horizon of our being. In fact, crime and its witnessing are two sides of the same coin, and the coin is the price we pay, in terms of deception, for the acceptance of language as the untranscendable feature of our being. This is to say that the deceptiveness of the big Other is nothing other than the deceptiveness of language itself, but, as it were, shifted to the background and given the status of the *empty* *framework* of language. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. As Žižek (2012: 46) puts it, “human language proper only functions when fiction counts for more than reality, when there is more truth in a mask than in the stupid reality beneath the mask.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “But an animal does not feign feigning. It does not make tracks whose deceptiveness lies in getting them to be taken as false, when in fact they are true – that is, tracks that indicate the right trail. No more than it effaces its tracks, which would already be tantamount to making itself the subject of the signifier” (683, 6). In short, animals are unable to pretend to pretend, which is precisely the function of the Other in respect of language. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. As claimed by Fink (2004: 116-17): “The subject comes into being here insofar as she identifies with the Other’s view of her (replete as it is with the Other’s ideals and values); in other words, she internalizes the ideal for her that the Other has, what she would have to be in order to be ideal in the Other’s eyes: the ego-ideal. […] the ego-ideal is essentially a point outside the ego from which one observes and evaluates one’s own ego as a whole or totality, just as one’s parent observes and evaluates it.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Lacan acerbically asserts that such belief corresponded to “a phenomenon of mental abdication tied to the aging of the psychoanalytic group in the Diaspora owing to the war, and the reduction of an eminent practice to a *Good Housekeeping* seal of approval attesting to its suitability to the ‘American way of life’” (685, 1). The target of Lacan’s invective here are those psychologists who fled Europe during the war and, once in America, begun to assert the idea that, at some point in its core, the ego must present itself as free of the conflicts between the drives and the demands of reality. From this perspective, they promoted the idea that treatment must consist in recuperating a strong and autonomous ego which is able to mediate between the activity of the drives and the social context. For Lacan this construction of the ego commits the crucial mistake of closing off none other than the unconscious. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Crucially, Lacan is keen to emphasize the historical implications for missing the opacity of the ego: “The promotion of consciousness as essential to the subject in the historical aftermath of the Cartesian cogito is indicative, to my mind, of a misleading emphasis on the transparency of the *I* in action at the expense of the opacity of the signifier that determines it” (685, 5). One should note here how the opacity of the ego is nothing but the opacity of the signifier that determines it – in other words, of the “unconscious structured like a language”. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. “For it is clear that man’s continued nescience of his desire is not so much nescience of what he demands, which may after all be isolated, as nescience of whence he desires” (689, 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. As Van Haute (2002: 144) comments: “It is precisely this homology that makes it possible for the signifier to inscribe itself in the body, and conversely, for the body to be taken up in the order of signifiers and thereby in the economy of the unconscious.” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. In cinema, a perfect rendition of this logic is given in Michelangelo Antonioni’s cult film *Blow-up* (1966), where the desiring subject (the photographer played by David Hemmings) eventually encounters itself in the meaningless remainder of the process of signification of reality in which he is engaged (the blurred, abstract enlargement of the photograph of a dead body). What is shocking about any such encounter is precisely the fading of the fantasy that sustains subjectivity: the entire content of the subject’s self is annihilated, reduced to an inexplicable drive that insists in its path regardless of any conscious motivation. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Slavoj Žižek ‘scomment on the ‘meaning of the phallus’ helps us to clarify the above (infamous) passage: “Lacan’s claim that the ‘imaginary’ number (the square root of -1) is the ‘meaning of the phallus,’ its signified, is often invoked as an outstanding example his intellectual imposture―so what does he mean by it? The paradox of the square root of -1 is that it is an ‘impossible’ number whose value can never be positivized, but which nonetheless ‘functions.’ What does this have to do with the phallus? Precisely insofar as it is the signifier of the impossible fullness of meaning, the phallus is a ‘signifier without a signified’―the ‘minus 1,’ the supplementary feature which sticks out from the series of ‘normal’ signifiers, the element in which excess and lack coincide. The impossible fullness at the level of meaning (of the signified) is sustained by the void (the castrating dimension) at the level of the signifier―we encounter the ‘meaning of the phallus’ when, apropos some notion, we enthusiastically sense that ‘this is *it*, the true thing, the true meaning,’ although we are never able to explicate *what*, precisely, this meaning *is*” (Žižek, 2012: 846). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Van Haute’s criticism (2002: 211-16) of this aspect of Lacan’s theory as presented in *Subversion*. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The place of phobia within Lacan’s theory is not clarified here, and is notoriously difficult to define in his work as a whole. In Seminar IV (1956-1957), Lacan updates Freud’s conceptualization of phobia by commenting on the case of Little Hans and claiming that phobia is a defensive mechanism against anxiety. This reading is confirmed and updated in Seminar X (1962-1963). In Seminar VIII (1960-1961), he argues, in line with what mentioned in *Subversion*, that phobia is the most radical form of neurosis. Eventually, in Seminar XVI (1968-1969), Lacan claims that phobia is not a structure like neurosis or perversion, but is rather placed in between them, holding the potential to lead to either one or the other. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Mutatis mutandi*, we could say that the peculiar position of the neurotic is characterized by the fact that, despite his ambivalent attachment to it, ultimately “he cleaves to this castration” (700, 5), i.e. he refuses to sacrifice it to the altar of the Other’s *jouissance*. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. In Seminar 1962-1963, session 13 March 1963, Lacan will state, for example, that the ultimate aim of the masochist is to draw out of the Other so much *jouissance* that it becomes unbearable, thus forcing this Other to evoke a law that might limit *jouissance*. The whole point is that by making the Other anxious, the masochist subject succeeds in finding a defense against his own potentially unlimited perverse enjoyment. Ultimately, as Lacan indeed underlined in later texts, perversion is a *père-version*, in other words a desperate and disavowed attempt at finally establishing the law of the father. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. In Plato’s *Symposium*, Alcibiades contrasts Socrates’ ugly appearance with the preciousness of his interior, comparing him to those boxes that, on the exterior, present figures of ugly satyrs, while hiding the *agalma*, i.e. jewels of incommensurable beauty. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)