Table of Contents

Editorial

2
The Gaze of Pygmalion
Bernard Baas

4
Missing the Point: Reading the Lacanian Subject through Perspective
Thomas Brockelman

16
Montaigne in the "Garden of Earthly Delights": the Image of the Corps Morcelé in the Essays
Jonathan Kim-Reuter

36
The Real Imaginary: Lacan’s Joyce
Juliet Flower MacCannell

46

Dialogues

Intimate Extorted, Intimate Exposed
Gérard Wajcman

58
Lieven Jonckheere

78

Reviews

Hitchcock’s Cryptonomies, by Tom Cohen
Sigi Jöttkandt

100

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Today, the “Cartesian” nature of the Lacanian subject has been broadly accepted; so much so that we have little difficulty in understanding the idea of an insubstantial but focal subjectivity, one which is irreducible to any self (“moi”) and yet responsible for those disruptions of selfhood to which Freud referred with the term “unconscious.” Here, of course, we must assume what Lacan does—namely, the unwarranted nature of the cogito: the basic argument of the second meditation demands only that we acknowledge a subject for whom doubt is staged, or, more precisely, that we admit there is representing going on. To put this in Kantian language (and it is Kant upon whom we rely here), when Descartes subtracts everything that he can doubt, he transforms being itself into a field of representation—things taken by the act of “doubting” to be mental constructs. “Subject” names the precondition for that subtractive operation, a condition that, as transcendental, cannot appear within the field it makes possible. Or, as Mladen Dolar puts it, “in the place of the supposed certainty of the subject’s being, there is just a void. It is not the same subject that thinks and that is; the one that is is not the one that thinks, even more, the one that is is ultimately not a subject at all.”

Although this is not entirely clear before the 1960s—perhaps because of Lacan’s earlier Auseinandersetzung with Sartre—Lacan’s writings and seminars from the early 1960s onwards clearly indicate an alliance with this Descartes. In fact, such Cartesianism runs implicitly through Lacan’s work from the late 1940s onwards—in the distinction between the subject (“je”) and the ego (“moi”), between the subject of enunciation and what it enunciates or, finally, between a “knowledge” suggested by the analyst but inaccessible to the analysand. This last distinction demands that we address the peculiar way that a radicalized Cartesianism can be of use in psychoanalysis rather than simply in constructing a philosophical position. No doubt, Lacan’s approach to Descartes is mediated by his interpretive transformation of Freud’s science, by his insight that the “unconscious” is misunderstood when taken as

a substantive but secret set of "contents," a "real me" somehow lying beneath my consciousness. Thus, in *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, Lacan asserts that the subject of psychoanalysis is "the Cartesian one" precisely insofar as it is not "the living substratum [. . .] nor any sort of substance."\(^3\)

Against such psychologism (most famously the kind of analysis embraced by Jung), Lacan insists that the unconscious is the *subject of representation*. As such, it is essentially inaccessible to a representational consciousness, heterogeneous to the very objectifying "form" imposed by representation. The subject ("I," or "je") cannot appear as a content of consciousness because it is not that sort of thing. Indeed, it is not an "object," a "what" at all and, indeed, strictly speaking does not even exist but is only the presupposition of every representation.\(^4\)

Of course, the real difficulty in understanding Lacanian thought lies not in understanding this concept of the subject but in seeing the connection between such a conceptualization of the psychoanalytic subject and the broader Lacanian "position"—the philosophical insight underlying Lacan’s understanding of world and, most problematically, of history. It is one thing to say that we must understand human subjectivity as the "point" of representation, it’s another to found upon such an assertion a coherent philosophical position. Indeed, drawing the line from one to the other remains problematic for Lacanians, and this largely explains the continued opacity of Lacan’s thought.

In the light of such a difficulty, it is important to note that while it has become popular to name this substantless, dimensional subject "Cartesian," it is also—both in the history of thought and in Lacan’s own research—importantly *pre-Cartesian*: in Seminar XI and, even more centrally in Seminar XIII, Lacan also finds in the history of *pictorial perspective*, and specifically in the development of systematic linear perspective during the Italian renaissance, the historical origin of Descartes’ (and Pascal’s) subject. That is, Lacan realizes that the ground for the purely "doubting"

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\(^1\) I am indebted to Adrian Johnston, both for this specific account of this distinction between "savoir" and "vérité" as it is introduced in Seminar XIII, and in general for his clear understanding of the role of Descartes in the seminars of the 1960s. See *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005) 70 (hereafter, Time). See below for Lacan’s transformation of this distinction at the end of his life.


consciousness of the Meditations was laid two centuries before in the painting, architecture and theory of Alberti, Brunelleschi and Fillarette, Leonardo and others. The key here lies in the notions of a “vanishing point” and “viewpoint,” concepts which—particularly in the simplest (and most favored) version of perspective, so called “one-point” perspective—anticipate Lacan’s psychoanalytic subject.

If that’s the case, if we can actually “model” the Lacanian subject on the perspectival one, then it should be possible to think through the relationship between subject and world/subject and self in relationship to that same model. Differently than in the case of Descartes, who so basically mistook his own insight that generations of thought were required to grasp it, we should be able to set this model in motion, to see its function. Such, in fact, is my task in the following comments—to think through the subject of psychoanalysis by means of the peculiar erasure and anamorphosis performed by systematic perspective. The psychoanalysis emerging from the perspectival model demonstrates both a promise and a crisis that we might not otherwise glimpse. Above all, in pushing that relationship between subject and world to the point where it exposes a deep, indeed constitutive, tension at its foundation, the perspectival “picture” can help us to understand how psychoanalysis must perch between a modernist vision of history, a history with freedom as its focus, and a limiting transcendental understanding of reality itself. Committed both to a project of liberation (even if of a limited, pessimistic kind) and a social ontology resisting any real freedom, we can grasp the peculiar crisis-nature of Lacanian analysis as a science.

