

Slavoj Žižek,
The Plague of Fantasies (London; Verso, 1997)

Cyberspace, Or, The Unbearable Closure of Being

What is a symptom?

When one is dealing with a universal structuring principle, one always automatically assumes that - in principle, precisely - it is possible to apply this principle to all its potential elements, so that the principle's empirical non-realization is merely a matter of contingent circumstances. A symptom, however, is an element which - although the non-realization of the universal principle in it appears to hinge on contingent circumstances has to remain an exception, that is, the point of suspension of the universal principle: if the universal principle were to apply also to this point, the universal system itself would disintegrate.

In the paragraphs on civil society in his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel demonstrates how the growing class of 'rabble [Pöbel]' in modern civil society is not an accidental result of social mismanagement, inadequate government measures, or simple economic bad luck: the inherent structural dynamic of civil society necessarily gives rise to a class which is excluded from its benefits (work, personal dignity, etc.) - a class deprived of elementary human rights, and therefore also exempt from duties towards society, an element within civil society which negates its universal principle, a kind of 'non-Reason inherent in Reason itself - in short, its *symptom*. Do we not witness the same phenomenon in today's growth of an underclass which is excluded ' sometimes even for generations, from the benefits of liberal-democratic affluent society? Today's 'exceptions' (the homeless, the ghettoized, the permanent unemployed) are the symptom of the late-capitalist universal system, the permanent reminder of how the immanent logic of late capitalism works: the proper capitalist utopia is that through appropriate measures (affirmative action and other forms of state intervention for progressive liberals; the return to self-care and family values for conservatives), this 'exception' could be - in the long term and in principle, at least - abolished. And is not an analogous utopianism at work in the notion of a 'rainbow coalition': in the idea

that, at some utopian moment to come, all progressive struggles (for gay and lesbian rights; for the rights of ethnic and religious minorities; the ecological struggle; the feminist struggle; and so on) will be united in a common 'chain of equivalences'?

The necessary failure here is structural: it is not simply that, because of the empirical complexity of the situation, all particular progressive fights will never be united, that 'wrong' chains of equivalences will always occur (say, the enchainment of the fight for African-American ethnic identity with patriarchal and homophobic attitudes), but, rather, that occurrences of 'wrong' enchainments are grounded in the very structuring principle of today's progressive politics of establishing 'chains of equivalences': the very domain of the multitude of particular struggles, with their continuously shifting displacements and condensations, is sustained by the 'repression' of the key role of economic struggle. The Leftist politics of the 'chains of equivalences' among the plurality of struggles is strictly correlative to the abandonment of the analysis of capitalism as a global economic system - that is, to the tacit acceptance of capitalist economic relations and liberal-democratic politics as the unquestioned framework of our social life.'

In this precise sense, symptom turns a dispersed *collection* into a *system* (in the precise sense this term acquired in German Idealism): we are within a system the moment we breach the gap which separates the a priori form from its contingent content - the moment we envisage the *necessity* of what appears to be a contingent intrusion which 'spoils, the game'. A system indicates the fact that 'there is One' (Lacan's *y a de lun*), an inherent element which subverts the universal frame from within; to return to our example: the 'systemic' nature of late-capitalist political struggle means that the chain of equivalences of today's identity struggles *is necessarily* never completed, that the 'populist temptation' *always* leads to the 'wrong' chain of equivalences.

In a different field, a 'system' also underlies the series of Buñuel films which vary the motif of what Buñuel himself calls the 'inscrutable impossibility of the fulfilment of a simple desire'. In *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz*, the hero wants to accomplish a simple murder, but all his attempts fail; in *The Exterminating Angel*, after a dinner party, a group of rich people cannot cross the threshold and leave the house; in *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, we have the opposite case of three upper-class couples planning to dine together, but unexpected complications always prevent the fulfilment of this simple wish; in *Navarin*, where the narrative follows a pattern of endless on-the-road humiliations and entrapments, the idealist priest Navarin, to whom life is a sort of journey in the footsteps of Christ, witnesses how his hopes of liberation are dashed on the very road to freedom that he has chosen., His final

insight, of course, is that what he has hitherto dismissed as mere distractions on his road to freedom - the contingent, unexpected humiliations and entrapments - provide the very framework of his actual experience of freedom. In other words, the structural role of these humiliations and entrapments which seem to pop up out of nowhere is the same as that of the unexpected complications which again and again prevent the group in *The Discreet Charm* from dining together The ultimate example which, perhaps, provides the key to this entire series is, of course, *That Obscure Object of Desire*, in which a woman, through a succession of absurd tricks, postpones again and again the final moment of sexual reunion with her aged lover (when, for example, the man finally gets her into bed, he discovers beneath her nightgown an old-fashioned corset with numerous buckles which are impossible to undo ...). The charm of the film lies in this very nonsensical short circuit between the fundamental, metaphysical Limit and some trivial empirical impediment. Here we find the logic of courtly love and of sublimation at its purest: some common, everyday object or act becomes inaccessible or impossible to accomplish once it finds itself in the position of the Thing - although the thing should be easily within our grasp, the entire universe has somehow been adjusted to produce, again and again, an unfathomable contingency blocking access to it.¹

The solution to this tension between the subject's goal (to sleep with the beloved; to have dinner together; to achieve freedom ...) and the imbecilic contingent intrusions which prevent its realization again and again lies in the Hegelian insight into their ultimate speculative identity: it is the barrier of these intrusions which maintains the Goal in its elevated sublimity, so that - to revert to a Derridean formulation - the condition of impossibility of realizing the Goal is simultaneously its condition of possibility - or, to put it in Hegelese, in fighting the imbecilic contingency of the ways of the world, the Idea fights itself, the very resource of its strength. This *necessity of the utter, imbecilic contingency*, this enigmatic notion of an unexpected intrusion which none the less pops up with absolute inevitability (and has to pop up, since its non-arrival would entail the dissolution of the whole domain of the search for the Goal), is the highest speculative mystery, the true 'dialectical synthesis of contingency and necessity' to be opposed to platitudes about the deeper necessity which realizes itself through surface contingencies. One is tempted to contend that when Hegel makes his 'panlogistic' claim according to which 'Reason rules the world' (or 'what is actual is reasonable'), its actual content is this kind of necessary intrusion of a contingency: when one is sure that 'Reason rules the world', this means that one can be sure that a contingency will always emerge which will prevent the direct realization of our Goal.²

The other side of this necessity which realizes itself in the guise of a series of contingent intrusions which again and again prevent the universal notion or project from realizing itself (like the accidents which again and again prevent the three couples in *The Discreet Charm ...* from dining together; like the unfortunate accidents which again and again prevent the abolition of African-American ghettos in the liberaldemocratic project), is the necessity, the absolute certainty, that within the field of a universal Lie the 'repressed' truth will emerge in the guise of a particular contingent event. That is the basic lesson of psychoanalysis: in our everyday lives, we vegetate, deeply immersed in the universal Lie; then, all of a sudden, some contingent encounter - a casual remark during a conversation, an incident we witness - brings to light the repressed trauma which shatters our self-delusion. Correlative to the illusion which tells us that the failure to realize our project is due to a mere unfortunate set of circumstances is the illusion which tells us that if we had not made that stupid contingent gesture (overheard that remark, taken that turn in the street and encountered that person ...), everything would have remained OK; our universe would still be intact, instead of lying in ruins.

We can see how each of these two forms negates one of the two aspects of the ideological space curvature: the first one negates its false opening (demonstrating that the promise of opening will remain unfulfilled for necessary reasons); the second negates its false closure (demonstrating that the excluded externality will necessarily invade the inside). What we have here, of course, is the logical square of necessity, possibility, impossibility and contingency: the recurring impossibility (to dine together) negates the ideological form of possibility; the contingency (the contingent emergence of truth) negates the ideological form of universal necessity. And is not the notion of cyberspace a key symptom of our socioideological constellation? Does it not involve the promise of false opening (the spiritualist prospect of casting off our 'ordinary' bodies, turning into a virtual entity which travels from one virtual space to another) as well as the foreclosure of the social power relations within which virtual communities operate?

The virtual as Real

One should adopt towards cyberspace a 'conservative' attitude, like that of Chaplin vis-à-vis sound in cinema: Chaplin was far more than usually aware of the traumatic impact of the voice as a foreign intruder on our perception of cinema. In the same way, today's process of transition allows us to perceive what we are losing and what we are gaining, - this

perception will become impossible the moment we fully embrace, and feel fully at home in, the new technologies. In short, we have the privilege of occupying the place of 'vanishing mediators'. Such a Chaplinesque attitude compels us to resist the seductive charm of the two contemporary myths about cyberspace, which are both based on the commonplace according to which we are today in the middle of the shift from the epoch of modernism (monological subjectivity, mechanistic Reason, etc.) to the postmodern epoch of dissemination (the play of appearances no longer grounded in reference to some ultimate Truth, the multiple forms of constructed Selves):

- In cyberspace, we witness a return to *pensée sauvage*, to 'concrete', 'sensual' thought: an 'essay' in cyberspace confronts fragments of music and other sounds, text, images, video clips, and so on, and it is this confrontation of 'concrete' elements which produces 'abstract' meaning ... here, are we not again back with Eisenstein's dream of 'intellectual montage' - of filming *Capital*, of producing the Marxist theory out of the clash of concrete images? Is not hypertext a new practice of montage?³
- Today we are witnessing the move *from the modernist culture of calculation to the postmodernist culture of simulation*⁴ The clearest indication of this move is the shift in the use of the term 'transparency': modernist technology is 'transparent' in the sense of retaining the illusion of an insight into 'how the machine works'; that is to say, the screen of the interface was supposed to allow the user direct access to the machine behind the screen; the user was supposed to 'grasp' its workings - in ideal conditions, even to reconstruct it rationally. The postmodernist 'transparency' designates almost the exact opposite of this attitude of analytical global planning: the interface screen is supposed to conceal the workings of the machine, and to simulate our everyday experience as faithfully as possible (the Macintosh style of interface, in which written orders are replaced by simple mouse-clicking on iconic signs ...); however, the price of this illusion of a continuity with our everyday environs is that the user becomes 'accustomed to opaque technology' - the digital machinery 'behind the screen' retreats into total impenetrability, even invisibility. In other words, the user renounces the endeavour to grasp the functioning of the computer, resigning himself to the fact that in his interaction with cyberspace he is thrown into a non-transparent situation analogous to that of his everyday *Lebenswelt*, a situation in which he has to 'find his bearings', to act in the mode of tinkering [*bricolage*] by trial and error, not simply to follow some pre-established general rules - or, to repeat Sherry Turkle's pun, in the postmodernist attitude we 'take things at their interface value'.

If the modernist universe is the universe, hidden behind the screen, of

bytes, wires and chips, of electric current, the postmodernist universe is the universe of naive trust in the screen which makes the very quest for 'what lies behind it' irrelevant. 'To take things at their interface value' involves a *phenomenological* attitude, an attitude of 'trusting the phenomena': the modernist programmer takes refuge in cyberspace as a transparent, clearly structured universe which allows him to elude (momentarily, at least) the opacity of his everyday environs, in which he is part of an a priori unfathomable background, full of institutions whose functioning follows unknown rules which exert domination over his life; for the postmodernist programmer, in contrast, the fundamental features of cyberspace coincide with those described by Heidegger as the constitutive features of our everyday life-world (the finite individual is thrown into a situation whose co-ordinates are not regulated by clear universal rules, so that the individual has gradually to find his way in it).

