

The Undergrowth of Enjoyment: How Popular Culture can Serve as an Introduction to Lacan

This article was first published in *New Formations* (vol. 9 (1989), pp. 7–29). Here Žižek pursues the difference between the earlier, 'structuralist' Lacan of the 1950s and the later Lacan of the Real of the 1960s onwards, in order to bring out the radicality of this concept within his triad of Imaginary/Symbolic/Real. The fundamental recalcitrance of the Real, the 'irreducible kernel of *jouissance* that resists all symbolization', is paradoxically the driving force of every discursive formation (see p. 14 of the article).

Žižek turns in particular to the theory of the cinema, here noting the shift from the semiotic approach of the 1970s, its preoccupation with the spectator as subject to visual seduction, to an emphasis on the gaze and the voice as that which cannot be integrated in either Imaginary or Symbolic. Something apparently meaningless invades our familiar 'reality', a disturbance on the side of the object, which seems to have an awareness of me from which I am excluded, so that I become strange to myself, and instead of gazing, I am gazed at. Similarly, the voice as object, as detached from the speaker, becomes alien to the 'diegetic "reality"', the story-line, and has the same effect as the visual intrusion. As one of his examples, Žižek goes to Hitchcock's *Psycho*, which can serve to illustrate how both gaze and voice function as cinematic objects. With respect to the gaze, Norman Bates's

house is rendered uncanny because the camera's viewpoint switches from the house coming closer (as seen by the approaching woman) to the woman coming closer (as seen from the house), giving the anxious impression that the house is gazing at her; with respect to the voice, the 'mother's' (Norman's) voice is heard without a body, like a free-floating superego in search of something to attach itself to.

But the apparent meaninglessness which irrupts within ideological formations can also serve to resist the superego demand, constituting what Lacan calls *le sinthome*, that singular element of the Real to be found adrift within each subject. While the *symptom* is a compromise with the Symbolic, a message to the Other, an unconscious act of bad faith, the *sinthome* is the invisible kernel, that meaningless fragment of the Real which nevertheless, as part of being – in its 'pathological' singularity – is the basis of the consistency of the subject. At the same time, this meaninglessness, which inevitably becomes subversive, since it cannot be accommodated, preserves the subject from being swallowed up by a totalizing system (see Žižek's film examples, *Brazil* and *Lili Marleen*). Nevertheless, the subject cannot survive without a certain symbolic support. Although the later Lacan shifted his focus from the boundary between Imaginary and Symbolic to that between Symbolic and Real, moving from desire to drive, he realized that the subject cannot escape the Symbolic injunction, the superego's 'So be it!' The status of this voice is also real, since, indirectly, it stands in for the particularities of all others, and reminds us that the Real of desire cannot all be absorbed into an ideal form of the Law.

Žižek moves from the benign superego to the less benign in examining the catastrophic intrusion of the Real in a science-fiction novel and a Fritz Lang film. He discusses various paranoid constructions which reveal the superego as persecutory in a world where an 'Other of the Other' controls events; the paranoid construction allows us to forget that 'the Other does not exist' as a consistent, closed order', and thus enables us to avoid 'confronting the blind, contingent automatism which is constitutive of the symbolic order'. In the case where there is a collapse of the boundary between Real and Symbolic, the Real either floods reality as in psychotic breakdown (e.g. the painter Mark Rothko) or is absorbed into reality as in the paranoid construction (Jim in *Empire of the Sun*), both producing the effect of an 'answer of the Real'. Since the Real cannot be avoided, the paranoid construction is a way of escaping from madness.

This ubiquity of the Real is what the later Lacan takes account of, in contrast to his earlier concentration on the signifier. He thus moves from the notion that *jouissance* is prohibited in language to that of the letter as permeated with enjoyment, the Real as active in every utterance. In the cinema such pervasion of the sign has been designated as *rendu* (Maurice

Chion), a way of representing reality distinct from the Imaginary and the Symbolic modes, typically through the sound-track, which now takes over as dominant indicator of the narrative reality, while the visual images become a secondary montage (as frequently both in *film noir* and in the contemporary cinema). Žižek shows how in three films an arbitrary stylistic prohibition has the effect of *rendu*, each producing the form of a different psychosis and each reproducing, through being an unnecessary prohibition, the Symbolic Law that forbids 'something *that is already in itself inaccessible*', thus making uncannily palpable the tension between Real and Symbolic.

The psychotic effect is constituted by the refusal of symbolic castration, resulting in the lack of a lack, and hence of the ability to attach words to the world. Whereas the earlier, 'classical' Lacan sees the unconscious as determined by the effects of the signifier (as 'the discourse of the Other'), the later Lacan turns to the ways in which signification is disrupted (in the four discourses). In *Seminar XX* he shifts from the Other to the 'One of *jouissance*', the singularity in the subject that resists its inclusion in the signifying chain, *le sinthome*. Žižek cites two stories by Patricia Highsmith to illustrate this 'undergrowth of enjoyment', in which strange uncanny excrescences thrust up from the ground, 'ex-sistence', the ontological, breaking through existence, the mundane. There is a dilemma here for the subject, who is caught in this either/or, 'the Thing embodying impossible enjoyment' or the Symbolic that excludes it. In an analysis, this is precisely what requires resolution at the end. For the late Lacan, this resolution comes about through an identification with the *sinthome*, through a recognition of the singularity of this element, the particular form of one's own enjoyment. A Ruth Rendell story allows Žižek to demonstrate what happens when there is an 'acting out' of a symptom instead of a Lacanian 'passage to the act': the spinster who steals the clock and identifies with its ticking is shifting her guilt to the Other, whereas in the 'passage to the act' the subject identifies with its *sinthome*, 'the pathological "tic" structuring the real kernel of our enjoyment'. 'Acting out' remains bound to the Symbolic, and in particular to its apparatus of truth; 'passage to the act' allows a break with symbolic 'truth' in order to establish an internal consistency.

The English reception of Jacques Lacan, predominantly at least, has still not integrated all the consequences of the break marked by the seminar on *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959–60), a break which radically shifted the accent of his teaching: from the dialectics of desire to the inertia of enjoyment (*jouissance*), from the symptom as coded message to the *sinthome* as letter permeated with enjoyment, from the 'unconscious structured like a language' to the Thing in

its heart, the irreducible kernel of *jouissance* that resists all symbolization.¹ The aim of the present essay is to exemplify some of the key motifs of this last stage of Lacanian theory via a reading of certain narratives borrowed from popular cinema and literature. What is proposed here is not some kind of 'applied psychoanalysis', a psychoanalytic reading of the products of culture, but on the contrary the articulation of some of the fundamental concepts of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory (gaze and voice as objects, the frontier separating reality from the Real, the role of the 'answer of the Real' in the production of the meaning effect, *rendu* and *sinthome*) by the use of examples taken from popular culture, and first from the cinema.

Why cinema? The use of the Lacanian theoretical apparatus in film theory is well known, and has been especially influential in Britain, from the *suture* theories of *Screen* in the 1970s to the feminist explorations indebted especially to the concepts of fantasy and identification. The Lacan who served as a point of reference for these theories, however, was the Lacan before the break; and it is only in French film theory over the last decade that a shift has occurred which corresponds (and has perhaps been directly indebted) to the late turn in Lacanian teaching, a turn that could be summarized concisely by the formula: 'from the signifier to the object'. If the 1970s were dominated by the semiotic approach best rendered by the title of Christian Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier* (an approach whose aim was to dispel the imaginary fascination, to break through it to the hidden symbolic structure regulating its functioning), in the last decade we can observe a shift of accent to the paradoxical status of those remnants and leftovers of the Real that elude the structuring of the signifier: gaze and voice. The renewal of film theory over the last decade is thus centred around gaze and voice as cinematic objects: the status of the first has been elaborated by Pascal Bonitzer,² of the second by Michel Chion.³ It is of course no accident that Lacan defined the object of psychoanalysis, the celebrated *objet petit a*, precisely as gaze and voice.