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In what was arguably the initiating act of Italian Renaissance painting, Filippo Brunelleschi produced a famous demonstration in the first years of the quattrocento. Painting in correct one-point perspective (a perspective system not yet formalized in theory) the baptistery and piazza of the duomo in Florence as they looked from a place inside its door in the first years of the quattrocento, he placed a pin-hole at the center of his panel. Furthermore, this “hole” in the painting occupied the key geometrical site organizing its representational schema, the so-called “vanishing point,” where parallel receding lines seem to meet. In order to complete the experiment, the viewer was to stand inside the duomo at the very position from which the work had been painted. Holding a small mirror, he was to gaze through the pinhole, jockeying the mirror into such a position that it reflected the scene on the panel in perfect continuity with the actual scene that extended out visually from the mirror’s edge. The picture in the mirror and the scene beyond its border blended into a single image. The “miracle” about which Manetti, Vasari and others later wrote lay precisely in the way that the represented and real scenes blended—that the actual piazza appeared as a continuation of the space of the panel’s representation.

In his magisterial book, *The Origin of Perspective*, Hubert Damisch has argued compellingly that the "demonstration" here concerns the relationship between perspectival space and subjectivity. While Brunelleschi’s accomplishment in this panel clearly belongs to a history of, if you like, “smoke and mirrors,” of quasi-magical perspectival effects that both predates and outlasts it, the form that he chose here for his trick bears thought. Why force his viewer to hold this awkward small mirror when Brunelleschi might have dispensed with the pinhole and the mirror, having the viewer look, from the privileged "viewpoint," directly at the panel superimposed on the scene? Why not look at the painting instead of through it? Such a technology would have been simpler and would also have demonstrated the “blending” of representation and visual space just as well as the preferred scheme.

As Damisch demonstrates, the reason for Brunelleschi’s preference of the pinhole view and the small mirror has to do with an, as yet, unarticulated—and, in the forming language of the *quattrocento* still unarticulable—sense about subjectivity and spatial representation. Cutting the viewing hole in the painting precisely at the vanishing point collapses two representational functions, but in each of these, the effect of the pinhole and the mirror is to underscore the "subjective" nature of pictorial representation. On the one hand, a line perpendicular to the picture-plane behind the peep-hole itself contains the so-called "viewpoint" around whose symmetrical simulacrum in the painting the geometries of the representation are organized: otherwise put, jockeying the mirror allows Brunelleschi to demonstrate that the view represented is specific to a chosen viewpoint, that it is a representation

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for a viewer, and to that extent of a viewer. You picture your “self” in picturing where you are in relationship to the painted scene. The viewer of the pinhole device simulates putting the viewer “in the picture” to demonstrate this representational fact.

On the other hand, Damisch notes that the advantage of the chosen system is that it puts the vanishing point (located at infinity on that same “centric” line, as Alberti later calls it) behind the eye of the viewer. In other words, it forces us to associate that vanishing point (where the parallel lines of spatial recession meet at the horizon within the painting) with what will later be called the dimensional, insubstantial subject of representation. Representation of space in correct “one-point” perspective—translation of three-dimensional space into systematic two-dimensional representation—involves the projection of a point of exception to that representation, a subject point as “hole” in the totalizing representation of being as objectivity (Damisch, 121). In Damisch’s words, the subject of one-point perspective is “behind the eye” of the viewer at infinity.

Brunelleschi’s first experiment thus proves an odd initiation of the Lacanian subject; for, (to reverse the order of my presentation of them) in superimposing vanishing and viewpoints on a single perpendicular line, at a single point, it both excludes that subject from the painting and includes it within it, indicating both subjectivity’s heterogeneity to the field of representation (as insubstantial, dimensional, etc.) and the fact that representation is for it (as the spatially positioned monocular viewer). In other words, the structure of subjectivity is calibrated with the utmost accuracy, demanding both that we conceive representation in terms of its possessing a constitutive “hole,” and that we be able to calculate precisely the position of this exception point in relationship to the geometry of a specific representation.
Fundamental Fantasy and Master Signifier

Let me begin with a contrast, an image from Freud, one that he calls a primal fantasy (Urphantasie). In general, Freud wields the term Phantasie in various ways, all of which have in common the notion of a psychically constructed and coherent scene in which the subject or “dreamer” is present as an observer. Beginning in 1915, moreover, Freud speaks of “primal fantasy” (Urphantasie)—using that term to indicate a “primal scene” (most typically the scene of witnessed parental coitus) that is present to the individual even when it represents no actual experience. Freud’s various “Urphantasien” share a reference to origins; in the case of the primal fantasy of the parental sex-act, this reference is quite literally to the subject’s origination, and the “primal scene” here is a kind of staging or representation of one’s own conception (Language, p. 332).