In both these myths, the error is the same: yes, we are dealing with a return to pre-modern 'concrete thought' or to the non-transparent lifeworld, but this new life-world already presupposes a background of the scientific digital universe: bytes - or, rather, the digital series - is the Real behind the screen; that is to say, we are never submerged in the play of appearances without an 'indivisible remainder'. Postmodernism focuses on the mystery of what Turkle calls the 'emergence' and Deleuze elaborated as the 'sense-event': the emergence of the pure appearance which cannot be reduced to the simple effect of its bodily causes;⁵ none the less, this emergence is the effect of the digitalized Real.⁶

Apropos of the notion of interface, the temptation here, of course, is to bring it to the point of its self-reference: what if one conceives of '*consciousness*' itself, *the frame through which we perceive the universe, as a kind of 'interface'*? The moment we yield to this temptation, however, we accomplish a kind of foreclosure of the Real. When the user playing with the multiplicity of Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels says to himself. 'What if real life (RL) itself is just one more IRC channel?'; or, with respect to multiple windows in a hypertext, 'What if RL is just one more window?', the illusion to which he succumbs is strictly correlative to the opposite one - to the common-sense attitude of maintaining our belief in the full reality outside the virtual universe. That is to say: one should avoid both traps, the simple direct reference to external reality outside cyberspace as well as the opposite attitude of 'there is no external reality, RL is just another window'.⁷

In the domain of sexuality, this foreclosure of the Real gives rise to the New Age vision of the new computerized sexuality, in which bodies mix in ethereal virtual space, freed of their material weight: a vision which is *stricto sensu* an ideological fantasy, since it unites the impossible - sexuality

(linked to the Real of the body) with the 'mind' decoupled from the body, as if - in today's universe, where our bodily existence is (perceived as) more and more threatened by environmental dangers, AIDS, and so on, up to the extreme vulnerability of the narcissistic subject to actual psychic contact with another person - we could reinvent a space in which we could fully indulge in bodily pleasures by getting rid of our actual bodies. In short, this vision is that of a state without lack and obstacles, a state of free floating in the virtual space in which desire none the less survives somehow

The threatened frontier

Instead of indulging in these ideologies, it is far more productive to begin with how computerization affects the hermeneutic horizon of our everyday experience. This experience is based on the three lines of separation: between 'true life' and its mechanical simulation; between objective reality and our false (illusory) perception of it; between my fleeting affects, feelings, attitudes, and so on, and the remaining hard core of my Self. All these three boundaries are threatened today:

- Technobiology undermines the difference between 'natural' lifereality and 'artificially' generated reality: already in today's genetic technology (with the prospect of free choice of sex, hair colour, IQ.. .), living nature is posited as something technically manipulable; that is, in principle, nature as such coincides with a technical product. The circle is thus closed, our everyday hermeneutical experience is undermined: technology no longer merely *imitates* nature, rather, it reveals the underlying mechanism which *generates* it, so that, in a sense, 'natural reality' itself becomes something 'simulated', and the only 'Real' is the underlying structure of DNA.
- In so far as the VR apparatus is potentially able to generate experience of the 'true' reality, VR undermines the difference between 'true' reality and semblance. This 'loss of reality' occurs not only in computer-generated VR but, at a more elementary level, already with the growing 'hyperrealism' of the images with which the media bombard us - more and more, we perceive only colour and outline, no longer depth and volume: 'Without visual limit there can be no, or almost no, mental imagery; without a certain blindness, no tenable appearance.'⁸ Or - as Lacan put it - without a *blind spot* in the field of vision, without this elusive point from which the object returns the gaze, we no longer 'see something'; the field of vision is reduced to a flat surface, and 'reality' itself is perceived as a visual hallucination.

- The MUD (Multiple User Domains) technology in cyberspace undermines the notion of Self, or the self-identity of the perceiving subject: the standard motif of 'postmodern' writers on cyberspace, from Stone⁹ to Turkle, is that cyberspace phenomena like MUD render the deconstructionist 'decentred subject' palpable in our everyday experience. The lesson is that one should endorse this 'dissemination' of the unique Self into a multiplicity of competing agents, into a 'collective mind', a plurality of self-images without a global coordinating centre, and disconnect it from pathological trauma: playing in Virtual Spaces enables me to discover new aspects of 'me', a wealth of shifting identities, of masks without a 'real' person behind them, and thus to experience the ideological mechanism of the production of Self, the immanent violence and arbitrariness of this production/construction.

These three levels follow one another logically: first, within 'objective reality' itself the difference between 'living' and 'artificial' entities is undermined; then the distinction between 'objective reality' and its appearance gets blurred; finally, the identity of the self which perceives something (be it appearance or 'objective reality') explodes. This progressive 'subjectivization' is strictly correlative to its opposite, to the progressive 'externalization' of the hard kernel of subjectivity. This paradoxical coincidence of the two opposed processes has its roots in the fact that today, with VR and technobiology, we are dealing with the loss of the surface which separates inside from outside. This loss jeopardizes our most elementary perception of 'our own body' as it is related to its environs; it cripples our standard phenomenological attitude towards the body of another person, in which we suspend our knowledge of what actually exists beneath the skin (glands, flesh. . .) and conceive the surface (of a face, for example) as directly expressing the 'soul'. On the one hand, inside is always outside: with the progressive implantation and replacement of our internal organs, techno-computerized prostheses (bypasses, pacemakers ...) function as an internal part of our 'living' organism; the colonization of the outer space thus reverts to the inside, into 'endolocolonization',¹⁰ the technological colonization of our body itself. On the other hand, outside is always inside: when we are directly immersed in VR, we lose contact with reality - electro-waves bypass the interaction of external bodies and directly attack our senses: 'it is the eyeball that now englobes man's entire body'.¹¹

Another aspect of this paradox concerns the way the progressive immobilization of the body overlaps with bodily hyperactivity: on the one hand I rely less and less on my proper body; my bodily activity is more and more reduced to giving signals to machines which do the work for me (clicking on a computer mouse, etc.); on the other hand, my body is

strengthened, 'hyperactivated' through body-building and jogging, pharmaceutical means, and direct implants, so that, paradoxically, the hyperactive superman coincides with the cripple who can move around only by means of prostheses regulated by a computer chip (like the Robocop). The prospect is thus that the human being will gradually lose its grounding in the concrete life-world - that is to say, the basic set of coordinates which determine its (self-) experience (the surface separating inside from outside, a direct relationship to one's own body, etc.). Potentially, total subjectivization (the reduction of reality to an electromechanically generated cyberspace 'window') coincides with total objectivization (the subordination of our 'inner' bodily rhythm to a set of stimulations regulated by external apparatuses). No wonder Stephen Hawking is emerging as one of the icons of our time: the mind of a genius (or so we are told), but in a body which is almost totally 'mediatized', supported by prostheses, speaking with an artificial, computer-generated voice. Hawking's active contact with his surroundings is limited to a weak pressure he is still able to exert with the fingers of his right hand. In short, his popular appeal cannot be separated from his debilitating illness - from the fact that his body, reduced to an immobile mass of flesh, kept functioning by mechanical prostheses and contacting the world through clicking a computer mouse, tells us something about the general state of subjectivity today.

At a more fundamental level, however, this 'derailment' - this lack of support, of a fixed instinctual standard, in the co-ordination between the natural rhythm of our body and its surroundings - characterizes man *as such*: man *as such* is 'derailed'; he eats more than is 'natural'; he is obsessed with sexuality more than is 'natural': he follows his drives with an excess far beyond 'natural' (instinctual) satisfaction, and this excess of drive has to be 'gentrified' through 'second nature' (man-made institutions and patterns). The old Marxist formula about 'second nature' is thus to be taken more literally than usual: the point is not only that we are never dealing with pure natural needs, that our needs are always-already mediated by the cultural process; moreover, *the labor of culture has to reinstate the lost support in natural needs*, to re-create a 'second nature' as the recompense for the loss of support in the 'first nature' - the human animal has to reaccustom itself to the most elementary bodily rhythm of sleep, feeding, movement.

What we encounter here is the loop of (symbolic) castration, in which one endeavours to reinstate the lost 'natural' co-ordination on the ladder of desire: on the one hand, one reduces bodily gestures to the necessary minimum (of clicks on the computer mouse ...); on the other, one attempts to recover lost bodily fitness by means of jogging, body-building, and so on; on the one hand, one reduces the bodily odors to a minimum

(by taking regular showers, etc.); on the other, one attempts to recover these same odours through toilet water and perfumes; and so on. This paradox is condensed in the phallus as the *signifier* of desire - as the point of inversion at which the very moment of 'spontaneous' natural power turns into an artificial prosthetic element. That is to say: against the standard notion of the phallus as the siege of male 'natural' penetrative/aggresive potency-power (to which one then opposes the 'artificial' playful prosthetic phallus), the point of Lacan's concept of the phallus as a *signifier* is that the phallus 'as such' is a kind of 'prosthetic', 'artificial' supplement: it designates the point at which the big Other, a decentred agency, supplements the subject's failure. When Judith Butler, in her criticism of Lacan, emphasizes the parallel between mirror-image (*idealego*) and phallic signifier,¹² one should shift the focus to the feature they effectively share: both mirror-image and phallus *qua* signifier are 'prosthetic' supplements for the subject's foregoing dispersal/failure, for the lack of co-ordination and unity; in both cases, the status of this prosthesis is 'illusory', with the difference that in the first case we are dealing with imaginary illusion (identification with a decentred immobile image), while in the second, the illusion is symbolic; it stands for phallus as pure semblance. The opposition between the 'true', 'natural' phallus and the 'artificial' prosthetic supplement ('dildo') is thus false and misleading: phallus *qua* signifier is already 'in itself' a prosthetic supplement. (This status of phallus also accounts for Lacan's identification of woman with phallus: what phallus and woman share is the fact that their being is reduced to a pure semblance. In so far as femininity is a masquerade, it stands for phallus as the ultimate semblance.)

Back to the threatened limit/surface which separates inside from outside: the very threat to this limit determines today's form of the hysterical question - that is to say: today, hysteria stands predominantly under the sign of vulnerability, of a threat to our bodily and/or psychic identity. We have only to recall the all-pervasiveness of the logic of victimization, from sexual harassment to the dangers of food and tobacco, so that the subject itself is increasingly reduced to 'that which can be hurt'. Today's form of the obsessional question 'Am I alive or dead?' is 'Am I a machine (does my brain really function as a computer) or a living human being (with a spark of spirit or something else that is not reducible to the computer circuit)?'; it is not difficult to discern in this alternative the split between A (*Autre*) and J (*jouissance*), between the 'big Other', the *dead* symbolic order, and the Thing, the *living* substance of enjoyment. According to Sherry Turkle, our reaction to this question goes through three phases: (1) the emphatic assertion of an irreducible difference: man is not a machine, there is something unique about him ... ; (2) fear and panic when we become aware of all the potential of a machine: it can

think, reason, answer our questions ... ; (3) disavowal, that is, recognition through denial: the guarantee that there is some feature of man inaccessible to the computer (sublime enthusiasm, anxiety ...) allows us to treat the computer as a 'living and thinking partner', since 'we know this is only a game, the computer is not really like that'.

Consider how John Searle's polemics against AI (his Chinese Room thought experiment) was 'gentrified' and integrated into the user's everyday attitude: Searle has proved that a computer cannot really think and understand language - so, *since there is, the ontological-philosophical guarantee that the machine does not Pose a threat to human uniqueness, I can calmly accept the machine and play with it...* Is not this split attitude, in which 'disavowal and appropriation are each tied to the other',¹³ a new variation on the old philosophical game of 'transcendental illusion' practised already by Kant apropos of the notion of teleology - since I know the computer cannot think, I can act, in my everyday life, *as if* it really *does*?