The first association that comes to mind in connection with 'gaze' and 'voice', for the reader well versed in 'deconstructivist' texts, is that they are the main target of the Derridean enterprise of deconstruction; for what is the gaze if not *theoria* grasping the 'thing itself' in the presence of its form and the form of its presence, and what is the voice if not the medium of pure 'auto-affectation' embodying the presence-to-itself of the speaking subject? The aim of deconstruction is precisely to demonstrate how the gaze is always already determined by the 'infrastructural' network which delimits what can be seen from the unseen, and which thus necessarily eludes capture by the gaze; and how, similarly, the self-presence of the voice is always-already split/deferred by the trace of writing.

Yet there is a radical incommensurability between Lacan and poststructuralist deconstruction; for, in Lacan, the function of gaze and voice is almost exactly the reverse. First of all, they are not on the side of the subject but on the side of the object. The gaze marks the point in the object (the picture) from which the viewing subject is *already gazed at*: it is the object which is gazing at me. Thus, far from guaranteeing the self-presence of the subject and her/his vision, the gaze functions as a spot or stain in/on the picture, disturbing its transparent visibility and introducing an irreducible split in my relation to it. I can never see the picture at the point from which it is gazing at me: the view and the gaze are constitutively dissymmetrical. The gaze as object is a blemish that prevents me from looking at the picture from a safe, 'objective' distance, framing it as something which is at the disposal of my grasping view. It is, we might say, the point at which the very frame (of my view) is already inscribed in the 'content' of the picture. And the same goes, of course, for the voice as object. That voice, the voice, for example, of the superego, addressing me without being attached to any particular bearer, floating freely in some horrifying interspace, functions again as a stain or blemish, whose inert presence interferes like a foreign body and prevents me from achieving self-identity.

To clarify this, let us take as our first example a classic Hitchcockian procedure. How does Hitchcock shoot a scene in which a character is approaching some mysterious and 'uncanny' object? He does it by juxtaposing the subjective view of the approaching object with an objective shot of the subject in motion. Among many instances, let me mention just two, both of which figure a house as the uncanny object: Lilah (Vera Miles) approaching 'Mrs Bates's' house towards the end of *Psycho* and Melanie (Tippi Hedren) approaching Mitch's mother's house in the famous scene from *Birds* analysed in detail by Raymond Bellour.⁴ In both cases, the view of the house as seen by the approaching woman alternates with the shot of the woman walking towards the house. Why does this formal procedure in itself generate such anxiety? Why does the object being approached become 'uncanny'? What we have here is precisely the dialectic of view and gaze, mentioned earlier: the subject sees the house, but what provokes anxiety is the uneasy feeling that the house itself is somehow already gazing at her, from a point which escapes her view and so renders her utterly helpless.⁵

The corresponding status of voice as object has been elaborated by Michel Chion around the notion of the *voix acousmatique*, the voice without bearer which cannot be attributed to a subject and hovers in some indefinable interspace, implacable precisely because it cannot be properly located, being part neither of the diegetic 'reality' of the story nor of the sound-accompaniment (commentary, musical score), but belonging to that mysterious domain designated by Lacan the 'between-two-deaths' (*l'entre-deux morts*). The first

instance that comes to mind here is once again from *Psycho*. As Chion has demonstrated in a brilliant analysis,⁶ the central problem of *Psycho* is to be located on a formal level: it consists in the relation of a certain voice (the 'mother's' voice) to the body; a voice, as it were, in search of a body to utter it. When the voice finally finds a body, it is not the mother's body at all, but the body of Norman, to which it is artificially appended.

The tension created by the errant voice in search of its body may also explain the effect of relief, even of poetic beauty, at the moment of 'desacousmatisation' – the point when the voice finally locates its bearer. Thus at the beginning of George Miller's *Mad Max II: The Road Warrior*, we have an old man's voice introducing the story and an unspecified view of Mad Max alone on the road. Only at the very end does it become clear that the voice and the gaze belong to the little wild kid with the boomerang who later became chief of his tribe and is recounting the story to his descendants. The beauty of the final inversion lies in its unexpectedness: both elements, the gaze-voice and the person who is its bearer, are given from the outset; but it is only at the very end that the connection between them is established, and the gaze-voice 'pinned' to one of the characters of the diegetic reality.

The example of *voix acousmatique* with the most far-reaching implications for the practice of ideological critique is Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*. We all know 'Brazil' as a stupid song from the 1950s that resounds compulsively throughout the picture. This song, whose status is never quite clear (when is it part of the story, when just part of the accompanying score?), embodies in its noisy repetitions the superego imperative of mindless enjoyment. 'Brazil', to put it briefly, is the content of the fantasy of the film's hero, the support and point of reference that structure his enjoyment; and it is precisely for that reason that we can use it to demonstrate the fundamental ambiguity of fantasy and enjoyment. Throughout the film, it seems that the mindlessly obtrusive rhythm of the song serves as a support for totalitarian enjoyment, condensing the fantasy-frame of the 'insane' totalitarian order that the film depicts; but at the very end, just when the hero's resistance has apparently been broken by the savage torture to which he has been subjected, he escapes his torturers by whistling... 'Brazil'! Thus, whilst functioning as a support of the totalitarian order, fantasy is at the same time that overflow or residue of the Real that enables us to 'pull ourselves out', to preserve a kind of distance from the socio-symbolic order. When we go crazy in our obsession with mindless *jouissance*, even totalitarian manipulation cannot reach us.

Finally, a similarly equivocal instance of the *voix acousmatique* can be found in Fassbinder's *Lili Marleen*. During the film the popular love-song 'Lili Marlene' is played and replayed *ad nauseam*, until the endless repetition transforms a lovely melody into a disgusting parasite that will not release us, even for

a moment. Totalitarian power, personified by Goebbels, tries to manipulate the song to capture the imagination of the exhausted soldiers, but it eludes his grasp; like a genie from a bottle, the song takes on a life of its own. The crucial feature of Fassbinder's film is this insistence on the central ambiguity of 'Lili Marlene', a Nazi love-song which is at the same time on the very edge of transforming itself into a subversive element capable of bursting free from the very ideological apparatus by which it is propagated, and thus always in danger of being prohibited.

Such a fragment of the signifier, inescapably permeated with mindless enjoyment, is what Lacan, in the last phase of his teaching, called *le sinthome*: no longer the 'symptom' (the homophonic *symptome*), the coded message to be deciphered by a process of interpretation, but the fragment of a meaningless letter, the reading of which procures an immediate *jouis-sense* or 'meaning-in-enjoyment'.