So, whereas Brunelleschi’s demonstration offers us the image of a scene which is explicitly non-whole (broken at least at one point, the vanishing point) and dependent (on the subject viewing it), the Freudian primal fantasy suggests a universe closed on itself. Furthermore, if we take Freud’s own most famous entrée to the primal scene/primal fantasy combination—namely, the “Wolfman” case—it is interesting to note that what leads Freud to such a scene of parental intercourse from the “Wolfman’s” own dream of “wolves in a tree” is the obvious anxiety underlying it. Here we should shift from the perspective of Freud to that of Lacan who, less concerned than Freud with the idea that the “scene” captures an “actual” infantile event would comment, rather, on the peculiar combination of fantasy of a complete and reliably independent world and such anxiety. In other words, it is only at an affective level that the fantasy delivers its really “fundamental,” unbearable content; it is only at that level that it is irreducibly unconscious.

To suggest that content, we might join Eric Santner and Slavoj Žižek in returning to a different Freud, the speculative theorist of Moses and Monotheism who proposes that the myth of Moses the patriarch and, indeed, the accompanying production of a patriarchal “God-the-Father,” amount to responses to a repressed murder of the actual (Egyptian) Moses. According to this account, the fundamental fantasy—that we are guilty of some horrible primal crime and thus must endlessly atone for it—actually aims to defeat anxiety, to transform it into guilt. After all, Freud’s deduced lesson from the death of the actual Moses, the “father,” is that there are no external consequences, no divine retribution for murder. However, we prefer a state in which what overcomes us is a specific object demanding a definite atonement.

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rather than an undefined “cloud” of affect. We prefer to have offended the gods, who demand expiatory sacrifices rather than confront a fundamentally meaningless universe where no punishment follows from our “wicked” deeds. Afflicted by paralyzing anxiety regarding the meaninglessness of the world, we create an unconscious fantasy by which we owe a specific debt for breaking the world-order, we find ourselves in need of atonement for contravening God’s will.

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The fundamental fantasy, then, does two things: first, it accounts for that “subject” visible in Brunelleschi’s perspective demonstration by expunging it “from the picture”—by attributing to it a basic transgression demanding compensatory atonement. “We” are sinners (in the Christian vision, original sinners, guilty of disrupting the basic fabric of Being). In such a cosmos, we as human beings are primordially guilty of disrupting the fundamental order and therefore excluded from it. Of course, this way of explaining the unconscious fantasy already implies its second characteristic, namely, its virtue of totalizing being, guaranteeing a “meaningful” universe. An ordered universe, essentially complete in itself, still holds “no place” for the spontaneous human will, the subject. The cosmos is whole: only, short of the redemption posited by orthodoxy, we cannot belong to it.

In brief, the exchange enacted through the fundamental fantasy acts in a profoundly pre-modern fashion. Moreover, from a Lacanian perspective, the fundamental fantasy produces reality by means of this proto-representation, wherein, precisely, the “field” of experience is cast as a fantasmatic or imaginary totality. That is, fantasy projects the social qua totality by imagining it as totalized from the position of transcendence, from a privileged subject’s perspective. Reality emerges from the real precisely when the world of human existence is conceived as the perspective of an omniscient subject—as what Žižek follows Lacan in calling the “Other.” In order to conceive of the world as “ontologically closed” we imagine a “viewpoint” from which it appears as totality. Reality is always conceived from and for such a totalizing view, such an outside. As a result, reality per se is a product of an omniscient subjectivity we imagine. Žižek notes this explicitly:

What psychoanalysis calls “fantasy” is the endeavor to close this gap by (mis)perceiving the pre-ontological Real as simply another, “more fundamental,” level of reality—fantasy projects on to the pre-ontological Real the form of constituted reality (as in the Christian notion of another, suprasensible reality). (Ticklish, 57)

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9 “The fundamental fantasy provides the subject with the minimum of being, it serves as a support for his existence—in short, its deceptive gesture is ‘Look, I suffer, therefore I am, I exist, I participate in the positive order of being.’” Slavoj Žižek, The Ticklish Subject (London: Verso, 1999) 281. Hereafter, Ticklish.
In a passage from *The Fragile Absolute*, Žižek articulates this point in relationship to sexual fantasy: “one should not,” Žižek writes, “confound this ‘primordially repressed’ myth (‘fundamental fantasy’) with the multitude of inconsistent daydreams that always accompany our symbolic commitments, allowing us to endure them.” In order to make this distinction, he then elaborates on two predominant forms of (heterosexual) fantasy today—Peter Hoeg’s idea, from *The Woman and the Ape*, “of a woman who wants a strong animal partner, a potent ‘beast,’ not a hysterical impotent weakling” and the notion of the “cybernetic” lover from male fantasy, the “perfectly programmed ‘doll’ who fulfills all his wishes, not a living being.” The point of this excursion into gendered sexual fantasy is that, in this context, the level of the fundamental fantasy could be metaphorized through “the unbearable ideal couple of a male ape copulating with a female cyborg, the fantasmatic support of the ‘normal’ couple of man and woman copulating.” That is, the fundamental fantasy is the fantasy of an Other in both senses of the genitive: it is the fantasmatic projection of an Other whose perspective includes all possible perspectives (in this case, the female and the male of the couple). On the other hand,
The pre-Copernican image of the cosmos familiar to us from maps like the one above pictures the "universe" opened by the fundamental fantasy, wherein guilt is interpreted as resulting from our transgression of a lawful order. Thus, the map takes the heterogeneity of the divine subject and gives it a "place." Indeed, "place" is vital here in a couple of ways: on the one hand, the medieval cosmos suggests, as a kind of graphic equivalent of the great Thomistic or Neo-Platonic "Chain of Being" theories, that every being "has a place" within an ordered cosmos. As Žižek puts it, the fundamental fantasy "provides a sense of ontological 'safety,' of dwelling within a self-enclosed finite circle of meaning where things (natural phenomena) in a way 'speak to us,' address us." On the other hand, of course, there is the divine place, the "Empyrean Heaven" which, appropriately, occupies the "highest" and outermost circle of being. This is, of course, the place of places; for it implies a position from which God can overview all of being, from which he can, in fact, constitute it as a whole.