Identifications, imaginary and symbolic

This same ambiguity determines the way we relate to our screen personae:

- On the one hand, we maintain an attitude of external distance, of playing with false images: 'I know I'm not like that (brave, seductive ...) , but it's nice, from time to time, to forget one's true self and put on a more satisfying mask - this way you can relax, you are delivered of the burden of being what you are, of living with yourself and being fully responsible for it. . . "¹⁴
- On the other hand, the screen persona I create for myself can be ,more myself' than my 'real-life' persona (my 'official' self-image), in so far as it *reveals* aspects of myself I would never dare to admit in RL. Say: when I play anonymously in MUD, I can present myself as a promiscuous woman and engage in activities which, were I to indulge in them in RL, would bring about the disintegration of my sense of personal identity

These two aspects are, of course, inextricably intertwined: the very fact that I perceive my virtual self-image as mere play allows *me* to suspend the usual hindrances which *prevent me* from realizing my 'dark side' in RL, and to externalize all my libidinal potential freely. When a man who, in his RL social contacts, is quiet and bashful, adopts an angry, aggressive persona in VR, one can say that he thereby expresses the repressed side of himself, a publicly non-acknowledged aspect of his 'true personality' -that his '*electronic id* is here given wing';¹⁵ however, one can also claim

that he is a weak subject fantasizing about more aggressive behavior in order to avoid confronting his RL weakness and cowardice. Acting out a fantasy scene in VR allows us to bypass the deadlock of the dialectic of desire and its inherent rejection: when a man bombards a woman with flirtatious promises about what sexual favours he would like to bestow on her, her best answer is 'Shut up, or you'll really have to do it! In VR, I can do it, act it out, without really doing it, and thus avoid the anxiety, connected with the RL activity - I can do it, and since I know I'm not really doing it, the inhibition or shame is suspended.

This is one way to read Lacan's dictum 'Truth has the structure of a fiction': I can articulate the hidden truth about my drives precisely in so far as I am aware that I am simply playing a game on the screen. In cyberspace sex, there is no 'face-to-face', just the *external* impersonal space in which everything, including my most intimate *internal* fantasies, can be articulated with no inhibitions What one encounters here, in this pure 'flux of desire', is, of course, the unpleasant surprise of what the Frankfurt School called 'repressive desublimation': the universe, freed of everyday inhibitions, turns out to be a universe of unbridled sadomasochistic violence and will to domination...¹⁶ The usual complaint against cybersex is that instead of the truly arousing and intensive encounter with another body, we get a distanced, technologically mediated procedure. However, is it not *precisely* this gap, this distance towards immediate *Erlebnis*, which can also *add* sexual arousal to a sexual encounter? People use pornography (or other technical sex devices) not only when they lack 'flesh-and-blood' partners but also in order to 'spice up' their 'real' sex life. The status of sexual supplement is thus again radically ambiguous and 'undecidable': it can spoil the game, yet it can also intensify enjoyment.

In order to conceptualize the two poles of this undecidability, Turkle resorts to the opposition between 'acting out' and 'working through' the difficulties of RL:¹⁷ I can follow the escapist logic and simply act out my RL difficulties in VR, or I can use VR to become aware of the inconsistency and multiplicity of the components of my subjective identifications, and work them through. In this second case, the interface screen functions like a psychoanalyst: the suspension of the symbolic rules which regulate my RL activity enables me to stage-externalize my repressed content which I am otherwise unable to confront. (Here again, do we not encounter the logic of *acceptance through disavowal*: I accept my fantasies in so far as 'I know it's only a VR game'?) The same ambiguity is reproduced in the impact of cyberspace on community life. On the one hand there is the dream of the new populism, in which decentralized networks will allow individuals to band together and build a participatory grass-roots political system, a transparent world in which the mystery of

the impenetrable bureaucratic state agencies is dispelled. On the other, the use of computers and VR as a tool to rebuild community results in the building of a community *inside* the machine, reducing individuals to isolated monads, each of them alone, facing a computer, ultimately unsure if the person she or he communicates with on the screen is a 'real' person, a false persona, an agent which combines a number of 'real' people, or a computer program Again, the ambiguity is irreducible.

However, this ambiguity, although irreducible, is not symmetrical. What one should introduce here is the elementary Lacanian distinction between imaginary projection-identification and symbolic identification. The most concise definition of symbolic identification is that it consists in assuming a mask which is more real and binding than the true face beneath it (in accordance with Lacan's notion that human feigning is the feigning of feigning itself. in imaginary deception, I simply present a false image of myself, while in symbolic deception, I present a true image and count on it being taken for a lie...¹⁸). A husband, for example, can maintain his marriage as just another social role and engage in adultery as 'the real thing'; however, the moment he is confronted with the choice of actually leaving his wife or not, he suddenly discovers that the social mask of marriage means more to him than intense private passion The VR persona thus offers a case of imaginary deception in so far as it externalizes-displays a false image of myself (a timid man playing a hero in MUD ...) and a symbolic deception in so far as it expresses the truth about myself in the guise of a game (by playfully adopting an aggressive persona, I disclose my true aggressivity).

In other words, VR confronts us, in the most radical way imaginable, with the old enigma of transposed/displaced emotions,¹⁹ At a somewhat different level, we encounter the same paradox apropos of TinySex: what TinySex compels us to accept is the blurred line of separation between 'things' and 'mere words'. Their separation is not simply suspended, it is still here, but displaced - a third realm emerges which is neither 'real things' nor 'merely words', but demands its own specific (ethical) rules of conduct. Let us consider virtual sex: when I play sex games with a partner on the screen, exchanging 'mere' written messages, it is not only that the games can really arouse me or my partner and provide us with a ,real' orgasmic experience (with the further paradox that when - and if - I later encounter my partner in RL, I can be deeply disappointed, turned off. my on-screen experience can be in a sense 'more real' than the encounter in reality); it is not only that, beyond mere sexual arousal, my partner and I can 'really' fall in love without meeting in RL. What if, on the net, I rape my partner? On the one hand, there is a gap which separates it from RL - what I did remains in a sense closer to impoliteness,

to rude, offensive talk. On the other hand, it can cause deep offence, even emotional catastrophe, which is not reducible to 'mere words'. . . . And - back to Lacan - what is this middle-mediating level, this third domain interposing itself between 'real life' and 'mere imagination', this domain in which we are not directly dealing with reality, but not with 'mere words' either (since our words do have real effects), if not *the symbolic order itself*?

Where is the 'decentred subject'?

When deconstructionist cyberspace ideologists (as opposed to the predominant New Age cyberspace ideologists) try to present cyberspace as providing a 'real-life', 'empirical' realization or confirmation of deconstructionist theories, they usually focus on how cyberspace 'decenters' the subject. Both Stone and Turkle approach this via the relationship between Multiple User Domains and post-traumatic Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD). There are four variations on the relationship between the Self and 'its' Body which violate the standard moral-legal norm of 'one person in one body':

- *many persons in a single body* (the 'pathology' of MPD): this version is 'pathological' in so far as there is no clear hierarchy between the plurality of persons - no One Person guaranteeing the unity of the subject;
- *many persons outside a single body* (MUD in cyberspace): these persons refer to the body which exists outside cyberspace, in 'reality', with the (ideological) presupposition that this body accommodates a 'true person' behind the multiple masks (screen personae) in VR;
- *many bodies in a single person*: this version is again 'pathological' in so far as many bodies immediately coalesce with a single collective person, and thereby violate the axiom 'one body - one person'. Take the fantasy of aliens, 'multiple bodies, but one collective mind'; or the case of hypnosis, in which the person of one body possesses another body - not to mention the popular image of 'totalitarian' communities that function like an ant colony - the Centre (Party) totally controls their individual minds
- *many bodies outside a single person* (institution, 'legal' - or, as they put it in France, 'moral' - person). This is how we 'normally' relate to an institution: we say 'the State, Nation, company, school ... wants this', although 'we know very well' that the institution is not an actual living entity with a will of its own, but a symbolic fiction.

The temptation to be avoided here is to 'deconstruct' too hastily the limit which, in both cases, separates the 'normal' from the 'pathological'. The

difference between the subject who suffers from MPD and the subject who plays in MUD does *not* lie in the fact that in the second case there still persists a kernel of Self firmly anchored in the 'true reality' outside the virtual play. The subject who suffers from MPD is rather too firmly anchored in 'true reality': what he lacks is, in a sense, lack itself: the void which accounts for the constitutive dimension of subjectivity. That is to say: the 'multiple Selves' externalized on the screen are 'what I want to be', the way I would like to see myself, the representations of my ideal ego; as such, they are like the layers of an onion: there is nothing in the middle, and the subject is this 'nothing' itself. It is therefore crucial to introduce here the distinction between 'Self' ('person') and subject: the Lacanian 'decentred subject' is *not* simply a multiplicity of good old 'Selves', partial centres; the 'divided' subject does *not* mean there are simply *more* Egos/Selves in the same individual, as in MUD. The 'decentration' is the decentrement of the \$ (the void of the subject) with regard to its content ('Self', the bundle of imaginary and/or symbolic identifications); the 'splitting' is the splitting between \$ and the phantasmic 'persona' as the 'stuff of the I'. *The subject is split even if it possesses only one 'unified' Self*, since this split is the very split between \$ and Self In more topological terms: the subject's division is not the division between one Self and another, between two contents, but *the division between something and nothing*, between the feature of identification and the void.

'Decentrement' thus first designates the ambiguity, the oscillation between symbolic and imaginary identification - the undecidability as to where my true point is, in my 'real' self or in my external mask, with the possible implication that my symbolic mask can be 'more true' than what it conceals, the 'true face' behind it. At a more radical level, it points towards the fact that the very sliding from one identification to another, or among 'multiple selves', presupposes the gap between identification as such and the void of \$ (the 'barred subject') which *identifies itself*- serves as the empty medium of identification. In other words, the very process of shifting among multiple identifications presupposes a kind of empty band which makes the leap from one identity to another possible, and this empty band is the subject itself.

To make the subject's 'decentration' clearer, we should recall the 'agent' in cyberspace: a program which acts as my stand-in, performing a series of specific functions. An 'agent' works in both directions: on the one hand it can serve as my extension and act for me, scanning the immense conglomerate of information and picking out what interests me, accomplishing simple (or not so simple) tasks for me (sending messages, etc.); on the other, it can act *on* me and control me (for example, it can automatically check my blood pressure and warn me if it

riser too much). Such a program which acts as my stand-in within the cyberspace provides an almost perfect illustration of the Lacanian concept of *ego* as opposed to the subject: a cyberspace agent is not 'another subject' but simply the subject's ego, ego as the subject's supplement - it is, of course, a kind of 'alter ego', but Lacan's point is that ego itself is always-already 'alter' with regard to the subject whose ego it is. For that reason, the subject entertains towards it the relationship of acceptance through disavowal described by Turkle: 'one knows very well it is merely a program, not a real living person', but for that very reason (i.e. because one knows that 'it's only a game') one can allow oneself to treat it as a caretaking partner Here again we encounter the radical ambiguity of cyberspace supplements: they can improve our lives, delivering us of unnecessary burdens, but the price we pay is our radical 'decentration' - that is to say, agents also 'mediate' us. Since my cyberspace agent is an external program which acts on my behalf, decides what information I will see and read, and so on, it is easy to imagine the paranoid possibility of *another* computer program controlling and directing my agent unbeknownst to me - if this happens, I am, as it were, dominated from within; my own ego is no longer mine.