It should be unnecessary to stress how radically, once we take into account the dimension of the *sinthome* in an ideological structure, we are compelled to modify the procedures of ideological analysis itself. Ideology is usually conceived as a discourse, an enchainment of elements whose meaning is overdetermined by their specific articulation, by the way some 'nodal point' or master-signifier totalizes them into a coherent and homogeneous field. We might point, for example, to Laclau's now classic analysis of the ways in which particular ideological elements function as 'floating signifiers', their meanings fixed retrospectively by the operation of hegemonic nodal instances.⁷ But what is at stake once we take into account the concept of the *sinthome* is a crucial shift away from deconstruction in this form. It is no longer sufficient to denounce ideological experience as artificial; to seek to demonstrate how the object proffered by ideology as natural and given is the product of a discursive construction, the result of a network of symbolic overdetermination; to locate the ideological text in its context, to render visible its necessarily overloaded margins. What we must do – what is done by Fassbinder and Gilliam – is, on the contrary, to isolate the *sinthome* from the context by virtue of which it exerts its power of fascination, to force us to see it in its utter stupidity, as a meaningless fragment of the Real. In other words, we must (as Lacan puts it in *Seminar XI*) 'change the precious gift into a piece of shit'; we must make it possible to experience the mesmerizing voice as a disgusting piece of sticky excrement.

This form of 'estrangement' is perhaps more radical even than Brechtian *Verfremdung*; for it produces distanciation, not by locating the phenomenon in its historical totality, but by making us experience the utter nullity of its immediate reality; the stupidity of a material presence which escapes historical mediation. Dialectical mediation – the context that bestows meaning on the object – is not added, but rather subtracted.

How Real is Reality?

It is no accident that both films, *Brazil* and *Lili Marleen*, depict a totalitarian universe in which the subjects can survive only by clinging to a superego voice (the title song) that enables them to escape a complete 'loss of reality'. As has been pointed out by Lacan, our 'sense of reality' is never supported solely by the 'reality test' (*Realitätsprüfung*); it always requires a certain superego command: a 'So be it!'. The status of the voice uttering this command is neither imaginary nor symbolic; it is real. We have thus reached the second motif that differentiates Lacan's last stage from the preceding ones. In the earlier stages, the accent fell on the boundary separating the Imaginary from the Symbolic; the aim here was to penetrate through the imaginary fascination to its symbolic cause – to the symbolic overdetermination regulating imaginary effects. In the last stage, the emphasis shifts to the barrier separating the Real from symbolically structured reality: to those leftovers or remnants of the Real that escape symbolic 'mediation'.

To exemplify this, let us refer once again to a popular narrative: Robert Heinlein's sci-fi novel *The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag*. The action takes place in contemporary New York; the eponymous hero, Hoag, can remember nothing that happens while he is at work, so he hires the private investigator Teddy Randall to find out what happens to him after he enters his work-place on the thirteenth floor of the Acme Company building. Randall follows Hoag to work; but between the twelfth and fourteenth floors Hoag disappears, and Randall is unable to find the thirteenth floor. That same evening, Randall's double appears in his bedroom mirror and tells the detective to follow him through the mirror, explaining that he has been summoned by 'the committee'. Randall is led to a great meeting-hall, where the president of the committee of twelve informs him that he is now on the thirteenth floor of the Acme building, to which he will be summoned from time to time for nocturnal interrogations.

At the denouement of the story, Hoag invites Randall and his wife to a picnic in the country. He tells them that he has at last become aware of his true identity: he is actually an art critic, though of a peculiar kind. Our universe, he says, is only one of several, and the masters of all the universes are mysterious beings who create different worlds, including our own, as experimental works of art. To maintain the artistic perfection of their efforts, these cosmic artificers from time to time send into their creations one of their own kind disguised as a native, to act as a kind of universal art critic. The mysterious committee members who summoned Randall are representatives of an evil and inferior divinity attempting to corrupt the work of the cosmic artists.

Hoag informs Randall and his wife that, in the course of his visit to this universe, he has discovered one or two minor blemishes which he intends to have put right during the next few hours. Randall and his wife will notice nothing; but on the drive home to New York, they must under no circumstances open the windows of their car. They set off, and the journey is uneventful until they witness a road accident. At first they ignore it and continue on their way; but when they see a patrolman, their sense of duty prevails and they stop to report the accident. Randall asks his wife to lower her window a little:

She complied, then gave a sharp intake of breath and swallowed a scream. He did not scream, but he wanted to. Outside the open windows was no sunlight, no cops, no kids – nothing. Nothing but a grey and formless mist, pulsing slowly as if with inchoate life. They could see nothing of the city through it, not because it was too dense but because it was – empty. No sound came out of it; no movement showed in it. It merged with the frame of the window and began to drift inside. Randall shouted, 'Roll up the window!' She tried to obey, but her hands were nerveless; he reached across her and cranked it up himself, jamming it hard into its seat. The sunny scene was restored; through the glass they saw the patrolman, the boisterous game, the sidewalk, and the city beyond. Cynthia put a hand on his arm. 'Drive on, Teddy!' 'Wait a minute,' he said tensely, and turned to the window beside him. Very cautiously he rolled it down – just a crack, less than an inch. It was enough. The formless grey flux was out there, too; through the glass city traffic and sunny street were plain, through the opening – nothing.

What is this 'grey and formless mist' if not the Lacanian Real – the pulsing of the pre-symbolic substance in all its abhorrent vitality? But what is crucial for us here is the form, or more precisely the place, in which this Real interferes: it irrupts on the very boundary separating the 'outside' from the 'inside', materialized in this case by the car window. Anyone who has ever been inside a car has experienced precisely this phenomenological sense of discord or disproportion between interior and exterior. Though from the outside the car looks small, from the inside it looks all of a sudden far larger; we feel quite comfortable. The price paid for that adjustment is the decisive loss of any continuity between inside and outside. To those sitting inside a car, the outside world appears at a certain distance, separated from them by a barrier or screen symbolized by the windows. They perceive everything outside the car as a mode of reality which is discontinuous with the reality inside. While they remain safely behind the closed windows, however, external objects are as if fundamentally unreal, their reality suspended in parentheses: a kind of cinematic reality, in effect, projected on to the screen of the window. It is precisely this phenomenological experience – the sense of a barrier separating inner and

outer, the perception of the outside as a kind of fictional representation or spectacle – that is invoked by the alarming final scene of Heinlein's story. It is as if, for a moment, the 'projection' of the outside world has stopped working; as if we have been confronted momentarily with the formless grey emptiness of the screen itself, with the Mallarmean 'place where nothing takes place but the place'. (The same dissonance and disproportion between inside and outside are reproduced in Kafka's stories, whose sinister architecture – the block of flats where the Court meets in *The Trial*, the uncle's palace in *Amerika* – is characterized by the fact that what appears from outside a modest structure metamorphoses miraculously on entry into an endless maze of halls and stairways reminiscent of Piranesi's drawings of the subterranean labyrinths of prisons.)

It seems that, as soon as we wall in a given space, there is more of it 'inside' than appears possible to an outside view. Continuity and proportion are not possible, because this disproportion, the surplus of inside in relation to outside, is a necessary structural effect of the very separation of the two; it can only be abolished by demolishing the barrier and letting the outside swallow the inside. What I want to suggest, then, is that this excess of 'inside' consists, precisely, in the fantasy-space – the mysterious thirteenth floor, the surplus space which is a persistent motif in science fiction and mystery stories. This, equally, is what underlies the classic cinematic device for evading the unhappy ending, in which, just as the action is approaching its catastrophic climax, we undergo a radical change of perspective, and discover that the whole near-tragic chain of events has been nothing but the protagonist's nightmare – at which point we are returned, awakened and relieved, to the 'real world'.