The remaining piece of this Lacanian "genetic ontology" is provided by the so-called "phallic" or "master" signifier. Its function is easy to capture by returning to the scene of primordial guilt framed by Freud’s interpretation of religion—a tableau which translates the "cloud" of anxiety resulting from remorse at a human crime not only into a crime against God but also into a specific path of atonement, a particular site which is precisely that of the master signifier. Such a path, furthermore, also has the benefit of strengthening the bonds of the group, sharing guilt. The torturing, hectoring affect of the "superego" (the internalized, murdered father) is not pleasant and it can be harmful as well. On the other hand, the Freud of Moses and Monotheism notes a straightforward affective benefit for the individual in belonging to the community of the guilty—namely, the sense of shared "accomplishment" in relinquishing immediate desires to follow the dictates of the "Law." In a pre-modern context, the master signifier builds the self, helping the individual to become stronger by becoming a full and mature part of the community. Notice, however, that such a sense of accomplishment hinges upon the definite and shared nature of the "code" of Law. We can only overcome our immediate desires and needs to the extent that these are opposed by specific prohibitions. A vague sense of disquiet about a given act won’t suffice.

In effect, the master signifier is responsible for the conscious effects of the unconscious fundamental fantasy: it paints that "cosmological" picture of the world as whole by creating the space of ideality (the "suprasensible," in Žižek’s Christian example) which is the "picture" accompanying the repressed fantasy. How does it accomplish this?

reality is conceived (by us) as the Other’s viewpoint or fantasy. See The Fragile Absolute (London: Verso, 2000) 65-6.

Think of the way that a photographer or painter can accentuate a foreground image—say, the “subject” of a portrait—by limiting the function of focus to that figure and blurring the background. Perhaps, as is often the case, the artist will accentuate this effect (think of the darkness in so many of Rembrandt’s backgrounds) with light and color, for example bringing forward the foreground, brilliantly accented, to grab our attention.

We should notice three separate phenomena at work in such an aesthetic effect: first, the subject of the photograph or painting in this way becomes something like a place of interest, a topos selected from amongst an indefinite but numerable set of possibilities. That is, in the language of structuralism, it marks a signifier, unattached to any particular meaning. In The Ticklish Subject, Žižek uses the example of Abraham Lincoln’s statement, “You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but you cannot fool all the people all of the time.” Ever since Lincoln uttered these words, people have lost themselves in the coils of the logical ambiguity they express: “does it mean that there are some people who can always be fooled, or that on every occasion someone or other is bound to be fooled?” (Ticklish, 56). The point for Žižek, however, is precisely that these words just sound good, that they are “witty” enough to fascinate us. In other words, they provide a focus (and, in that sense, serve as a “signifier”) for our attention and, like the foregrounded subject of a portrait, draw our attention away from an unfocused and meaningless background.

Of course, and this makes the second important phenomenon, both Lincoln’s words and the portrait manage to provide such a focus because they are enigmatic, because, meaningless in themselves, they seem to be mysteries, to invite an endless process of interpretation. In this light, it is hardly surprising that Žižek at one point suggests that an individual’s feelings for someone with whom she/he has fallen in love provide a perfect example of such an enigmatic signifier. After all, our love refers to “an unknowable X, to the je ne sais quoi that makes me fall in love,” and as a result, the place of the “master signifier” marks an endless effort to find a meaning adequate to it (Puppet, 72).

Finally, moreover, the enigma of the phallic signifier gives birth to a kind of transcendence or ideality, figuring the limit or end of the search for a “solution” to the mystery it poses. In other words, around this signifier we are utterly convinced that there is a meaning to our love, to the portrait hanging before us or, for that matter, to Lincoln’s words. This meaning is out there, beyond us, but in a position that makes sense, not just of some particular phenomenon (Lincoln’s “sound bite,” say) but, rather, of our lives as a whole. The promise of one’s search for the meaning of one’s love is that this meaning will “make sense” of all the absurdity in a life. Our fascination, indeed, is predicated upon this hermeneutic affect, wherein the very search for a meaning instantiates it. It all “makes sense,” if we could just put our finger on how . . . Thus, it is not simply that the master signifier fascinates us; it does so in a fashion that retroactively provides consistency to our lives.
Herein lies the peculiar space of the fundamental fantasy attached to the back, as it were, of the master signifier. Its space corresponds to that peculiar transcendence that we posit when we take the solution to the enigma to “exist” “out there.” Only one thing must be added: we must understand that a precondition of such ideality is that we never actually achieve it, that we are never able to occupy the space of the Other from which the meaning of our lives would be manifest. Žižek acknowledges this necessity, for example, with regard to the way love operates, noting that “the moment I can enumerate reasons why I love you, the things about you that made me fall in love with you, we can be sure that this is not love,” or not any longer (Puppet, 72). In other words, to be effective, the master signifier must remain an enigma, not only in the sense that it promises transparent meaning but also in the sense that it promises such meaning, that it never actually delivers it.