One of the commonplaces about Romanticism is that it asserts madness as the positive foundation of 'normality': it is not madness which is a secondary and accidental distortion of normality; rather, it is normality itself which is nothing but gentrified/regulated madness (to quote Schelling) - in this way, Romanticism clearly announces the Freudian thesis that the 'pathological' provides the key to the 'normal'. Long before Romanticism, however, Malebranche adopted the same approach. In eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought, the blind man acted as the model enabling us to grasp the logic of vision: we can claim that we understand vision only when we can translate the act of seeing into a procedure accessible also to a person who, precisely, does *not* see.²⁰

Along the same lines, Malebranche claims that the 'pathological' case of feeling a hand one does not have provides the key to explaining how a 'normal' person feels the hand he actually possesses - as in psychoanalysis, where the 'pathological' provides the key to the 'normal'. No wonder, then, that Malebranche, in effect, pre-empted Lacan's famous quip about madness ('A madman is not only a beggar who thinks he is a king, but also a king who thinks he is a king' - that is, who directly grounds his symbolic mandate in his immediate natural properties): in strict analogy, Malebranche claims that a madman is not only a person who feels his right hand without actually having one - that is, a person who can feel pain in his missing limbs - but also a person who feels a hand he *really* has, since when I claim to feel my hand directly, I confound two ontologically different hands: the material, bodily hand and the represen-

tation of a hand in my mind, which is the only thing I am actually aware of. A madman is not only a man who thinks he is a rooster, but also a man who thinks he is directly a man - that is to say, this material body he feels directly as his own. Here Malebranche evokes the problematic of the two bodies, the ordinary material one and the sublime one: the fact that I can fully feel the limb I do not have demonstrates that the hand I feel is not the corporeal hand but the idea of this hand planted in my mind by God. (In his piano music, Robert Schumann exploits the same gap with a melody which is expected to occur - whose structural place is constructed - but is then not actually played: for that reason, its presence is even more strongly felt - see Appendix II below.) And is not the *phallus* that strange bodily organ in which bodily and mental causality separate and at the same time strangely intermingle (its erection does not obey my conscious will, yet I can obtain involuntary erection by mere thoughts)? Perhaps this simultaneous separation/overlapping defines 'symbolic castration'. One can thus say that the phallus is the ultimate occasionalist object: the point at which the very gap that separates the series of mental causes from the series of bodily causes is inscribed into our body

The phantasmic hypertext

Our first result is thus that cyberspace merely radicalizes the gap constitutive of the symbolic order: (symbolic) reality always-already was 'virtual'; that is to say: *every access to (social) reality has to be supported by, an implicit phantasmic hypertext*. How does this hypertext work?

Ulu Grosbard's *Falling in Love* is usually dismissed as a failed remake of David Lean's *Brief Encounter*; what perhaps saves the film, however, is its overt self-reflective attitude: before we get to the final happy ending (the couple are reunited for good), all other known and possible endings are rehearsed. For a brief moment, it seems that the desperate heroine will attempt suicide; for a further brief moment, it seems that, a year after breaking up, the two lovers will accidentally meet again, just sadly say hello to each other, and then depart; and so on. Because of all this, the spectator is assured, at least twice, that what he sees is already the final scene of the film - unexpectedly, however, the film goes on This implicit reference to (at least) two other possible outcomes is not a mere intertextual play, but relies on a deeper libidinal necessity: it is only against the background of the two phantasmic scenarios (suicide; the melancholic encounter after the break-up) that the couple can finally be reunited in 'real life'. At the level of fantasy, these two scenarios must occur if the final reunion in 'real life' is to be rendered acceptable. To

put it in somewhat pathetic terms: the couple can be reunited in 'real life' only if, on the phantasmic level, they have gone through a double suicidal gesture, and accepted the loss. This allows us to supplement the standard notion according to which there is no reality without its phantasmic support: social reality (in this case: the reality of the couple's reunion) can occur only if it is supported by (at least) *two* fantasies, two phantasmic scenarios.

Let us test this hypothesis with some other examples. *Le Père humilié* the last part of Paul Claudel's Coufontaine trilogy, analysed by Lacan as the exemplary case of the modern tragedy,²¹ focuses on the relationship between the beautiful blind Pensée and the two brothers who love her, Orion and Orso. Orion's love for Pensée is absolute, true passion, but for that very reason, after a night of love, he leaves her for the battlefield, where he meets his violent death (what we encounter here, of course, is the standard I-Can't-Love-You-Unless-I-Give-You-Up motif). On the other hand, Orso's love for Pensée is the standard affectionate frame of mind, which lacks this unconditional dimension: more than anything else, he would like to live with her - that is to say, he actually prefers her to anyone or anything else, which is why he gets her (marries her and adopts Orion's son as his own), but has to renounce having sex with her ... a nice version of 'there is no sexual relationship': either a lasting *mariage blanc*, or the consummated passion which has to end in tragedy. One is thus tempted to claim that Orion and Orso are two aspects of one and the same person, like the old gentleman's mistress in Buñuel's *Obscure Object of Desire*, who is played by two different actresses. In other words, do not these two versions embody the two scenarios which, on the phantasmic level, *have to occur, if 'normal' marriage, which seemingly unites both aspects* (I live with a woman that I love, and have a child with her), *is to take place?* Is not such a double renunciation the condition of what we call 'happiness'?

At a different level of political process, the same logic of a double phantasmic background is discernible in *Meet John Doe*, Frank Capra's key film and the turning point in his career: it marks the passage from the social populism of *Mr Deeds* and *Mr Smith* to the Christian attitude of *It's a Wonderful Life*. *Meet John Doe* is the story of an unemployed man (Gary Cooper), hired to impersonate a nonexistent fictional character fabricated by a manipulative journalist (Barbara Stanwyck) to arouse public compassion; the whole scam is orchestrated by Norton, the newspaper's owner and a big mogul, in order to advance his proto-Fascist dictatorial goals. The first uncanny feature of the film is that it presents the crowd not as the idealized community of compassionate common people but as an unstable, unreliable mob which oscillates between the two excesses of sentimental solidarity and violence (well before Freud, such a notion of

the crowd had already been theorized by Spinoza). The further point is that Gary Cooper's character is presented not as an originally good and innocent man, thrown into a violent conflict by some dark manipulative forces or Fate itself (as in the two Mr films), but as an opportunistic loser who first agrees to participate in a scam, and is only gradually redeemed by taking the Cause he is compelled to personify seriously, so that he is finally ready to sacrifice his life in order to prove the seriousness of his commitment. The suicide motif in Capra is present more often than it may appear (it is also central to *It's a Wonderful Life*); but it is only in *Meet John Doe* that it assumes the key role as the only means left to Doe of proving that his Cause is not a fake.

This deadlock is clearly manifested by the obvious failure of the film's ending (the failed ending is the usual place at which the inconsistency of the work's ideological project becomes visible - what makes *Così fan tutte* central to Mozart's operatic project is the very failure of its finale). The ending of the film was decided on after a long period of hesitation in which a whole series of different endings were considered; the existing pseudo-Christological ending involves the ideological gesture of resolving the deadlock of the other endings under consideration.

In the first version the film ended with the convention scene, in which John Doe endeavours to denounce the scam, and with Norton's full victory over John Doe: when Doe attempts to explain to the crowd what actually took place, the electricity is cut off and his voice is not heard In the second version, the truly Christological one, Doe fulfils his promise and actually kills himself - he jumps from the skyscraper, while Norton and others watch; the Colonel, Doe's friend, takes his body in his arms. (Significantly, this pietà composition inverts the one we see in the final version, where it is Doe himself who takes Anna's body into his arms.) In the third, Norton is broken down and promises that the true John Doe story will be printed in his papers²² The version we actually have -when Doe actually wants to commit suicide, the crowd of his followers who are watching talk him out of it, and together they vow to form a new, authentic John Doe movement, out of reach of Norton's manipulations -has thus to be read as the resolution of the deadlock to which the previously considered versions bear witness.

Each ending is unsatisfying in its own way: the first two (the defeat of Doe's Cause; Doe's death) are too bleak; the third one is too ridiculous in the simplicity of Norton's conversion to goodness. The first two versions are the only consistent ones, since they resolve the tension between the authenticity of Doe's Cause and the falsity of his story (the fact that he is a fake) in the only two possible ways: either Doe survives, and the Cause is lost and discredited; or the Cause is saved, but Doe has to pay for it with his life. Both these solutions, however, were unacceptable to the

Hollywood ideological framework. Capra wanted it both ways (Doe alive, as well as his Cause saved), so his problem was how to spare Doe's life without making his vow to kill himself an empty gesture not to be taken seriously. The solution was that the common people, the members of his movement, were the only ones who could effectively convince him not to take his life.

The ending we actually see is thus to be read against the background of the other endings considered, as in Hitchcock's *Notorious*, a film which, perhaps, owes at least part of its powerful impact to the fact that its dénouement should be perceived against the background of at least two other possible outcomes which resonate in it as a kind of alternative history.²³ That is to say: in the first story outline, Alicia wins redemption by the end, but loses Devlin, who is killed rescuing her from the Nazis. In the last scene, back in the USA, she visits Devlin's parents, and shows them a commendation from the President that cites both her and Devlin for their heroic deeds. In a further elaboration of this first version, the climactic party scene was added, and the film was supposed to conclude with it: Devlin preoccupies the Nazis long enough for Alicia to escape, but he is waylaid and killed as she waits outside. The idea was that this act should solve the tension between Devlin, who is unable to admit to Alicia his love for her, and Alicia, who is unable to perceive herself as worthy of love: Devlin admits his love for her without words, by dying in order to save her life. In the final scene, we find Alicia back in Miami with her group of drinking friends: although she is more 'notorious' than ever, she has in her heart the memory of a man who loved her and died for her, and - as Hitchcock put it in a memo to Selznick - 'to her this is the same as if she had achieved a life of marriage and happiness'.

In the second main version, the outcome is the opposite: we already have the idea of a slow poisoning of Alicia by Sebastian and his mother. Devlin confronts the Nazis and flees with Alicia, but Alicia dies in the process. In the epilogue, Devlin sits alone in a Rio café, where he used to meet Alicia, and overhears people discussing the death of Sebastian's wanton and treacherous wife. The letter in his hands, however, is a commendation from President Truman citing Alicia's bravery. Devlin pockets the letter and finishes his drink In a further (arguably the worst) version, devised by none other than Clifford Odets, Alicia and Devlin escape Sebastian's house with Sebastian and his mother, who holds the two lovers at gunpoint; however, the mother becomes enraged and shoots her son, and in the ensuing crash she herself dies, so that everything ends well Finally, the version we know was arrived at, with a finale which implies that Devlin and Alicia are now married. Hitchcock then left this finale out, to end on a more tragic note, with Sebastian, who truly loved Alicia, left to face the Nazis' deadly wrath. (Already in

the triangle of gazes at the famous party scene, Sebastian's gaze is that of the impotent observer.)

The point is that if we are to grasp the explicit story properly, we should read it in the Lévi-Straussian way, against the background of (and in contrast to) the two alternative stories. That is to say: there is definitely a Hitchcockian shibboleth; beneath the standard notion of Hitchcock -the great commercial entertainer, the 'master of suspense' - there is another Hitchcock who, in an unheard-of way, practiced the critique of ideology. The spectator who is not versed in recognizing this Hitchcockian shibboleth will miss the way in which both alternative endings (Devlin's and Alicia's death) *are* incorporated into the film, as a kind of phantasmic background to the action we see on the screen: if they are to constitute a couple, both Devlin and Alicia *have to undergo the 'symbolic death'*, so that the happy ending emerges from the combination of two unhappy endings - that is to say, these two alternative phantasmic scenarios sustain the *dénouement* we actually see.