A notable example is Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window*, which begins with a lonely professor of psychology who dozes off one evening in the club. At eleven the attendant wakes him from his nap; and as he is leaving, he glances at the portrait of a beautiful brunette in the window of a store next to the club. The portrait has always been a source of fascination to him, but this time it seems to come alive: the picture in the shop window merges with the reflection of a young woman in the street, who asks him for a match. The professor starts an affair with her and kills her lover in a fight. He is kept informed of the progress of the murder investigation by a friend in the police force; and when he knows his arrest is imminent, he sits in a chair, drinks poison, and dozes off... to be woken by the club attendant because it is eleven o'clock. He returns home, with a renewed appreciation, we presume, of the danger of succumbing to the charms of alluring brunettes.

Contrary to superficial impressions, the final reversal is not a compromise designed to accommodate the narrative to the ideological conventions of Hollywood. The 'message' of the film is not 'Thank God, it was only a

dream; I am not really a murderer, just a normal man like everybody else! Rather, it is that *in our unconscious, in the Real of our desire, we are all murderers*. Paraphrasing the Lacanian reading of Freud's account of the father whose dead son appears in a dream, reproaching him with the cry 'Father, can't you see I'm burning?', we might say that the professor wakes *in order to be able to continue his dream* (of being a normal man like everyone else), to escape the psychic reality of his desire. Awakened into everyday reality, he can say with relief, 'It was only a dream,' overlooking the crucial fact that it is precisely when he is awake that he is 'nothing but the consciousness of his dream' (Lacan). As in the parable of Zhuang-zhi and the butterfly (another Lacanian point of reference), what we have is not a quiet, kind, decent, bourgeois professor dreaming that he is a murderer, but a murderer dreaming, in his everyday life, that he is a quiet, kind, decent, bourgeois professor.

This kind of retroactive displacement of 'real' events into fiction (dreaming) appears as a compromise, an act of ideological conformism, only so long as we hold to the naïve ideological opposition between 'hard reality' and the 'world of dreams'. As soon as we recognize that it is precisely and only in dreams that we encounter the real of our desire, the whole accent shifts radically. Our commonest everyday reality, the reality of the social universe in which we play our usual roles as decent ordinary people, turns out to be an illusion resting on a specific 'repression': on ignorance of the real of our desire. This social reality then becomes nothing more than a fragile symbolic tissue which can be torn at any moment by the intrusion of the real; the most routine everyday conversation, the most familiar event, can suddenly take a dangerous turn, damage can be caused that cannot be undone, things can be said after which the tissue can never be repaired. *The Woman in the Window* exemplifies this in the loop-like line of its narrative progress. Events proceed in a linear fashion until, all of a sudden, at the very instant of catastrophic breakdown, we find ourselves once again back at an earlier point: the route into the catastrophe turns out to be nothing but a fictional detour, returning us to our starting point. To effect this retroactive fictionalization, *The Woman in the Window* employs a repetition of the same scene (in which the professor falls asleep, to be woken at eleven by the attendant); but the repetition retroactively transforms everything that has happened in between into a fiction.

The earlier reference to Kafka in connection with the disproportion between 'outside' and 'inside' was more than merely casual. Kafka's Court, that absurd, obscene agency of guilt, can be located precisely in this surplus of inside over outside, this fantasy-space on the thirteenth floor. Indeed, it is not difficult to recognize in the mysterious 'committee' that interrogates Heinlein's hero a new version of Kafka's tribunal, a classic figure of the evil Law of the superego. Heinlein ultimately eludes the Kafkaesque vision of a world ruled by

the agents of a mad God; but he does so only at the cost of resorting to the paranoid notion that the universe is a work of art created by an unknown demiurge. The common feature of paranoid stories of this kind (a further example is Isaac Asimov's 'The Jokester') is that they imply the existence of the 'Other of the Other', a hidden subject who pulls the strings of the great Other, the symbolic order, precisely at those points where the Other starts to speak 'autonomously', where it produces an effect of meaning by means of a senseless contingency, beyond the conscious intention of the speaking subject, as in dreams or jokes. This 'Other of the Other' is exactly the Other of paranoia, the one who speaks through us without our knowledge, controlling our thoughts, manipulating us through the apparent spontaneity of jokes, the hidden Artist whose fantasy-creation is our reality. This paranoid construction enables us to evade the fact that (to cite Lacan again) 'the Other does not exist' as a consistent, closed order: to avoid confronting the blind, contingent automatism which is constitutive of the symbolic order.

The Answer of the Real

Faced with a paranoid construction of this kind, we must not forget Freud's warning and mistake it for the 'illness' itself. The paranoid construction, on the contrary, is already an attempt to heal ourselves, to pull ourselves out of the real 'illness', the psychotic breakdown – the 'end of the world', the falling apart of the symbolic universe – with the help of a substitute-formation.

The process of psychotic breakdown corresponds precisely to the breakdown of the boundary separating reality from the Real; and, for an example of that breakdown in its pure and, as it were, distilled form, without any admixture of 'content', I want first to turn to a sequence of paintings produced in the 1960s, during the last decade of his life, by Mark Rothko, the most tragic exponent of American 'abstract expressionism'. The 'theme' of the paintings is constant: they represent a series of colour variations on the motif of the relation between reality and the Real, rendered in pure geometrical abstraction by the famous painting of Kasimir Malevich, *The Naked Unframed Icon of my Time*: a simple black square on a white ground. In this formulation, 'reality' (the white background surface, the 'liberated nothingness', the open space in which objects can appear) derives its consistency and meaning entirely from the 'black hole' in its centre (the Lacanian *das Ding*, the Thing that gives body to the substance of enjoyment), from, that is, the exclusion of the Real, the transformation of the status of the Real into a central lack. Like all Rothko's late pictures, this is a manifestation of a fight to maintain the frontier separating reality from the Real, to prevent the Real (the central black square) from

overflowing the entire field, to preserve the distinction between the square and what must at all costs remain its background; for if the square comes to occupy the whole field, and the difference between figure and ground is lost, we are precipitated into psychotic autism.

Rothko depicts this struggle as a colour tension between a grey background and the central black spot which spreads menacingly from one picture to another. In the late 1960s, the vivacity of red and yellow in his earlier canvases begins to give way to the minimal opposition of black and grey. If we look at these paintings 'cinematically' – putting the reproductions one above the other and turning them over quickly to give an impression of continuous movement – we can trace a line that travels ineluctably to a seemingly inevitable end. In the canvases produced immediately before Rothko's death, the minimal tension between black and grey changes for the last time into a burning conflict of voracious reds and yellows: witness perhaps to a last desperate attempt at redemption, yet at the same time an unmistakable confirmation that the end is imminent. A few weeks later, he was found dead in his New York atelier, in a pool of blood, with his wrists cut.

Far from being a sign of 'madness', the barrier separating the Real from reality is therefore the very condition of a minimum of 'normality'; madness – psychosis – sets in when this barrier falls down and the Real either overflows into reality (as in autistic breakdown) or is itself included in reality (as in paranoia, where it assumes the form of the 'Other of the Other'). Two instances of this can be drawn from popular narratives: the first, Spielberg's *Empire of the Sun*. From the moment at which the protagonist, Jim, is imprisoned in a Japanese camp near Shanghai, his basic problem becomes one of survival, not only in the physical sense but above all psychically: how to avoid a catastrophic 'loss of reality' once his world, his symbolic universe, has literally fallen apart. Early on in the film, Jim's reality is the isolated and artificial world of his expatriate parents; and he perceives the misery of Chinese everyday life only through the safe distance of a screen – which, as in *The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag*, is a car window. Through the windows of his parents' Rolls Royce, Jim observes the misery and chaos of the Chinese crowd as a kind of cinematic 'projection', dreamlike and discontinuous with his own reality. His problem, then, is how to survive once this barrier is removed; once he is thrown into the hostile, violent world towards which he has until then sustained a distance based on a suspension of its reality.