Modernity and Fantasy

With these accounts of the fundamental fantasy and the master signifier, it is now possible to pose my basic, structural question—possible, that is, to see how the structure of the “perspectival” subject forces us to a deep problem in Lacanian theory. That problem derives from the observation that it is no coincidence that the Lacanian psychoanalytic subject is also the radicalized modern subject. In other words, there’s a bond between the subject of psychoanalysis and modernity. We might articulate the problem itself as follows: on the one hand, the revolution apparent in Brunelleschi’s perspective experiment (a revolution which becomes the “cause” of both modern philosophy and modern science) depends upon what seems to be an exposure of fantasy as “false.” Recall that in the demonstration, and in systematic painterly and architectural perspective in general, the subject is revealed as both constitutive of the world’s apparent totality and as a specific void or lack in that totality. We needn’t wander any further than Nicholas of Cusa’s speculations (contemporary with Brunelleschi) on the perspectival nature of all truth and the resultant impossibility that we live in a “centered” universe to see contained in Brunelleschi’s insight trouble for unconscious fantasy.

Recall that, for Nicholas (and his disciple, Giordano Bruno), because all truth is constituted perspectivally (that is, for a finitely positioned viewer), there can be no finitely locatable “center” to the universe. Or, as he also puts it in the Docta Ignorantia, in a perspectival universe, every point (and thus no point) is the center. It remains for Bruno to draw the most outrageous consequences already implied in Cusanus’s still “orthodox” thought—namely that such a universe reserves no special “place” either for any individual or for humanity as a whole. Thus, at a single blow, the entire cosmos of the master signifier is challenged. In the infinite, homogeneous space underlying perspective, we lose the sense of security it grants us.

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Indeed, in its invisible subject-effect, perspective might constitute the exemplary historical moment within a Lacanian view of history, the moment when people were able to “traverse” the fundamental fantasy itself—to liberate themselves from its claim. In other words, representation was the primary hammer with which the cosmological world-view, with its closure and its Platonism, could be smashed. Perspective “subjectivized” us, forced us to live without a “place” from which and for which we were constituted. I might go so far as to say that what we mean by “subject” within the modern context is nothing except the structure necessary to conceptualize the real without transcendence, the structure necessary to escape the “cosmological” fantasy and the seduction of ethics. The inception of the modern is thus an experience of freedom, a matter that we should not forget in the ambiguous history following from it.

To this extent, the political revolutions of the eighteenth century belong essentially to—perhaps one might even say that they provide something like a goal of—the subjectivism that makes such a representational transformation possible. Or, to put it in other words, the possibility of a genuinely political society, a society that would acknowledge and take responsibility for the freedom of itself and persons within it, lies in the loss of “our place” which ushered in modern space and modern science. Only a society that conceptually admits the freedom of its acts and the acts of its citizens—refusing all forms of arguments from nature—can provide the conditions to further that freedom. Modernity opens the possibility of political freedom, and such opening provides modernity’s ultimate justification.

On the other hand, though, from a Lacanian perspective, the phallic signifier and its fantasmatic reverse are constitutive figures: reality itself depends upon their existence. In other words, nestled into what often seems a merely technical account, the Freudian-Lacanian tradition includes a profound transcendental insight: what we mean experientially by reality is something like an existence guaranteed by fantasy, an existence which we imagine to be totalized and which, as totalized, excludes us (that is, as subject) from it. It is thus not possible to suppose that the truth of the subject, the truth suggested by Brunelleschi’s experiment, somehow does away with fundamental fantasy.

The problem with a modernist interpretation of Lacan should be obvious from my characterization of the fundamental fantasy. The “perspectival” moment, whatever its revolutionary potential, doesn’t shatter reality itself: nor could it, fantasy being constitutive of reality per se. Leaving aside for the moment the question of the possibility and limitation of revolutionary change within a Lacanian framework, I want to focus on the tension here between the claim of transcendental constitution assigned to the fantasy/master signifier combination and the claim that the modern, perspectival moment (with its various Cartesian and subjectivist permutations) exposes the fantasy.

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The obvious resolution of that tension—supported by a century of critical theory about modern-technological societies and the specific interpretations of those changes proposed by Jacques-Alain Miller and members of the Slovenian School—is that fundamental fantasy and master signifier don’t disappear within the modern world but that they are profoundly changed by it. For the most part, we discover the effects of the modern subject in the emergence of new forms of fantasy, forms that no longer follow the model of an exclusionary transcendence.

And, just as, as a kind of corollary to it, the pre-Copernican diagram of the cosmos gave us entrée to the fantasy-formation, we might here return to the countermovement to such cosmology proposed by the founders of modern science, in order to understand the underpinnings of such a new formation of reality. Think here of the radical (and, of course, for its author, traumatic) immanence of Spinoza’s philosophy. In subtracting the very space of transcendence from the universe, in proposing his “monist” philosophy, Spinoza follows the most explosive potential of the modern revolution, but, oddly, he retreats in a characteristic way: in his Ethics, he posits a position, the “mind of God,” which conceives all natural events in terms of their pure actuality—in terms, that is, of a completed causal chain. Indeed, the moment of retreat from the subversive potential of modernity comes precisely here, at the moment when nature itself is reconceived immanently from a totalized perspective. At first, powerfully, we conceive of all being as subsisting in a single plane, a plane of material causes. But then we add to that thesis a closure of that material dimension: all effects are already contained in their causes, so that the end of the universe is already implicit in the first events occurring within it. We are faced with a reductive causal determinism, a determinism without the possibility of freedom. Paraphrasing Hegel, Žižek tells us that “teleology is the truth of linear mechanical causality.” Is not such totalization of nature the almost invariable accompaniment of all early-modern, all “mechanistic” science?