Towards the end of the film, Alicia undergoes a 'symbolic death' in the guise of the long and painful process of slow poisoning which nearly kills her. (Devlin's 'symbolic death' has a different form, that of openly acknowledging his love for Alicia, an act which involves the radical reformulation of his subjective identity: after he does it, he is no longer 'the same Devlin' - to put it in somewhat pathetic terms, the moment he acknowledges his love for her, his old ego dies.) From this brief description it should already be clear how strong the ideologico-critical thrust of this Hitchcockian shibboleth is: it reveals the entire problematic of sexism - the way the male identity is threatened by assertive femininity, as well as the traumatic price a woman has to pay in order to become a 'normal wife' (Alicia's ordeal by poisoning - like Melanie's near-death towards the end of *The Birds* - demonstrates how only a subdued, immobilized woman, deprived of her autonomy of action, can enter into the marital link with the hero).²⁴

Back to *Meet John Doe*: in what, then, does the resolution of the film consist? A lot has been written about the film's Christological reference (the hero at the end endures his Way of the Cross, the obvious reference to the *pieta* when he carries his beloved Anna (Barbara Stanwyck), the film's Mary Magdalene). What actually occurs, however, is *not* the Christological gesture of the redemption of the collective through the sacrifice of the Leader: the solution the film proposes is not a religious escape. What we in fact encounter at the end is a different sacrificial gesture, the one patently at work in opera, especially in Mozart. Confronted by the ultimate deadlock, the hero heroically asserts his readiness to die, to lose everything, to put everything at stake, and at this very moment of heroic suicidal self-abandonment, the Higher Power (the

King, Divinity) intervenes and spares his life. (In Gluck's *Orfeo*, divinity intervenes and gives Orpheus back his Eurydice at the very moment when he raises the knife to kill himself; in Mozart's *The Magic Flute* the Three Boys intervene at the very moment when Pamina is ready to stab herself, and, later when the desperate Papageno is about to hang himself; in *Idomeneo*, Neptune intervenes at the very moment when King Idomeneo raises his sword to fulfil the sad duty of sacrificing his beloved son; up to Wagner's *Parsifal*, in which Parsifal himself intervenes at the very point when King Amfortas urges his knights to stab him, and thus end his torment.²⁵)

Capra's solution of saving the hero at the precise moment when he displays the seriousness of his suicidal intent (you can have it all only if you pass through the 'zero point,' and agree to lose it all) thus follows an old tradition. This gesture as such is not necessarily mystifying, so the problem with the film is not that it opts for this solution. That is to say: this gesture fits perfectly the fact that, in contrast to the two populist *Mr* films, the hero of *Doe* is not, from the very outset, an innocent nice guy but a confused opportunist, a victim who only gradually, through a painful process of education, grows into his role of Doe: so, in this sense, a suicidal moment has to occur in which the hero casts off the fake position and assumes an authentic position. The position of Gary Cooper in *Meet John Doe*, is thus in a way analogous to that of Cary Grant in Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*: in both films the subject occupies, fills in, the empty place in some pre-existing symbolic network: first, there is the signifier 'George Kaplan' or 'John Doe', then the person (Roger O. Thornhill, the anonymous unemployed man) finds himself occupying this place. The difference between the two cases is that Gary Cooper (like de Sica in Rossellini's *General della Rovere*) gradually identifies with this symbolic place and fully assumes it, up to the point where he is prepared to stake his life on it.

This line of development is properly *materialist*: it accounts for the process in the course of which what was at the outset a manipulated movement with a faked Leader can outgrow its initial conditions and turn into an authentic movement. That is to say: much more interesting than the idealist narrative of gradually corrupted innocence is the opposite story: since we all live within ideology, the true enigma is how we can outgrow our 'corrupted' initial condition - how something which was planned as ideological manipulation can all of a sudden miraculously start to lead an authentic life of its own. (In the case of religion, for example, the most interesting cases are those - like the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico - where the ideological edifice initially imposed by the colonizers was appropriated by the oppressed as a means of articulating their grievances, and turned against the oppressors themselves.)

So there is nothing inherently false in the idea that the hero, by means of his suicidal gesture, is no longer a puppet figure manipulated by the proto-Fascist Norton - that he redeems himself and is free to start his movement anew. The problem lies elsewhere. The film concludes with the promise that now, after Doe's redemption, it will be possible to reassemble the Doe movement, but this time in a pure form, freed from Norton's (i.e. proto-Fascist) manipulation, as an authentic movement of the people themselves; the only content of this movement, however, is empty populist sentimental solidarity and love for one's neighbor - in short, what we get is exactly the same ideology as the one previously promulgated by Norton. To paraphrase Marx's well-known indictment of Proudhon from *The Misery of Philosophy*: instead of the depiction of actual people caught in and manipulated into an ideological illusion, we get this illusion itself, without the actual people and conditions in which it thrives

What one should bear in mind is the purely *formal* nature of such a gesture of 'authentic contact': it is quite possible to arouse a feeling of truly belonging to a Cause by simply insisting that things are now for real, that we really mean it, without specifying the content of the Cause (see the parodic speech quoted by Adorno in his *Jargon of Authenticity*). Fascism refers directly to this formal emptiness of the gesture of belonging, to the satisfaction provided by the attachment to the form as such: the message is to obey, to sacrifice oneself for the Cause, without asking why - the content of the Cause is secondary, and ultimately irrelevant. In *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, one of the stories told by William Hurt to Raul Julia is about a woman in France during the German occupation, who is in love with a high-ranking Nazi officer but is horrified at the actions of the Nazis; to allay her fears, the Nazi takes her into his office and explains to her the deepest secrets of the Nazi effort (how they are really doing things to help the people, the profound love that moves them ...), and she understands and accepts his explanation. Of course, we never learn what these profound motivations are, but this gesture, in its very emptiness, in the primacy of form over content, is ideology at its purest.

In the same way, the solution of *Doe* is apparently 'radical' (a 'true' populist movement no longer manipulated by - and playing the game of - big Capital), yet precisely as such it is *stricto sensu* empty, a self-referential assertion of authenticity, a kind of hollow container open to a multitude of incompatible readings, from Fascism to Communism: we never learn in what, precisely, this new populism will consist, and this very void is ideology. In other words, what is missing is simply the turn towards organizing a labor movement and changing the very material conditions in which people like Norton can thrive. The solution would be authentic if we were to witness the birth of a true radical (Communist) political

movement, aimed at destroying the political and economic power of people like Norton, who effectively corrupted the movement in the first place. The emptiness of the existing solution becomes evident if one tries to imagine a possible sequel to the film: what will follow? Will it be possible for the new authentic Doe populism to thrive in the same society which concocted it as a means of manipulation? Or, if we take the wellknown allegorical dimension of the film, Doe is a kind of Capra selfportrait (Capra himself was traumatized by his own success; he underwent a kind of 'crisis of investiture' and considered himself a fake, unable as he was to accept the fact that he was the author who could incite such enthusiasm in the public; on the other hand, he considered himself manipulated by the studio bosses, the real-life Nortons)? The resolution proposed by the film is exactly correlative to the fact that Capra himself was allowed to continue with his populist foolery, in so far as he did not effectively question the power of the studio system.

The suspension of the Master

The supreme example of symbolic virtuality, of course, is that of (the psychoanalytic notion of) castration: the feature which distinguishes symbolic castration from the 'real' kind is precisely its virtual character. That is to say: Freud's notion of castration anxiety has any meaning at all only if we suppose that *the threat of castration* (the prospect of castration, the 'virtual' castration) *already produces real 'castrating' effects*. This actuality of the virtual, which defines symbolic castration as opposed to the 'real' kind, has to be connected to the basic paradox of power, which is that symbolic power is by definition virtual, power-in-reserve, the threat of its full use which never actually occurs (when a father loses his temper and explodes, this is by definition a sign of his *impotence*, painful as it may be). The consequence of this conflation of actual with virtual is a kind of transubstantiation: every actual activity appears as a 'form of appearance' of another 'invisible' power whose status is purely virtual - the 'real' penis turns into the form of appearance of (the virtual) phallus, and so on. That is the paradox of castration: whatever I do in reality, with my 'real' penis, is just redoubling, following as a shadow, another virtual penis whose existence is purely symbolic - that is, phallus as a signifier. Let us recall the example of a judge who, in 'real life', is a weak and corrupt person, but the moment he puts on the insignia of his symbolic mandate, it is the big Other of the symbolic institution which is speaking through him: without the prosthesis of his symbolic tide, his 'real power' would instantly disintegrate. And Lacan's point apropos of the phallus as signifier is that the same 'institutional' logic is at work already in the most

intimate domain of male sexuality: just as a judge needs his symbolic crutches, his insignia, in order to exert his authority, a man needs a reference to the absent-virtual Phallus if his penis is to exert its potency.

Swiss bureaucracy provides an illustrative case of this effectivity of virtuality. A foreigner who wants to teach in Switzerland has to appear before a state agency called the *Comiti de Mabitant*, and to apply for a *Certificat de bonne vie et mœurs*; the paradox, of course, is that nobody can *get* this certificate - the most a foreigner can get, in the case of a positive decision, is a paper stating that he is *not to be refused* it - a double negation which, however, is not yet a positive decision.²⁶ This is how Switzerland likes to treat an unfortunate foreign worker: your stay there can never be fully legitimized; the most you can get is the admission which allows you to dwell in a kind of in-between state - you are never positively accepted, you are just not yet rejected and thus retained with a vague promise that, in some indefinite future, you stand a chance

Furthermore, the very notion of 'interface' has its pre-digital precursors: is not the notorious square opening in the side wall of the restroom, in which a gay offers part of his body (penis, anus) to the anonymous partner on the other side, yet another version of the function of interface? Is the subject not thereby reduced to the partial object as the primordial phantasmic object? And is not this reduction of the subject to a partial object offered in the interspace-opening also the elementary *sadistic* scene? If, however, the dimension of virtuality and the function of interface' are consubstantial with the symbolic order, in what, then, *does* the 'digital break' consist? Let us begin with an anecdotal observation. As any academic knows, the problem with writing on the computer is that it potentially suspends the difference between 'mere drafts' and the 'final version': there is no longer a 'final version' or a 'definitive text', since at every stage the text can be further worked on *ad infinitum*, - every version has the status of something 'virtual' (conditional, provisional)... This uncertainty, of course, opens up the space of the demand for a new Master whose arbitrary gesture would declare some version the 'final' one, thereby bringing about the 'collapse' of the virtual infinity into definitive reality.

Hackers in California practise a computer manipulation of the *Star Trek* series, so that they add to the 'official' TV storyline scenes of explicit sexual encounters without changing any of the 'official' content (for example, after the two male heroes enter a room and close the doors, we see a homosexual play between them...). The idea, of course, is not simply to ironize or falsify the TV series, but to bring to light its unspoken implications (the homoerotic tension between the two heroes is clearly discernible to any viewer ...).²⁷ Such changes do not depend directly on technical conditions (the computer's capacity to create lifelike images);

they also presuppose the suspension of the function of the Master on account of which - potentially, at least - there no longer is a 'definitive version'. The moment we accept this break in the functioning of the symbolic order, an entirely new perspective on traditional 'Written' literature also opens up: why shouldn't we start to produce rewritings of canonic masterpieces to which, without changing the 'explicit' content, one would add detailed descriptions concerning sexual activity, underlying power relations, and so on, or simply retell the story from a different perspective, as Tom Stoppard did in his retelling of *Hamlet* from the standpoint of two marginal characters (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*)? *Hamlet* itself immediately gives rise to an entire host of ideas: Hamlet is seduced by his mother into incest (or is he himself raping her)? Ophelia kills herself by drowning because she is pregnant by Hamlet? Wouldn't it also be enlightening to rewrite canonic love texts from the feminist standpoint (say, to produce the diaries of the *woman* who is the object of male advances in 'The Diary of a Seducer' from Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*²⁸)?