His first, automatic reaction to this loss of reality, this encounter with the Real, is to repeat the elementary 'phallic' gesture of symbolization, to invert his utter impotence into omnipotence, to conceive himself as *radically responsible* for the intrusion of the Real. The moment of this intrusion of the Real has been marked by the shell from the Japanese warship which hits the hotel where

Jim and his family have taken refuge. In order to hang on to a sense of reality, Jim immediately assumes responsibility for this disaster. From his room, he has watched the Japanese ship sending out light signals, and has answered them with his pocket torch; and when, a moment later, the shell strikes the hotel and his father rushes into the room, Jim, convinced that the attack was the result of his inadvertent signalling, cries desperately, 'I didn't mean it! It was only a joke!' The same omnipotence surfaces later in the prison camp, when an Englishwoman dies, and Jim, furiously massaging her corpse, is convinced by an involuntary movement of the eyelids that he has succeeded in reviving the dead. We see here how a 'phallic' inversion of impotence into omnipotence is invariably associated with an *answer of the real*: there must always be some 'little piece of the real', wholly contingent but perceived none the less by the subject as a confirmation of his supposed omnipotence.⁸

Far from being limited to so-called pathological cases, the 'answer of the real' is a fundamental prerequisite for intersubjective communication; for there can be no symbolic exchange without some 'bit of the real' to serve as a kind of pawn guaranteeing its consistency. What, then, does this mean for the structure of so-called normal communication? Under what condition can we speak of 'successful' communication?

In a recent novel by Ruth Rendell, *Talking to Strange Men* – which could be read as a kind of 'thesis novel' on this theme (in the sense in which Sartre spoke of his plays as 'thesis plays' exemplifying his philosophical propositions) – an intersubjective constellation is staged which renders perfectly the Lacanian thesis on communication as a 'successful misunderstanding'. As is often the case with Ruth Rendell (cf. also her *Lake of Darkness*, *The Killing Doll*, *The Tree of Hands*), the plot is based on the contingent encounter of two intersubjective networks. The hero of the novel is a young man, desperate because his wife has recently left him for another man. Quite by chance, he stumbles upon what he believes to be a spy ring, which communicates through coded messages secreted in the hand of a statue in the park. The hero breaks the code, and places in the hand of the statue a coded message ordering one of the 'agents' to liquidate the man for whom his wife left him.

What the hero does not know is that the 'spy ring' is actually a group of pre-pubescent adolescents playing spy games. When his wife's lover finally dies, it is in fact as a result of pure accident; yet the hero reads his rival's death as a result of his own successful infiltration into the spy ring.

The charm of the novel derives from the parallel description of the intersubjective networks of the two groups, on the one side the hero, desperately searching for his wife, on the other the spy games of the adolescents. There is a sort of interaction between them, but it is wrongly construed on both sides: the hero believes that he is in contact with a real spy ring which is carrying out his

orders, while the adolescents have no idea that an outsider has interfered in the circulation of their messages and attribute the hero's interventions to one of their own members. 'Communication' is achieved, but in such a way that one participant knows nothing at all about it while the other totally misunderstands the nature of the game. The two poles of communication are thus asymmetrical. The adolescent network, we might say, embodies the great Other, the symbolic universe of codes and cyphers, with its senseless automatism; and when as a result of its blind functioning this mechanism produces a body, the subject (the hero) reads this purely arbitrary outcome as an 'answer of the real', a confirmation of successful communication.⁹

Rendering the Real

We have now arrived at the last motif separating the later from the earlier Lacan. The 'standard' Lacanian theory of the signifier aims to produce a suspension of the sign-effect described above: to make us see the pure contingency on which the process of symbolization hangs; to 'denaturalize' the effect of meaning by demonstrating how it is always overdetermined by a series of contingent encounters. In *Seminar XX (Encore)*, however, Lacan surprisingly rehabilitates the notion of the sign – conceived precisely in its opposition to the signifier – as preserving continuity with the Real. Assuming that we can discount the possibility of a simple theoretical regression, what is meant here?

In the earlier Lacan, the order of the signifier is defined by a vicious circle of differentiality. It is an order of discourse in which the identity of each element is overdetermined by its articulation, in which every element 'is' nothing more than its difference from all the others, without any grounding in the Real. In rehabilitating the notion of 'sign', Lacan attempts, by contrast, at this later stage in his work to indicate the status of a letter which cannot be reduced to the dimension of the signifier, which is prediscursive, still permeated with the substance of enjoyment. Against the classical 'standard' proposition of 1962, 'enjoyment is forbidden to the one who speaks as such', we have now a paradoxical letter which is nothing other than materialized enjoyment.

In film theory, the status of this letter-enjoyment – of a letter continuous with the Real of *jouissance* – has been defined by Michel Chion using the concept of *rendu*, which is opposed both to the (imaginary) simulacrum and the (symbolic) code. *Rendu* is a third means of representing reality in the cinema – not by imaginary imitation or by symbolic codification, but by means of its immediate 'rendition'.¹⁰ Chion has in mind here specifically those contemporary techniques of sound recording and reproduction that enable us not only exactly to reproduce 'original' sound, but to reinforce it and so render audible

details which we should not be able to hear if we found ourselves in the 'reality' recorded by the picture. This kind of sound penetrates us, seizes us on an immediate-real level; witness, for example, the obscenely disgusting mucous-slimy sounds, suggestive of some indeterminate activity somewhere between sexual intercourse and the act of childbirth, that accompany the transformation of human beings into their alien clones in the Philip Kaufman version of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. According to Chion, this shift in the status of the sound-track points to a slow but far-reaching silent revolution that is taking place in contemporary cinema. For it is no longer appropriate in such cases to say that the sound 'accompanies' the flow of pictures; rather, the sound-track functions as the primary frame of reference that orientates us in the depicted diegetic reality. Bombarding us with details from every side, the sound-track has in a sense taken over the function once exercised by the establishing shot. It gives us the general perspective, the 'map' of the situation, and guarantees its continuity, while the images on screen are reduced to isolated fragments, visual fishes swimming freely in the encompassing medium of the sound-aquarium.

It would be difficult to invent a better metaphor for psychosis: in contrast to the 'normal' state of affairs, in which the Real is a lack, a hole in the middle of the symbolic order (the central black spot in Rothko's paintings), we have here an 'aquarium' of the Real encircling isolated islands of the Symbolic. In other words, it is no longer enjoyment which drives the proliferation of signifiers by its lack, functioning as a central 'black hole' around which the signifying network is interlaced; it is, on the contrary, the symbolic order itself which is reduced to the status of floating islands of signifiers, albuminous *îles flottantes* basking in a sea of yolky enjoyment.¹¹

This effect of *rendu* is not of course limited to the 'silent revolution' currently taking place in the cinema.¹² Close analysis reveals its presence already in classical Hollywood cinema – in *film noir* of the late 1940s and early 1950s, for example. A number of those films are founded in the prohibition of a formal element which is conventionally central to the narrative of sound film: the objective shot, montage, the voice, etc. Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* is constructed, for example, on a prohibition of the objective shot: except for the introduction and the ending, where Marlowe gazes directly into camera, introducing and commenting on the narrative, the entire story is told in flashback through subjective shots – we see only what the detective himself sees (including himself, seen only when he looks in a mirror). Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*, contrastingly, is built on a prohibition of montage: the whole picture has the effect of a single unedited and uninterrupted take. Even when a cut is necessary for technical reasons (and in 1948 the longest possible camera-take was ten minutes), it is disguised so as to be undetectable.