It might also be instructive to recall a theoretical trope that emerged almost as soon as the perspectival metaphor established itself in the 15th century—the location of the divine at the confluence of all “viewpoints” constituting perspectival space. For it turns out that modernity opens a second possible “position” from which reality may be constituted. Recall the philosophical view first articulated by Nicholas of Cusa, but reflected in Bruno, Leibniz and Newton. This argument starts in a radical decentering of the medieval, cosmological, world-view. Space is projected as an infinite and homogeneous field amenable to purely quantitative understanding. Where in such a universe is God—still the “subject” for philosophy until Descartes? A universe without center can allow no places “nearer” or “farther” from him: nor (which is really the same thing) can it admit the image of a God out “beyond” space. Cusanus’s solution is to conceive God as present in every point, every position, but only insofar as any such point is conceived as viewpoint. In Newton’s famous phrase, the universe

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is God’s “sensorium.” In other words, the subject is in every place qua viewpoint. The “other space” of this fantasy, then, consists of the infinite (but complete) set of all points within objective space. It is the same space in which we live but now conceived as a web of subject points. There is, and can be, no distinguishing characteristic of such a space, since it is the very same space as the one we inhabit, but it is, nonetheless, functionally distinct from objective space. Thus, we get a sense of uncanny “closeness” to us, typical of a paranoid psychical economy.

Fig. 4: Detail from Abraham Bosse: Les Perspecteurs, 1648, Bibliothèque nationale de France
And this paranoid structure also informs the form of subjectivization at work here. For example, in a late work, “On the Image of God,” Nicholas describes an icon that he gave to the monks at his former home, Tegernsee: like those paintings with which murder-mysteries have made us familiar, the eyes of this icon had the odd quality of seeming to gaze at the viewer no matter where he positioned himself. If we admit that such subjection indicates a subject who is anywhere and everywhere, we are “subjected” to the gaze of the “Other” at any and every point. Space itself seems to be alive with this (nonetheless) obscene gaze. Surely, though it emerges with early modernity, this idol seems remarkably contemporary. It captures that uncanny sense of a subject of the world that is no longer simply transcendent.

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To understand the unconscious element of this “paranoid” construction of reality, the key transformation involves that closing off of transcendence which we have seen to be definitive of the modern fantasy. Instead of outside a closed cosmos, the Other now inhabits a space of unprecedented intimacy to the subject, right there, at the same "point of view" as that of the subject but still distinct from it. A paranoid intimacy, then.

The effects of this paranoid relationship are twofold and, to a large extent, historically ordered. Let me name them: obsessional neurosis and perversion. The first, whose emergence I might date in the period after the Renaissance, retains the basic economy of guilt-before-law that we have already seen to have been definitive of reality in the pre-modern period. Still, without the function of a master signifier producing the Other’s transcendence, guilt effects the individual differently. With the disappearance of the concrete site for guilt’s atonement, we lose also the “communal” structure that reinforces individual identity before the modern period. To put this in Lacan’s terms, modernity could be identified with the gradual disappearance of ritual, of those kinds of communal bonds founded upon a symbolically shared sense of guilt.

14 See Miran Bozovic’s introduction to Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon writings, where Bozovic argues that Bentham’s own reference to the panoptic tower’s presence within the panopticon prison as “like a God” must be understood at the level of fantasy. The panoptic gaze (in which every point is watched from everywhere) certainly takes the place of fantasy of transcendence; that is, like the old God, this new one allows the constitution of the Real as reality. Still, Žižek’s analysis allows us to see the essential difference between the new God and the old. See “Introduction: An Utterly Dark Spot,” in Jeremy Bentham, The Panopticon Papers, ed. Miran Bozovic (London: Verso, 1995).

15 “What we are faced with, to employ the jargon that corresponds to our approaches to man’s subjective needs, is the increasing absence of all those saturations of the superego and ego ideal that are realized in all kinds of organic forms in traditional societies, forms that extend from the rituals of everyday intimacy to the periodic festivals in which the community manifests itself. We no longer know them except in their most obviously degraded aspects.” Lacan, “Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis,” in Écrits: a Selection, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W.
The displacement of the pre-Copernican “map” is both symbol and cause of the decay of such a public law and, with it, of a public identity based upon shared guilt. For one thing, there is no longer a specific set of public rules sufficing to satisfy the demands of conscience. Think here of the great struggle of the Protestant Reformation, which follows the modern revolution by internalizing faith, making it a matter of “the heart” rather than of public rites. Increasingly, in the period of the 17th and 18th centuries, the individual is thrown back on herself in determining the “content of conscience,” a position that, in turn, weakens identification through and with the social bond. In a series of arguments, Žižek associates the infinite demand of the Protestant, Kantian call to “duty” with the situation of Kafka’s subject called “before the law,” that is, faced with a legal demand never specified or, better, whose specific content we are never allowed to know. We know we are supposed (not) to do something, but we can never really know what that something is. Our primordial guilt becomes, then, precisely the anxiety in the presence of a Law without possibility of a finite redress by “following the rules,” since these rules are never specified (see, for example, Puppet, 129).