In Germany, a whole collection of short stories was written recently, retelling great Western narratives from Oedipus to Faust from the standpoint of the woman involved (Jocasta, Margaretha); even more interesting is the case of the new version of a novel written by a woman and from the romantic woman's perspective, which shifts the focus to another woman - like Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which retells Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* from the standpoint of the 'madwoman in the attic', the insane Bertha, Rochester's first wife, imprisoned on the third floor of the Rochester manor house - what we learn, of course, is that, far from simply fitting the category of evil destroyer, she was herself the victim of brutal circumstances

Since the writer who exemplifies restraint and reliance on the unspoken is definitely Henry James, in whose work tragedies occur and whole lives are ruined during what appears to be a polite dinner-table conversation, would it not also be enlightening to rewrite his masterpieces in order to explicate their latent sexual tensions and political content (Strether from *The Ambassadors* masturbating late in the evening in his hotel room - or, better still, engaged in homosexual play with a paid young boy - to relax after his busy daily social round; Maisie from *V"at Maisie Knew* observing her mother's lovemaking with her lover)? Once the dam of the Master-Signifier collapses, it opens up the way for the flood of ideas, some of which can be not only amusing but also insightful in bringing to light the underlying 'repressed' content. The problem is, however, that one should also not lose sight of what gets *lost* in such a procedure: it relies on the transgressive move of violating the boundaries of some canonic work - once the canonic point of reference loses its

strength, the effect changes completely. Or - to put it in a different way - the effect of some content is entirely different if it is only hinted at as the 'repressed' secret of the 'public' storyline, as opposed to being openly described.

Franz Kafka's *The Castle* describes the hero's (K.'s) desperate attempts to get into the Castle, the mysterious seat of power. A new CD-ROM, *The Castle*, turns Kafka's novel into an interactive game: the player is invited to guide the hapless K past Klamm, the mysterious gatekeeper, and into the dark and dank corridors of the castle The point here is not to deplore the vulgarity of this idea but, rather, the opposite: to emphasize the structural analogy between K's endless attempts to enter into contact with the Castle and the never-ending feature of the interactive computer game, as if that which was, in the case of Kafka, a nightmarish experience turns all of a sudden into a pleasurable game: nobody really wants to enter the Castle fully; the pleasure is provided by the endless game of gradual and partial penetrations. In other words, nightmare turns into pleasurable game the moment the function of the Master is suspended.

The decline of this function of the Master in contemporary Western societies exposes the subject to radical ambiguity in the face of his desire. The media constantly bombard him with requests to choose, addressing him as the subject *supposed to know what he really wants* (which book, clothes, TV program, holiday destination ...): 'Press A if you want this; press B if you want that'; or - to quote the slogan of the recent 'reflective' TV publicity campaign for advertisement itself - 'Advertisement - the right to choose'. At a more fundamental level, however, the new media deprive the subject radically of the knowledge of what he wants: they address a thoroughly malleable subject who has constantly to be told what he wants - that is, the very evocation of a choice to be made performatively creates the need for the object of choice. One should bear in mind here that the main function of the Master is to tell the subject what he wants - the need for the Master arises in answer to the subject's confusion, in so far as he does not know what he wants. What happens, then, in the situation of the decline of the Master, when the subject himself is constantly bombarded with the request to give a sign of what he wants? The exact opposite of what one would expect: it is when there is no one there to tell you what you really want, when all the burden of the choice is on you, that the big Other dominates you completely, and the choice effectively disappears - is replaced by its mere semblance. One is again tempted to paraphrase here Lacan's well-known reversal of Dostoevsky ('If there is no God, nothing at all is permitted'): if no forced choice confines the field of free choice, the very freedom of choice disappears.²⁹

Informational anorexia

The suspension of the function of the (symbolic) Master is the crucial feature of the Real whose contours loom on the horizon of the cyberspace universe: the moment of implosion when humanity will attain the limit that is impossible to transgress; the moment at which the co-ordinates of our societal life-world will be dissolved.³⁰ At that moment, distances will be suspended (I will be able to communicate instantly through teleconferences with any place on the globe); all information, from texts to music to video, will be instantly available on my interface. However, the obverse of this suspension of the distance which separates me from a faraway foreigner is that, due to the gradual disappearance of contact with 'real' bodily others, a neighbor will no longer be a neighbor, since he or she will be progressively replaced by a screen spectre; general, availability will induce unbearable claustrophobia; excess of choice will be experienced as the impossibility to choose; universal direct participatory community will exclude all the more forcefully those who are prevented from participating in it. The vision of cyberspace opening up a future of unending possibilities of limitless change, of new multiple sex organs, and so on, conceals its exact opposite: an unheard-of imposition of radical closure. This, then, is the Real awaiting us, and all endeavours to symbolize this Real, from utopian (the New Age or 'deconstructionist' celebrations of the liberating potentials of cyberspace) to the blackest dystopian ones (the prospect of the total control by a God-like computerized network ...), are just that: so many attempts to avoid the true 'end of history', the paradox of an infinity far more suffocating than any actual confinement.

Or - to put it in a different way - the virtualization cancels the distance between a neighbor and a distant foreigner, in so far as it suspends the presence of the Other in the massive weight of the Real: neighbors and foreigners are all equal in their spectral screen presence. That is to say: why was the Christian injunction 'Love thy neighbor as thyself' so problematic for Freud? The proximity of the Other which makes a neighbor a neighbor is that of *jouissance*: when the presence of the Other becomes unbearable, suffocating, it means that we experience his or her mode of *jouissance* as too intrusive.³¹ And what is contemporary 'postmodern' racism if not a violent reaction to this virtualization of the Other, a return of the experience of the neighbor in his or her (or their) intolerable, traumatic *presence*? The feature which disturbs the racist in his Other (the way they laugh, the smell of their food ...) is thus precisely the little piece of the Real which bears witness to their presence beyond the symbolic order.

So - back to the deadlock involved in the act of filling in the gaps in a

canonic narrative (*Star Trek, Hamlet, The Ambassadors ...*): as it has often been said, Virtual Reality is a kind of Orwellian misnomer. What is threatened in its rise is the very dimension of virtuality consubstantial with the symbolic order: the universe of VR tends to bring to light, to realize on the textual surface, the underlying fantasy - that is, to fill in the gap which separates the symbolic surface texture from its underlying fantasy, which is merely surmised or indicated in a canonic text (What takes place when the door closes behind the two main heroes of *Star Trek*? What is Strether doing alone in his hotel room in *The Ambassadors*?). The canonic text's consistency relies on the delicate balance of what is said and what is merely implied - if we 'say it all', the effect is not simply that of truth. Why? We must focus on what gets lost when these voids in the text are filled in - what gets lost is the real presence of the Other. Therein lies the paradox: the oppressive and simultaneously elusive presence of the Other subsists in the very absences (holes) of the symbolic texture. In this precise sense the commonplace according to which the problem with cyberspace is that reality is virtualized, so that instead of the flesh-and-blood presence of the Other we get a digitalized spectral apparition, *misses the point*: what brings about the 'loss of reality' in cyberspace is not its emptiness (the fact that it is lacking with respect to the fullness of the real presence) but, on the contrary, its very excessive fullness (the potential abolition of the dimension of symbolic virtuality). Is not one of the possible reactions to the excessive filling-in of the voids in cyberspace therefore *informational anorexia*, the desperate refusal to accept information, in so far as it occludes the presence of the Real?

We are thus a long way from bemoaning the loss of contact with a real" flesh-and-blood other in cyberspace, in which all we encounter are digital phantoms: our point, rather, is that cyberspace is *not spectral enough*. That is to say: the status of what we have called the 'real presence of the Other' is inherently spectral: the little piece of the Real by means of which the racist identifies the *Other-jouissance* is a kind of minimal guarantee of the spectre of the Other who threatens to swallow us or to destroy our 'way of life'. To take another example: in 'phone sex', the very narrowness of the communication band (our partner is accessible to us only in the guise of a disembodied and, as such, all-pervasive voice) elevates the Other, our partner, into a spectral entity whose voice directly penetrates our interior. When (and if) we finally encounter our phonestex partner in real life, the effect is often precisely what Michel Chion called *désacousmatisation*:³² the Other loses his spectral quality, he turns into an ordinary worldly being towards whom we can maintain a normal distance. In short, we pass from the spectral Real to reality, from the obscene ethereal *presence* of the Other to the Other who is simply an object of *representation*.

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

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

The easiest way to discern the set of social relations which overdetermine the mode of operation of cyberspace is to focus on the predominant 'spontaneous ideology of cyberspace', the so-called *cyberevolutionism* which

relies on the notion of cyberspace (or World Wide Web) as a self-evolving 'natural' organism.³³ Crucial here is the blurring of the distinction between 'culture' and 'nature': the obverse of the 'naturalization of culture' (market, society, etc. as living organisms) is the 'culturalization of nature' (life itself is conceived as a set of self-reproducing items as information - 'genes are memes'). This new notion of Life is thus neutral with respect to the distinction between natural and cultural or 'artificial' processes - both Earth (as Gaia) and global market appear as gigantic self-regulated living systems whose basic structure is defined in terms of the process of coding and decoding, of passing on information, and so on. The reference to the World Wide Web as a living organism is often evoked in contexts which may 'seem liberating: say, against the state censorship of Internet. This very demonization of the State, however, is thoroughly ambiguous, since it is predominantly appropriated by fighting populist discourse and/or market liberalism: its main targets are the state interventions which try to maintain a kind of minimal social balance and security - the title of Michael Rothschild's book (*Bioeconomics: The Inevitability of Capitalism*) is indicative here. So - while cyberspace ideologists can dream about the next step of evolution in which we will no longer be mechanically interacting 'Cartesian' individuals, in which each 'person' will cut their substantial link to their individual body and conceive themselves as part of the new holistic Mind which lives and acts through him or her, what is obfuscated in such direct 'naturalization' of the World Wide Web or market is the set of power relations - political decisions, institutional conditions - within which 'organisms' like internet (or market or capitalism ...) can only thrive.³⁴

Saving the appearance

This brings us back to the problem of the Master-Signifier: a MasterSignifier is always virtual in the sense of involving some structural ambiguity. In *X Files*, the relationship between the extraterrestrials interfering with our lives and the mysterious government agency which knows about it is utterly ambiguous: who actually pulls the strings, government or extraterrestrials? Is the government using the extraterrestrials to increase its hold over the population, or is it passively collaborating in order to prevent panic, since it is helpless and held in check by them? The point is that the situation has to remain open, undecidable: if the gaps were to be filled in here, if we were to learn the true state of things, the entire symbolic universe of *X Files* would disintegrate. And it is crucial that this ambiguity turns around the problem of power and impotence: symbolic authority is virtual, which means that it functions as

a threat which should never be put to the test - one can never be sure if one's father (on whose symbolic authority one relies) is truly so powerful or just an impostor. Symbolic power is thus effective only as virtual, as a promise or threat of its full display. This, perhaps, also provides the ultimate resort of the figure of 'the man who knows too much': he knows too much about authority - that is, the secret he knows is that authority is an imposture, that Power is really impotent, helpless. What the emptiness of the Master-Signifier conceals is thus the inconsistency of its content (its signified): the shark in Spielberg's *Jaws* functions as a symbol only in so far as its fascinating presence obfuscates the inconsistent multitude of its possible meanings (is it a symbol of the Third World threat to America? A symbol of unbridled capitalist exploitation? and so on) - were we to obtain a clear answer, the effect would be lost. And again, this virtual status of the Master-Signifier is what gets lost in cyberspace, with its tendency to 'fill in the gaps'.