Finally, Russell Rouse's *The Thief*, the story of a Communist agent who finally breaks down under moral pressure and gives himself up to the FBI, is built on a prohibition of the voice: it is a 'talking film', certainly, since we hear the usual background noises, but apart from a few distant murmurings we never hear a voice, a spoken word (the film avoids all situations in which dialogue would be necessary); the idea being to convey the spy's painful solitude and isolation from the community.

Each of these three films leaves us with an undeniable sense of dissatisfaction, an impression of failure; they produce a feeling of claustrophobic closure, as if we found ourselves imprisoned in a psychotic universe without symbolic openness. In *The Lady in the Lake*, we long continually for release from the 'glasshouse' of the detective's gaze, so that we can take a 'free' and objective view of the action. In *Rope* we wait desperately for a cut to deliver us from the nightmarish continuity. In *The Thief*, we look forward all the time to some voice to pull us out of the closed autistic universe in which the meaningless noises render all the more palpable the basic silence, the absence of a spoken word.

Each of these three prohibitions thus produces its own kind of psychosis; indeed, taking the three films as a point of reference, it would be possible to elaborate a classification of the three fundamental types of psychosis. By prohibiting the objective shot, *Lady in the Lake* produces an effect of paranoia. Since the point of view of the camera is never 'objective', the field of what is seen is continually menaced by the unseen, and the very proximity of objects to the field of view becomes threatening. All objects assume a potentially minatory character, and there is danger everywhere. (When a woman approaches the camera, for instance, we experience her presence as an aggressive intervention into the sphere of our intimacy.) Through a prohibition of montage, *Rope* enacts the psychotic *passage à l'acte*. The rope of the title is ultimately the rope that connects 'words' and 'deeds'. Like the hangman's rope, it signifies the moment when the symbolic falls into the Real. *The Thief*, by prohibiting the voice, renders a psychotic autism, a terminal isolation from the discursive network of intersubjectivity. We can now see, therefore, wherein lies the dimension of *rendu*: not in the psychotic contents of these movies, but in the way the content, so far from being simply 'depicted', is directly 'rendered' in the very form of the narrative. Here, surely, the 'message' of the film is immediately its form.

The ultimate reason for the 'failure' of these films is that the formal prohibitions they impose are both arbitrary and capricious. It is as if the director had decided to renounce one of the key constituents of the normal talking picture (objective shot, montage, voice) purely for the sake of formal experiment. Thus all three films involve the prohibition of something that could as easily

not have been prohibited, not (as in the fundamental paradox that, according to Lacan, defines symbolic castration and the incest taboo, the prohibition of that *jouissance* which is axiomatically impossible) the prohibition of something *that is already in itself inaccessible*. Hence the sense of claustrophobia that they evoke; for the fundamental prohibition that constitutes the symbolic order – the incest prohibition, the ‘cutting of the rope’ through which we achieve symbolic distance from ‘reality’ – is absent, and the arbitrary prohibition that takes its place only embodies and bears witness to a second lack, the lack of a lack itself.

Love Thy Sinthome As Thyself

The lack of a lack – the lack, that is, of distance, of the empty space which ‘triggers’ the process of symbolization – is what, according to Lacan, characterizes psychoses. Thus *rendu* could be defined as the elementary cell or zero point of psychosis. Here we touch on the most radical dimension of the break that separates the later Lacan from the ‘standard’ version of his theory. The limit of the ‘classical’ Lacan is the limit of discourse. The field of psychoanalysis is conceived as the field of discourse, and the unconscious is defined as the ‘discourse of the Other’. Towards the end of the 1960s, Lacan gave precise form to his theory of discourse by stipulating a matrix of four discourses – the discourses of the Master, the University, Hysteria, and the Analyst – which he saw as representing the four possible types of social bond, four articulations of the network regulating intersubjective relations. The first of these, and the point of departure for all the others, was the discourse of the Master, in which a certain signifier (S_1) represents the subject ($\$$) for another signifier, or more precisely for all other signifiers (S_2). The problem, of course, is that the tidy operation of signification never comes off without producing some annoying, messy, disturbing surplus, a piece of leftover or ‘excrement’, which Lacan designates as smell *a*. The other three discourses are nothing but three different attempts to ‘come to terms’ with this tiresome and disruptive residue, the famous *objet petit a*.

The discourse of the University takes the residue for its immediate object, its ‘other’, and attempts to transform it into a ‘subject’ by applying to it the network of ‘knowledge’ (S_2). This is the elementary logic of the pedagogic process: out of an untamed object, the ‘unsocialized’ child, we produce a subject by the implantation of knowledge. The repressed truth of this discourse is that behind the semblance of neutral knowledge, there is always a gesture of the Master.

The discourse of the Hysteric starts, so to speak, from the opposite side. Its basic constituent is the hysteric’s question to the Master, ‘Why am I what you

say I am?' This question arises as a reaction to what Lacan, in the early 1950s, called the 'founding word', the act of conferring a symbolic mandate which, by naming me, defines and fixes my place in the symbolic network. The hysterical question thus articulates the experience of a fissure, an irreducible gap between the signifier which represents me and the non-symbolized surplus of my being-there. The hysteric embodies this ontological question: her/his basic problem is how to justify and account for her/his existence in the eyes of the Other.¹³

Finally, the discourse of the Analyst is the direct inverse of that of the Master. The analyst occupies the place of the surplus object and identifies directly with the residue of the discursive network. This is why the discourse of the Analyst is far more paradoxical than it might appear at first sight, for it attempts to knit together a discourse starting from the very element that escapes discursive articulation, its fall-out or excrement.

What must not be forgotten here is that Lacan's matrix of the four discourses is a matrix of the four possible positions in the intersubjective network of communication: we remain, here, within the field of communication as meaning, in spite or rather because of all the paradoxes implied by the Lacanian conceptualization of these terms. Communication is seen to be structured as a paradoxical circle in which the sender receives from the receiver his/her own message in its reverse (that is, true) form. In this formulation, the decentred Other decides *post facto* the true meaning of what I have said (in this sense, it is the S_2 which is the true master-signifier, conferring retroactive meaning on S_1). What circulates between subjects in symbolic communication is ultimately lack – the constitutive absence itself – for it is this absence which opens up the space in which positive meaning can constitute itself. All these are paradoxes intrinsic to the field of communication *qua* meaning; the very nonsense of the signifier, the signifier-without-signified, the condition of possibility of all other signifiers, is a non-sense strictly internal to the field of meaning, and delimits it *from within*.¹⁴

All the effort of Lacan's last years, however, is directed at breaking through the field of communication-as-meaning. Having established the definitive, logically purified structure of communication and the social bond through the matrix of the four discourses, he set out to delineate the outlines of a certain space in which signifiers find themselves in a state of 'free floating', logically prior to their discursive binding and articulation; the space of a particular 'prehistory' preceding the 'historicity' of the social bond, a psychotic kernel evading the discursive network. Thus the rather unexpected shift in *Seminar XX (Encore)* – a shift homologous to that from signifier to sign – from the Other to the One. Previously, all Lacan's efforts had been directed towards defining the otherness that precedes the formation of the One. First, in the theory of the signifier as differential, every One is defined by the bundle of its

discursive relations to its Other. Every One is conceived in advance as 'one-among-others'. Then, in the very domain of the great Other itself, the symbolic order, Lacan sought to isolate and separate out its extemporal, impossible-real kernel. Thus the *objet petit a* is 'the other in the midst of the Other itself', a foreign body in its very heart. But suddenly, in *Seminar XX*, we stumble upon a One (in 'There is One', *Y a de l'Un*) which is not one-among-others, which does not yet partake of the articulation proper to the order of the Other. This One is of course precisely the One of *jouis-sense*, of the signifier not yet enchained but still floating freely, permeated with enjoyment: the enjoyment that prevents it from being articulated into a chain.