Now, of course, the results of this change are themselves ambiguous and well-documented—on the one hand, the emergence of modern neurosis and the accelerated weakening of instituted forms of community, on the other, the development of the “genius,” the self-creating individual and the Romantic cult of individualism, but either end of the equation indicates that, when guilt is finally separated off from the symbolic apparatus of a specific set of requirements and prohibitions—when “the Law” ceases to form a potential identity—we face a transformed fantasy/master signifier combination.

We must ask what happens when the “object,” the place of the superego, is occupied by the very “excess” of being that guilt intended to tame? This is in fact the strange condition controlling our reality today, the condition under which totality emerges as that strange, excessive totality, “life”: “Are we really living?” we ask. Have we really “given our all?” or “enjoyed ourselves?” These Romantic questions begin to haunt humanity, to provide, ironically, the nexus of guilt (“I have not really lived, given my all, enjoyed, etc”), precisely at that moment, at the end of the Enlightenment, when the old institutions and specific demands of the old Law fall. Less and less are persons tortured by guilt at moral transgression: at an ever accelerating pace, our guilt now becomes performance-guilt about life, guilt that transforms life into a “vague” totality capable of providing a measure for our success or failure and a measure, of course, in terms of which we almost inevitably fall short.

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Norton, 1977) 26. See also Žižek, Plague, 43 n34.
The key transformation at that historical moment is the prominence of a new totalizing device, a device for the imposition of “reality” on the real—now associated with “life” or in the term wielded by Lacan, Žižek and Todd McGowan, “enjoyment.” McGowan has recently hypothesized that increasingly since the 19th century we have become a “society of enjoyment,” a society in which the commandment to “enjoy!” has largely displaced traditional moral imperatives (and a state of affairs that breeds endless reactionary proposals for “returns” to an earlier world). In other words, the society of enjoyment or, as McGowan specifies it, “the society of commanded enjoyment,” is the visible symptom of the paranoid fundamental fantasy, the way that the “belief” in the big Other continues when we consciously claim to disavow it. Guilt and anxiety—the weapons of the superego—still operate, but they do so by torturing us for not enjoying ourselves, not being “really alive” in response to the direct enjoyment of the Other.

And it is in this sense of a disavowed belief in the Other that we are justified in following Žižek’s lead in finding the predominant master signifier of our world—or what replaces it—in perversion. The pervert is a false transgressor of the law, apparently radical in his/her willingness to engage in “forbidden” practices but secretly invested in maintaining Law so as to leave room for the pleasure of breaking the rules! The structure of this deception is a fundamental fantasy in which the pervert imagines her/himself to be a kind of “bodyguard” for the Other, protector and facilitator of the Other’s desire rather than his/her own. Consider the transformation of Kantian moral theory first suggested by Lacan in his seventh seminar and much elaborated upon by Žižek and his colleague Alenka Zupančič. Kantian moral theory—the demand that a free subject heed the “call of conscience”—suggests an outcome today that is far from Kant’s own moral rigor. In The Ticklish Subject, Žižek even suggests that one can see this outcome in Michel Foucault’s ethic of the “care of the self” (from his History of Sexuality). Kant’s moral philosophy demands that we distinguish the “inner” voice of conscience from the external and artificial imperatives imposed by tradition, religion, etc. We must not confuse the form of the categorical imperative with the content of specific duties. Foucault simply sees the

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17 Žižek writes that “the ultimate perverse fantasy,” lies in “the notion that we are ultimately instruments of the Other jouissance, sucked out of our life-substance like batteries.” The Parallax View (Cambridge, Mass. & London: The MIT Press, 2006) 313. See also “Objet a,” where Žižek writes, “the pervert knows perfectly what he is for the Other: a knowledge supports his position as the object of his Other’s (divided subject’s) jouissance” (Objet a, 115).

18 See, for example, Alenka Zupančič, Ethics of the Real (London and New York: Verso, 2000) and Slavoj Žižek, Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

19 See Ticklish, 279-80.
necessity of completing this “formal” interiorization of morality. “The care of the self”
demands that we avoid all socially imposed (and thus artificial) rules, including the
rules that Kant ascribed to duty or morality itself. The new imperative of conscience
is that one do “what one really wants to do,” a task that first demands of the “moral
agent” that she discern this “true” desire in a preconstituted and complete “self”—a
self which here plays the role of the Other (one might determine what “it” wants by
means of a ouija board or . . . by means of free association). To return to the preferred
Lacanian term, the new formations transform the superego from an agency of
prohibition to one of enforced enjoyment.

I referred above to perversion as a “substitute” for the master signifier, an assertion
that I would justify in part with the analogous way that perversion diverts or
fascinates us, preventing us from “paying attention to what’s behind the curtain” of
fantasy. That is, here too, as in the traditional fantasy, reality gains its consistency by
diverting attention from a fragmentary and senseless condition. In such a movement,
we might locate all the varieties of frenetic activity that fill the space of post-
Romantic cultural politics—from the Nietzschean cult of the “overman” and its
reverberations in modern art to the “play of the signifier” embraced by post-
structuralists to the “Risk Society” of Ulrich Beck. In each of these cases, “play,” a
kind of hyper-activity, is substituted for any challenge to the order of reality. Indeed,
Žižek defines the “game” aspect here in precisely this manner—indicating the
“perverse” nature of the culture it supports: the game is defined by the question,
“what do we have to change so that ultimately nothing will really change?” (Ticklish,
p. 200).