The suspension of the Master, which reveals impotence, in no way gives rise to liberating effects: the knowledge that 'the Other doesn't exist' (that the Master is impotent, that Power is an imposture) imposes on the subject an even more radical servitude than the traditional subordination to the full authority of the Master. In his analysis of Paul Claudel's Coufontaine trilogy, Lacan elaborates the distinction between classical and modern tragedy: classical tragedy is the tragedy of Destiny, of the subject guilty without his active participation; guilt is inscribed into his very position in the symbolic network of Destiny. The modern, post-Christian tragedy, on the contrary, takes place in a universe in which 'God is dead' - that is, our lives are no longer preordained by the cosmic frame of Destiny. Lacan's point here is that this absence of Destiny, of the symbolic frame which detennines our guilt in advance, not only does not make us free, but imposes on us an even more radical tragic guilt - as he puts it, the subject's tragic fate hinges on the fact that he becomes the hostage of the Word.³⁵

The supreme example of this new tragic predicament is the fate of the sacrificed Stalinist Communist: this example makes it clear how - to put it succinctly - the subject is called upon to sacrifice himself *in order to save the appearance* (of the Master's or Leader's omnipotence and knowledge) - to prevent the Master's impotence from becoming visible to all the world. When, in the post-classical universe, no one 'really believes' in the universal Destiny inherent in the cosmic Order (be it Christian Faith or Communism) - when, to put it in Hegelese, Faith loses its substantial weight - it becomes crucial to *maintain the appearance* of Faith. When a true believer in Stalinist Communism is asked to confess his deviancy, or even his treason, the underlying line of argumentation is: 'We all know that the big Other doesn't exist (that our Leader is not perfect, that we

have made a lot of mistakes, that there are no iron laws of History, that the Necessity of Progress towards Communism is not as inexorable as we pretend), but to acknowledge this would add up to a total catastrophe. The only way to save the appearance - to safeguard the Party and its Leader as historical Reason incarnate, to avoid imputing to the Leader and the Party the responsibility for our evident failures - is for you to assume the responsibility for our failures - that is to say, to confess your guilt.' This underlying logic of the Stalinist show trials thus bears direct witness to the fact that Communism is no longer a substantial Faith, but a modern Faith relying on the subject's readiness to sacrifice himself and to assume guilt in order to keep hidden the fact that 'the father is humiliated', that the Leader is impotent. The subject is not called upon to sacrifice himself for the Truth of the Faith: he is called upon to sacrifice himself precisely so that the fact that 'the big Other doesn't exist' will continue to be invisible, so that the idealized figure of the Leader embodying the big Other will remain intact and unblemished.

In this sense, the subject is 'the hostage of the Word': 'Word' stands here for the ideological doctrine which has lost its substantial bearings, it has the status of a pure semblance, but which - precisely as such, as a pure semblance - is essential. The subject is blackmailed and, as it were, cornered by being told that if he doesn't forget about his individual rights, his innocence, or even his honor and dignity, and confess, the -Word which guarantees the semblance of Meaning will disintegrate. In other words, he is asked to sacrifice himself, the innermost kernel of his being - not for the True Cause, but for a pure semblance. Furthermore, this retreat of substantial Destiny, of the symbolic Law regulating our existence, also coincides with the shift from *symbolic Law* to superego: the agent who imposes on the subject the sacrifice which should 'save the appearance' (say, the confession at the show trial 'needed by the Party to forge its unity and mobilize its members') is clearly a superego figure amassing the *jouissance* of which the subject is deprived: the appearance of Destiny to which this subject refers (in the case of Stalinism, as the 'inexorable progress towards Communism') is a mask concealing the *jouissance* of the subject who reserves for himself the position of the object-instrument of the big Other .³⁶

What can meteorology teach us about racism?

What, then, is the nature of the difference between the narrativist postmodernism and Lacan? Perhaps the best way to approach it is via the gap which separates the modern universe of science from traditional knowledge: for Lacan, modern science is not just another local narrative

grounded in its specific pragmatic conditions, since it does relate to the (mathematical) Real beneath the symbolic universe.

Let us recall the difference between modern satellite meteorology and the traditional wisdom about the weather, which 'thinks locally'. Modern meteorology assumes a kind of metalanguage view on the entire atmosphere of the Earth as a global and self-enclosed mechanism, while traditional meteorology involves a particular viewpoint within a finite horizon: out of some Beyond which, by definition, remains beyond our grasp, clouds and winds arrive, and all one can do is formulate the rules of their emergence and disappearance in a series of 'wisdoms' ('If it rains on the first of May, beware of drought in August', etc.). The crucial point is that 'meaning' can emerge only within such a finite horizon: weather phenomena can be experienced and conceived as 'meaningful' only in so far as there is a Beyond out of which these phenomena emerge, following laws which are not directly natural laws - the very lack of natural laws directly connecting actual weather here and the mysterious Beyond sets in motion the search for 'meaningful' coincidences and correlations. The paradox is that although this traditional 'closed' universe confronts us with unpredictable catastrophes which seem to emerge 'out of nowhere', it none the less provides a sense of ontological 'safety', of dwelling within a self-enclosed finite circle of meaning where things (natural phenomena) in a way 'speak to us', address us.

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

Paradigmatic here are the last chapters of Edgar Allan Poe's *Gordon Pym*, which stage the phantasmic scenario of crossing the threshold into the pure Otherness of the Antarctic. The last human settlement prior to this threshold is a native village on an island with savages so black that

even their teeth are black; significantly, what one encounters on this island is also the ultimate Signifier (a gigantic hieroglyph inscribed into the very shape of the mountain chain). Savage and corrupt as they are, the black men cannot be bribed into accompanying the white explorers further south: they are scared to death by the very notion of entering this prohibited domain. When the explorers finally enter this domain, the ice-cold polar snowscape gradually and mysteriously turns into its opposite, a domain of thick, warm and opaque whiteness ... in short, the incestuous domain of primordial Milk. What we get here is another version of the kingdom of Tarzan or *She*: in Rider Haggard's *She*, Freud's notorious claim that feminine sexuality is a 'dark continent' is realized in a literal way: She-who-must-be-obeyed, this Master beyond Law, the possessor of the Secret of Life itself, is a white woman ruling in the midst of Africa, the dark continent. This figure of She, of a woman who exists (in the unexplored Beyond), is the necessary phantasmic support of the patriarchal universe. With the advent of modern science, this Beyond is abolished, there is no longer a 'dark continent' which generates a Secret - consequently, Meaning is also lost, since the field of Meaning is by definition sustained by an impenetrable dark spot at its very heart.

The very process of colonization thus produces the excess which resists it: does not the mystery of Shangri-la (or of Tarzan's kingdom, or of the kingdom of *She*, or ...) lie precisely in the fact that we are dealing with the domain which *has not yet been colonized*, with the imagined radical Otherness which forever eludes the colonizer's grasp? Here, however, we encounter another key paradox. This motif of *She* relies on one of the key mythical narratives of colonialism: after white explorers transgress a certain frontier which is taboo even for the most primitive and cruel aborigines, and enter the very 'heart of darkness', what they encounter there in this purely phantasmic Beyond, is again the rule of a mysterious White Man, the pre-Oedipal father, the absolute Master. The structure here is that of a Moebius band - at the very heart of Otherness, we encounter the other side of the Same, of our own structure of masterhood.

In his formidable *Fear in the Occident*,³⁷ Jean Delumeau draws attention to the unerring succession of attitudes in a medieval city infested by plague: first, people ignore it and behave as if nothing terrible is really going on; then they withdraw into privacy, avoiding contact with each other; then they start to resort to religious fervor, staging processions, confessing their sins, and so on; then they say to themselves 'What the hell, let's enjoy it while it lasts!', and indulge passionately in orgies of sex, eating, drinking and dancing; finally, they return to life as usual, and again behave as if nothing terrible is going on. However, this second 'life as usual' does not occupy the same structural role as the first: it is, as it

were, located on the other side of the Moebius band, since it no longer signals the desperate attempt to ignore the reality of plague, but, rather, its exact opposite: resigned acceptance of it Does not the same go for the gradual replacement of (sexually, racially ...) aggressive with more 'correct' expressions, like the chain *nigger - Negro - black - AfricanAmerican* or *crippled - disabled - bodily challenged*? This replacement functions as a metaphorical substitution which potentially proliferates and enhances the very (racist, etc.) effect it tries to banish, adding insult to injury. In analogy to Delumeau, one should therefore claim that the only way actually to abolish the hatred-effect is, paradoxically, to create the circumstances in which one can *return to the first link in the chain* and use it in a non-aggressive way - like following the patterns of 'life as usual' the second time in the case of plague. That is to say: as long as the expression 'crippled' contains a surplus, an indelible mark, of aggressivity, this surplus will not only be more or less automatically transferred on to any of its 'correct' metaphorical substitutes, it will even be enhanced by dint of this substitution. The strategy of returning to the first link, of course, is risky; however, the moment it is fully accepted by the group targeted by it, it definitely can work. When radical African-Americans call each other 'niggers', it is wrong to dismiss this strategy as a mere ironic identification with the aggressor; rather, the point is that it functions as an autonomous act of dismissing the aggressive sting.³⁸

A further thing to note about the white Master who rules in this phantasmic domain of radical Otherness is that this figure is split into two opposites: either the horrifying embodiment of 'diabolical Evil' who knows the secret of *jouissance* and, consequently, terrorizes and tortures his subjects (from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* to the feminine version, Rider Haggard's *She*) or the saint who rules his kingdom as a benevolent theocratic despot (Shangri-la in *Lost Horizon*). The point, of course, lies in the 'speculative identity' of these two figures: the diabolically evil Master is 'in himself or for us' *the same* as the saintly sage-ruler; their difference is purely formal, it concerns only the shift in the perspective of the observer. (Or, to put it in Schelling's terms, the saintly wise ruler is, in the mode of potentiality, what the evil Master is in the mode of actuality, since 'the same principle carries and holds us in its ineffectiveness which would consume and destroy us in its effectiveness'.³⁹) What the hundreds-of-years-old monk who runs Shangri-la, and Kurtz from *Heart of Darkness*, share is that they have both cut their links with common human considerations and entered the domain 'between the two deaths'. As such, Kurtz is the Institution in all its phantasmic purity: his very excess merely realizes, brings to an end, the inherent logic of the Institution (the Company and its colonization of the wilderness of Congo).⁴⁰ This inherent logic is concealed in the 'normal' functioning of

the Institution: the very figure which literally realizes the logic of the Institution is, in a properly Hegelian way, perceived as an unbearable excess which has to be finished off,

This, however, in no way implies that today's racism is a kind of remainder of the traditional open/closed universe, with its structure of the Limit and its phantasmic Beyond (the place of what one usually refers to as 'enchantment'), which gets lost in the modern 'disenchanted' universe. Today's racism is strictly (post)modern; it is a reaction to the 'disenchantment' inflicted by the new phase of global capitalism. One of the commonplaces of the contemporary 'post-ideological' attitude is that today, we have more or less outgrown divisive political fictions (of class struggle, etc.) and reached political maturity, which enables us to focus on real problems (ecology, economic growth ...) relieved of their ideological ballast - however, it is as if today, when the dominant attitude defines the terrain of the struggle as that of the Real ('real problems' versus 'ideological chimeras'), the very foreclosed political, as it were, *returns in the Real* - in the guise of racism, which grounds political differences in the (biological or social) Real of the race.⁴¹ One could thus claim that what the 'post-ideological' attitude of the sober pragmatic approach to reality excludes as 'old ideological fictions' of class antagonism, as the domain of 'political passions' which no longer have any place in today's rational social administration, is the historical Real itself.

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

The problem with today's social functioning of cyberspace is thus that it potentially fills in the gap, the distance between the subject's public

symbolic identity and its phantasmic background: fantasies are increasingly immediately externalized in the public symbolic space; the sphere of intimacy is more and more directly socialized. The inherent violence of cybersex lies not in the potentially violent content of sexual fantasies played out on the screen, but in the very formal fact of seeing my innermost fantasies being directly imposed on me from without. A painful and disturbing scene from David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* (Willem Dafoe invading the private space of Laura Dern, touching her intimate parts, forcing her to say 'Fuck me!', and after she finally does so, replying 'No, thanks, I don't have time today, but on another occasion I would do it gladly')⁴² perfectly illustrates the obscene violence of cybersex in which, although (or, rather, precisely because) 'nothing really happens in our bodily reality', the phantasmic intimate kernel of our being is laid bare in a much more direct way, making us totally vulnerable and helpless.