To indicate the specificity of this One, Lacan coined the neologism *le sinthome*: the point which functions as the ultimate support of the subject's consistency, the point of 'thou art that', the point marking the dimensions of 'what is in the subject more than itself' and what it therefore 'loves more than itself', that point which is none the less neither symptom (the coded message in which the subject receives from the Other its own message in reverse form, the truth of its desire) nor fantasy (the imaginary scenario which, with its fascinating presence, screens off the lack in the Other, the radical inconsistency of the symbolic order).

Two examples from the work of the novelist Patricia Highsmith may serve to elucidate Lacan's concept of the *sinthome*. Highsmith's short stories often explore the motif of nature's pathological ties, its monstrous deformations that materialize the subject's deepest enjoyment by serving as its objective counterpart and support. In her story 'The Pond', a recently divorced woman with a small son moves into a country house with a deep pond in the garden, from which strange plants sprout. The pond exerts a strange fascination on the boy, and one morning his mother finds him drowned, entangled in the roots. Distraught, she calls the garden service, who spread weedkiller around the pond. But it is no use: the roots grow more vigorously than before. Eventually she tackles them herself, hacking and sawing with obsessive determination. As she struggles with them, the roots seem to respond: the more she attacks them, the more she becomes entangled. Finally she stops resisting and yields to their embrace, recognizing in their power of attraction the call of her dead child. Here we have an image of the *sinthome*: the pond as the 'open wound of nature', the nucleus of an enjoyment that simultaneously attracts and repels us.

An inverted variation on the same motif appears in another Highsmith story, 'The Mysterious Cemetery'. In a small Austrian town, doctors at the local hospital perform radioactive experiments upon their dying patients. In the graveyard behind the hospital where the patients are buried, bizarre protuberances appear, red spongy plant-like excrescences whose growth cannot be stopped. After a while, the local people get used to them; they even become

a tourist attraction; and poems are written about the uncanny and irrepressible 'undergrowth of enjoyment'.

The ontological status of these excrescences of the Real springing up from the soil of common reality is entirely ambiguous; they both do and do not exist. This ambiguity overlaps perfectly with the two opposed meanings of the word 'existence' in Lacan. First, existence means symbolization, integration into the discursive order: only what is symbolized can be said to exist. This is the sense in which Lacan maintains that 'Woman does not exist', or that 'there is no sexual relationship'. Woman, or the sexual relationship, do not possess signifiers of their own; they resist symbolization, and cannot be inscribed into the signifying network. What is at stake here is what Lacan, alluding to Freud and to Heidegger, calls 'the primordial *Bejahung*', an affirmation prior to denial, an act which 'allows the thing to be', which releases the Real in the 'clarity of its being'. According to Lacan, the well-known 'sense of unreality' we experience in the presence of certain phenomena can be located precisely at this level: it indicates that the object in question has lost its place in the symbolic universe.

Against this, existence is also defined in the opposite sense, as 'ex-sistence', the impossible-real nucleus resisting symbolization. The first traces of such a notion of existence can already be found in *Seminar II*, in the notion that 'there is something so incredible about every existence that we must in fact incessantly question ourselves about its reality'. It is of course this ex-sistence of the Real, of the Thing embodying impossible enjoyment, that is excluded by the very advent of the symbolic order. We could say that we are always caught in a certain *vel*, an either/or; that we are forced to choose between meaning and ex-sistence, and that the price we pay for access to meaning is the exclusion of ex-sistence. In these terms, we might say that it is precisely woman that 'exists', that persists as a residue of enjoyment beyond meaning, resisting symbolization; which is why, as Lacan puts it, woman is 'the *sinthome* of man'.

This notion of the ex-sisting *sinthome* – the proliferating 'undergrowth' in Highsmith's stories – is thus more radical than either symptom or fantasy; for the *sinthome* is the psychotic kernel that can neither be interpreted (like a symptom) nor 'traversed' (like a fantasy). What, then, do we do with it? Lacan's answer, and at the same time the Lacanian definition of the ultimate moment of psychoanalysis, is *identification with the sinthome*. The *sinthome* represents the outermost limit of the psychoanalytic process – the reef on which psychoanalysis sticks. At the same time, is the experience of the radical impossibility of the *sinthome* final proof that the psychoanalytic process has been brought to a conclusion?¹⁵ We reach the end of the psychoanalytic process when we isolate the kernel of enjoyment which is as it were immune to the operative mode of the discourse. This is the ultimate Lacanian reading of Freud's motto 'Wo es war, soll ich werden': in the real of your symptom you must acknowledge the

ultimate ground of your being. There, where the symptom already was, is the place with which you must identify, recognizing in its 'pathological' singularity the element that guarantees your consistency.

We can now see how great a distance from the 'standard' version of his theory Lacan covered in the last decade of his teaching. In the 1960s he still conceived the symptom as 'a means, for the subject, of giving way on his desire', a compromise-formation bearing witness to the fact that the subject did not persist in his desire – which is why access to the truth of the desire was possible only through the interpretative dissolution of the symptom. In the later Lacan, by contrast, the analysis is over when we achieve a certain distance in relation to the fantasy and identify precisely with the pathological singularity on which hangs the consistency of our enjoyment.

It now also becomes clear how we may understand Lacan's proposition on the very last page of *Seminar XI*, that 'the desire of the analyst is not a pure desire'. All Lacan's previous determinations of the final moment of the analytic process, the 'passage' (*passé*) of analysand into analyst, implied a kind of purification of the desire, a breakthrough to 'desire in its pure state'. The analytical formula was, first, to get rid of symptoms as compromise-formations; then to traverse the fantasy – the frame which defines the co-ordinates of enjoyment. The 'desire of the analyst' was thus a desire purified of enjoyment, and the analysand's access to pure desire was always paid for by the loss of enjoyment.

In the last stage, however, the whole perspective is reversed: we are asked to identify precisely with the particular form of our enjoyment. How, then, does this identification with the symptom differ from what we usually understand by the term: a hysterical reversion into 'madness'?

In Ruth Rendell's brilliant short story 'Convolvulus Clock', Trixie, an elderly spinster, steals a fine old clock from an antique shop. But once she has it, the clock continually incites uneasiness and guilt. She reads allusions to her little crime in every passing remark of her acquaintances; and when a friend mentions that a similar clock has recently been stolen from the antique shop, the panic-stricken Trixie pushes her under an approaching tube train. When in the end she can stand the ticking of the clock no longer, she throws it into a stream; but the stream is shallow and it seems to Trixie that anyone looking down from the bridge will immediately see it. So she wades into the stream, retrieves the clock, and starts to break it up with stones and to scatter the pieces around. The more she scatters the pieces the more it seems that the whole stream is overflowing with clock; and when some time later a neighbouring farmer pulls her, wet, bruised and shaking, from the water, Trixie is waving her arms like the hands of a clock and repeating 'Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Convolvulus clock.'