And so, the communal and “moral” behaviors built upon the traditional master
signifier/fantasy combination gradually give way to the perverse and paranoid world
blossoming around us today. In a strange sense, then, conservative critics of
modernity are right; morality has decayed. The traditional father is in crisis. The
revolutionary promise of the modern subject is disarmed and its “truth” simply
recycled as the pathology of modernity. But those reactionaries are also wrong: given
its origin in the truth of subjectivity, modernity cannot be retracted. Rather, the only
possibility lies in somehow passing through the paranoid fundamental fantasy and its
perverse substitute for the master signifier, in going beyond the pervert’s cynical
games.

Conclusions

Our exercise in “picture thinking,” our effort to think through the Lacanian subject
by referring it back to the problem of systematic pictorial perspective as it emerged at
the dawn of modernity, thus allows us to understand much about our contemporary
world. Indeed, I would suggest that, as a number of thinkers from Jacques-Alain
Miller to Julia Kristeva and Teresa Brennan have proposed, Lacanian theory thus
provides a powerful alternative for historically-based critical theory to the Frankfurt
School or its traditional adversaries. In other words, Lacan provides a unique access to the contours of our historical present, a powerful tool for comprehending life in late capitalist industrial and consumer societies. According to the model we have uncovered here, the history of modernity has been one of adaptation: “how to maintain social stability in the face of an insight (the subject) with revolutionary potential?” This is the implicit question whose various answers have comprised the secret history of our present. In its ability to analyze the increasing extremity of the moves necessary to maintain the socially constituted Other in the face of its exposure as fantasy, such a theory can explain much that remains opaque within either conservative or traditional Marxist critiques, not only about the fate of subjectivity but also about the imaginary and social organizations with which a capitalist, technological world maintains its stability.

In addition to this comprehension of the way that social reality maintains itself in the face of a threatening “truth,” we must also record the fact of psychoanalysis itself—that is, the fact of a “revolutionary” practice, a practice which somehow enacts the potential only “pictured” in Brunelleschi’s experiment. Along with those political revolutions I previously mentioned as following through on the potential of the subjectivist moment, we should add the potential of an analytic “traversal of the fantasy,” the revolution encoded in psychoanalysis. Exposure of the modern subject opens the possibility that the subject could challenge the very limitations of its “world.”

Of course, such a possibility corresponds oddly—and that’s the point—with its opposite, with the way that the “truth” of analysis can be, depending on context, an excuse or opportunity for mere adaptation or retreat. In other words, the ambiguity of the modern insight invites further research into that distinction to which Lacan himself repeatedly returned in his latest work, between “truth” and “knowledge.” Could it be that the key here is a “knowledge” irreducible to any represented truth? Could it be that the analysand’s leap into her/his own unconscious fantasy involves this knowledge which cannot be turned into a form of “comfort”?  

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21 In *The Plague of Fantasies*, Slavoj Žižek summarizes the complex history of Lacan’s thought on the relationship between knowledge and truth as follows: for most of his career, Lacan belongs in a solidly existentialist tradition, one which conceives the goal of therapy in terms of authenticity. As Žižek explains, this Lacan accented the role of truth for the analysand. Emphasizing the hysterical symptom, the symptom which “tells the truth in the guise of a lie,” the Lacan of the 1940s through the mid-1960s sees analysis as moving toward the analysand’s need to acknowledge the “lie” she/he has been living. It is the lie of my own desire hidden in the hysterical symptom. Analysis aims at authenticity to the extent that its goal would coincide with the analysand’s acknowledgment or knowledge of that repressed desire. For Žižek, however, the very last period of Lacan’s life, when he was working through the implications of the idea, introduced earlier in the 1960s, of a “fundamental fantasy,” departs from both the
These are questions that must remain unanswered, along with one other query that I’ve already left dangling. Above, I deferred the problem of how we might understand the possibility of revolutionary change from a Lacanian perspective. After all, to the extent that reality itself depends upon fantasy, revolution makes no sense. We seem to be thoroughly enclosed in our fantasy or, at the very least, in a fantasy. What would it really mean to “fulfill” this revolutionary potential of the modern subject?

The fact that the most powerful contemporary research in Lacanian theory, that of Žižek and Alain Badiou, is directed against any “conservative” vision of Lacan—against any interpretation of psychoanalysis which confirms the impossibility of revolution or, even worse, takes its task to lie in a return to traditional forms of authority and community—should alert us to the importance of understanding the appearance they combat. Lacking space here to really address this issue, let me simply suggest that the very terms of the problem may deceive us: after all, the very idea that we are trapped “in” a world produced by fantasy is the product of fantasy itself, a product exposed by psychoanalysis. Here, too, we must understand the demonstrative nature of Brunelleschi’s experiment: in other words, “subject,” this “point” of focus and infinity, only “exists” to the extent that it demonstrates the failure of reality itself, the lack underlying apparent totality. Surely, if such a demonstration shows us anything, it must be that history, too, resists reduction to the coordinates of fantasy. Somehow, then, psychoanalysis must align itself with the possibility of genuine transformation, a possibility upon which its practice insists, even when it tells us a different story. The question of how and with what qualifications analysis must enter such alliance remains open.

existentialist ideal and any intersection of truth and analytic progress (Plague, 37). Here, the key movement takes us away from the overlapping of truth and knowledge, to a condition in which the “truth” enjoyed by the analyst is rigorously divided off from a new, “a-subjective” knowledge on the part of the analysand (Plague, 37).

2 I do, however, wrestle with it in a book manuscript forthcoming from Continuum Press, Žižek and Heidegger: the Question Concerning Techno-Capitalism.