The prospect of the accomplished digitalization of all information (all books, movies, data ... computerized and instantly available) promises the almost perfect materialization of the big Other: out there in the machine, 'everything will be written', a complete symbolic redoubling of reality will take place. This prospect of a perfect symbolic accountancy also augurs a new type of catastrophe in which a sudden disturbance in the digital network (an extra effective virus, say) erases the computerized 'big Other', leaving the external 'real reality' intact. We thus arrive at the notion of a purely virtual catastrophe: although, in 'real life', nothing whatsoever happens, and things seem to follow their course, the catastrophe is total and complete, since 'reality' is all of a sudden deprived of its symbolic support As is well known, all large armies are today more and more playing virtual war games, winning or losing battles on computer screens, battles which simulate every conceivable condition of 'real' war. So the question naturally crops up: if we have virtual sex, and so on, why not virtual warfare? Why shouldn't 'real' warfare be replaced by a gigantic virtual war which will be over without the majority of ordinary people being aware that there was any war at all, like the virtual catastrophe which will occur without any perceptible change in the 'real' universe? Perhaps, radical virtualization - the fact that the whole of reality will soon be 'digitalized', transcribed, redoubled in the 'big Other' of cyberspace - will somehow redeem 'real life', opening it up to a new perception, just as Hegel already had a presentiment that the end of art (as the 'sensible appearing of the Idea'), which occurs when the Idea withdraws from the sensible medium into its more direct conceptual expression, simultaneously liberates sensibility from the constraints of Idea?

Notes

¹ For a detailed account of this structure of sublimation, see Chapter 4 of Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, London: Verso 1994.

² Furthermore, it would be productive to classify the multitude of 'irrational' impediments in Buñuel's films; they can be grouped in four categories which form a kind of Greimasian semiotic square: sexual impediment which prevents the consummation of the act of love, and thus proves that 'there is no sexual relationship' (*That Obscure Object of Desire*); religious impediment which prevents our access to spiritual freedom (*Navarin*); the impossibility of participating in a banal everyday social ritual, i.e. a dinner party (*The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*); the obverse impossibility of ending the social ritual and leaving the house after a dinner party (*The Exterminating Angel*); the criminal transgressive act, i.e. murder (*The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* - a true anti-Oedipus, since in contrast to Oedipus, who unknowingly murders his father, poor Archibaldo consciously wants to kill a series of women who are then actually killed, but by a miraculous accident which has nothing to do with him); finally, the sociopolitical impediment which prevents the realization of freedom and makes freedom forever 'phantomatic', i.e. that mysterious X on account of which revolutions always seem to go wrong (*The Phantom of Liberty*, precisely).

The first thing to do is to classify these examples into the couples of opposites: participation in a banal social ritual versus the act of leaving the place of this ritual; the sexual act (i.e. the act of creating life) versus killing (taking life); earthly anarchic freedom versus religious spiritual freedom. It is as if the same opposition is repeated three times, in three different powers/potencies - at the level of banal social rituals, of 'sinful' private acts, and of the endeavour to reach absolute Freedom. At each of the three levels, we can neither 'get out' nor 'stay in': it is impossible to participate in the banal social ritual, but it is also impossible to get out of it; it is impossible to make love, and also to kill; it is impossible to find fulfilment and spiritual freedom in Christian transcendence, but it is no less impossible to find it in social anarchy The Lacanian name for such an inability to 'get out' and 'stay in' is, of course, the Real; this same paradox of the Real is at work in 'free associations' within the psychoanalytic cure (we never really have them, one never can fully suspend the pressure of inhibitions and 'let oneself go'; at the same time, *whatever one says* on the analytic couch is a free association, even if it was carefully planned or if it is a long line of strict logical reasoning) and in *jouissance*: *Jouissance* eludes us, it is beyond our reach, its full confrontation is lethal; at the same time, however, one can never get rid of it, its remainder sticks to us whatever we do. Along the same lines, the Kantian ethical injunction also has the status of the Real: it is impossible fully to realize one's ethical duty, yet it is also impossible to avoid the pressure of the call of duty.

³ On Eisenstein, see V.V. Ivanov, 'Eisenstein's Montage of Hieroglyphic Signs', in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1985, pp. 221-35.

⁴ See Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1995.

⁵ See Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, New York: Columbia University Press 1990.

⁶ Another trap to be avoided here is to sexualize too quickly the shift from the modernist culture of calculation to the postmodernist culture of simulation by calling it a shift from 'masculine' to 'feminine': from male modernist attitude of control, domination, etc., to the postmodern feminine attitude of tinkering, dialogue with the machine This way, we miss the crucial point: a cyborg monster has no sex, it is asexual in the sense of the Lacanian *lamella*, that is, it stands for what was lost in the human animal's entry into the order of sexuality.

⁷ This double trap is analogous to the double trap apropos of the notion of ideology: the simple reliance on pre-ideological external reality as the measure of ideological distortion is strictly correlative to the attitude of 'there is no external reality, all we are dealing with is the multitude of

simulacra, of discursive constructs'. See Slavoj Žižek, 'Introduction', in *Mapping Ideology*, London: Verso 1995.

⁸ Paul Virilio, *The Art of the Motor*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1995, p. 4.

⁹ See Allucquere Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1995.

¹⁰ Virilio, *The Art of the Motor*, p. 113.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 148

¹² See Chapter 2 of Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, New York: Routledge 1993.

¹³ Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, p. 126.

¹⁴ Years ago, in a TV interview, one of the participants in a contest for the best 'Madonna lookalike' gave an appropriate answer to the journalist's patronizing question about how she felt being deprived of her true self in her total imitation of another person: 'For 364 days a year, I am forced to live with my true Self - it is a liberating experience to be able to get rid of it for at least one day!'

¹⁵ Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, p. 205.

¹⁶ In other words, *computerization undermines performativity*. By claiming this, I am not resurrecting the myth of the good old pre-computerized times when words really counted. As Derrida - but also Lacan - emphasized again and again, the performative can always, for structural reasons, go wrong; it can arise only against the background of radical undecidability -the very fact that I have to rely on the other's word means that the other remains forever an enigma to me. What tends to get lost in virtual communities is this very abyss of the other, this very background of undecidability: in the 'wired universe', the very opaqueness of the other tends to evaporate. In this sense, the suspension of performativity in virtual communities is the very opposite of the suspension of performativity in the psychoanalytic cure, where I can tell my analyst anything, all my obscene fantasies about him, knowing that he will not be offended, that he will not 'take it personally'.

¹⁷ Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, p. 200.

¹⁸ Or - to take a rather vulgar everyday example - being slightly overweight, I have at my disposal two strategies to conceal this fact. I can put on a shirt with vertical lines which makes me appear slender, or I can, on the contrary, put on a shirt with horizontal lines, counting on the fact that people I meet will (mis)perceive my overweight as the illusion created by my inappropriate dress: 'Look, this stupid shirt makes him look fat, whereas he is not really so fat!'

¹⁹ See Chapter 3 above.

²⁰ See Alenka Zupančič, 'Philosophers' Blind Man's Buff', in *Voice and Gaze as Love Object* (SIC Series, vol. 1), Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1996.

²¹ See Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre VIII.- Le transfert*, Paris: Editions du Seuil 1991.

²² See Joseph McBride, *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1992.

²³ See the fascinating report in Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System*, New York: Hold & Co. 1996, pp. 393-403.

²⁴ Among Hitchcock's films, *Topaz* also has two other endings which were shot but later abandoned: (1) Granville, unmasked as the Russian spy, leaves for Russia and meets the hero, who is also leaving for America, at the airport; (2) Granville and the hero meet at an empty stadium for a duel, but before the duel starts, he is shot by a hidden KGB hit man

²⁵ See Chapter 5 of Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1993.

²⁶ I owe this information to John Higgins, Cape Town University (private conversation). I owe this information to Constance Penley, UCLA (private conversation).

²⁷ I owe this information to Constance Penley, UCLA (private conversation).

²⁸ Incidentally, Kierkegaard *did* plan also to write 'hetaira's diary', a diary of seduction from the perspective of the seductress (who is, typically, conceived of as a 'hetaira', i.e. a prostitute).

²⁹ However, one is also tempted to claim that there is a way in which, in cyberspace, the foreclosed dimension of the symbolic Master 'returns in the Real': in the guise of supplementary characters who exist only as programmed entities within the cyberspace (like Max Headroom from the TV series of the same name - see Chapter 6 of Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology*). Are not

such figures the exemplary cases of what Lacan calls *L'Un-en-plus*, the One which adds itself to the series, the direct point of subjectivization of the anonymous order which regulates relations between 'real' subjects?

³⁰ For an outline of this unbreachable limit, see Paul Virilio, *Cybermonde, la politique du pire*, Paris: Textuel 1996.

³¹ For a more detailed account of the other's unbearable proximity, see Chapter 2 above.

³² See Michel Chion, *La Voix en cinéma*, Paris: Cahiers du cinéma 1982.

³³ I draw here on Tiziana Terranova, 'Digital Darwin', *New Formations* 29 (Summer 1996), London: Lawrence & Wishart.

³⁴ The other foreclosure, correlative to that of social antagonism, is that of sexual difference: cyberevolutionism strives to replace sexual reproduction with models of direct cloning (of the self-reproducing genes).

³⁵ See Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre VIII.- Le transfert*.

³⁶ 'So, when the God of destiny is dead, instead of assuming this death and fulfilling its mourning, one substitutes oneself to it and *perpetuates* with regard to the other a will-to-castration, conferring on this will the figure of destiny in order to mask one's own maligned *jouissance*' (Philippe Julien, *L'Étrange jouissance du prochain*, Paris: Seuil 1995, p. 137). Do not these lines, written to illustrate the position of Father Badillon in Claudel's *L'otage*, perfectly fit the position of the Stalinist party executioner?

³⁷ See Jean Delumeau, *La peur en Occident* Paris: Albin Michel 1976.

³⁸ In the course of my military service, I became very friendly with an Albanian soldier. As is well known, Albanians are very sensitive to sexual insults which refer to their closest family members (mother, sister); I was effectively accepted by my Albanian friend when we left behind the superficial game of politeness and respect, and greeted each other with formalized insults. So when we met each other in the morning, I usually greeted him with: 'I'll screw your mother!', to which he regularly responded: 'Go ahead, you're welcome after I've finished with your sister!' The interesting thing was how soon this exchange lost its openly obscene or ironic character, and became formalized: after only a couple of weeks, the two of us no longer bothered with the whole sentence; in the morning, upon seeing him, I just nodded my head and said 'Mother!', to which he simply responded 'Sister!'.

³⁹ F.W.J. Schelling, *Die Weltalter. Fragmente. In den Urfassungen von 1811 and 1813*, ed. Manfred Schroeter, Munich: Biederstein 1946 (1979 edn), p. 105.

⁴⁰ I owe this idea to Ed Cadava, Princeton University. In his cinema version of *Heart of Darkness* (*Apocalypse Now*), Francis Ford Coppola distorts the Kurtz figure by giving it a New Age mist: Coppola reads Kurtz as a Fisher King figure awaiting (and thus accepting) his death as a ritual which will lead to his subsequent regeneration.

⁴¹ Here I follow ideas developed by Jacques Rancière (in a private conversation). Such a gesture which draws the line of separation between 'real problems' and 'ideological chimeras' is, from Plato onwards, the very founding gesture of ideology: ideology is by definition self-referential - that is, it always establishes itself by assuming a distance towards (what it denounces as) 'mere ideology'.

⁴² For a closer analysis of this scene, see Appendix I below.