This kind of identification can be distinguished from that marking the final moment of the psychoanalytic procedure via a distinction between acting out and what Lacan calls the 'passage à l'acte'. Broadly speaking, acting out is still a symbolic act, an act addressed to the great Other. The 'passage to the act', by contrast, suspends the dimension of the Other: the act is here transposed into the domain of the Real. In other words, acting out is an attempt to break through a symbolic deadlock (an impossibility of symbolization or putting into words) by means of an act, which none the less still functions as the bearer of a ciphered message. By her final identification with the clock, the unfortunate Trixie tries to attest her innocence to the Other, and thus to shed the intolerable burden of her guilt; her 'acting out' embodies a certain reproach to the Other.

The 'passage to the act', in contrast, entails an exit from the symbolic network, a dissolution of the social bond. We could say that by acting out we identify ourselves with the symptom as Lacan conceived it in the 1950s, as a ciphered message delivered to the Other; whereas by the *passage à l'acte* we identify with the *sinthome*, the pathological 'tic' structuring the real kernel of our enjoyment. In Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*, the protagonist, the 'harmonica man', preserves a minimum of coherence in the face of a childhood trauma (his involuntary part as an accomplice to his brother's murder) through a form of personal 'nuttiness'. His specific 'madness' takes the form of identification with his symptom-harmonica. 'He plays the mouthorgan when he should talk and he talks when he should play the mouthorgan,' as his friend Cheyenne puts it. In Lacanian terms, the man everyone knows as 'Harmonica' has undergone 'subjective destitution'; he has no name, no signifier to represent him (it is perhaps no accident that the last of Leone's westerns is called *My Name Is Nobody*); he can retain his coherence only through identification with his symptom.

With such 'subjective destitution', the very relation to truth undergoes a radical change. In hysteria and its 'dialect', obsessional neurosis, we always partake in the dialectical movement of truth, which is why the acting out at the climax of the hysterical crisis remains throughout determined by the coordinates of truth; whereas the *passage à l'acte* so to speak suspends the dimension of truth.¹⁶ In so far as truth has the structure of a (symbolic) fiction, truth and the Real of *jouissance* are incompatible. The spectacle of *Brazil* or *Lili Marlene* does not therefore expose some kind of repressed truth in totalitarianism. It does not confront totalitarian logic with its own inner truth. It simply dissolves it as an effective social bond by isolating the outrageous kernel of its mindless enjoyment.

NOTES

- 1 References in this article to Lacan's work are based on Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire: livre XI* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1973); *livre XX* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1975); *livre II* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1978).
- 2 Pascal Bonitzer, *Le Champ aveugle* (Paris, Gallimard, 1982).
- 3 Michel Chion, *La Voix au Cinéma* (Paris, Éditions de L'Étoile, 1982).
- 4 Raymond Bellour, *L'Analyse du film* (Paris, Éditions Albatros, 1979).
- 5 Since this gaze is on the side of the object, it cannot be subjectified. As soon as we try to add a subjective shot from the house itself (the camera peeping out tremulously from behind the curtains of the approaching Lilah, perhaps), we descend to the level of the ordinary thriller, since such a shot would represent not the gaze as object but only the point of view of another subject.
- 6 Chion, *La voix*.
- 7 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London, Verso, 1985).
- 8 The ironic and perverse achievement of *Empire of the Sun* consists in offering us, who live in an epoch of postmodern nostalgia, a nostalgic object in the shape of the concentration camp, that intolerable and inescapable instance of the impossible-real of our history. Think how the film depicts everyday life in the camp: children clattering happily down the slope in their handcars, elderly gentlemen improvising a round of golf, women gossiping cheerfully as they iron the weekly wash, while all the time Jim himself runs errands between them, delivering the linen, bartering vegetables for a pair of shoes, resourceful as a fish in its element; and all to the accompaniment of music which evokes in the traditional Hollywood idiom a vivacious idyll of everyday small-town life. Such is the film's depiction of the concentration camp, the traumatic Real of the twentieth century, that which 'returns as the same' in all social systems. Invented at the turn of the century by the British in the Boer War, it was used not only by the two major totalitarian powers, Nazi Germany and Stalin's USSR, but also by such a pillar of democracy as the United States (for the isolation of the Japanese during the Second World War). Thus every attempt to represent the concentration camp as 'relative', to reduce it to one of its forms, to conceive it as a result of some specific set of social conditions (to prefer the term 'Gulag' or 'holocaust', for example) already betrays an evasion of the unbearable weight of the Real.
- 9 We encounter the same mechanism in horoscopes and fortune-telling. There too a totally contingent coincidence of a prediction with some detail of our real life is sufficient for an effect of transference to take place. One trivial 'bit of the real' is sufficient to trigger the endless work of interpretation through which we struggle to connect the symbolic – here, the symbolic network of prediction – with the events of the day. Suddenly, everything has meaning; and if the meaning is not clear, that is only because it is still hidden, waiting to be deciphered. The Real does not function here as something which resists symbolization, as a meaningless residue which

cannot be integrated into the symbolic structure, but, on the contrary, as its last support.

- 10 Michel Chion, 'Révolution douce', in *La Toile Trouée* (Paris, Éditions de L'Étoile, 1988), pp. 25–31.
- 11 The fact that the Real thus rendered is what Freud called 'psychic reality' is demonstrated by the mysterious beauty of scenes in David Lynch's *Elephant Man* which present the Elephant Man's subjective experience 'from the inside'. The matrix of external sounds, the noise of 'the real world', is suspended or moved to the background; all we hear is a rhythmic beat of uncertain origin and status, something between a heartbeat and the regular ictus of a machine. Here we have *rendu* at its purest, a pulse which does not imitate or symbolize anything but which seizes us directly, 'renders' the thing without mediation. In painting, it is abstract expressionist 'action painting' that most closely corresponds to 'rendu'. The spectator is supposed to view the painting from close up, so as to lose objective distance and be drawn directly into it; and the painting itself neither imitates reality nor represents it through symbolic codes, but rather 'renders' the real by 'seizing' the spectator.
- 12 The clearest case of *rendu* in Hitchcock's work is the famous backwards tracking shot in *Frenzy*, where the camera movement (serpentine, then straight backwards, reproducing the shape of a necktie) tells us what is happening behind the doors of the apartment from which the movement started. In his study of Hitchcock, François Regnault even ventured the hypothesis that such a relation between form and content offers a clue to the entire Hitchcock *oeuvre*, where the content is always rendered by a particular formal feature (the spirals in *Vertigo*, intersecting lines in *Psycho*, etc.): François Regnault, 'Système formel d'Hitchcock', in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, hors-série 8:^b *Alfred Hitchcock* (1980), pp. 21–30.
- 13 In contrast to perversion, which is defined precisely by the lack of a question: the pervert possesses an immediate certainty that his activity serves the enjoyment of the other. Hysteria and its 'dialect' obsessional neurosis differ in terms of the way the subject attempts to justify her/his existence: the hysteric by offering her/himself to the Other as the object of its love, the obsessive by striving to comply with the demand of the Other through frenetic activity. Thus the hysteric's answer is love, the obsessive's work.
- 14 'Communication *qua* meaning' because the two ultimately overlap; not only because the circulating 'object' is always meaning (albeit in the negative form of nonsense), but because meaning itself is always intersubjective, constituted through the circle of communication: it is the other, the addressee, who retroactively determines the meaning of what I have said.
- 15 This is the proper emphasis on Lacan's thesis of the 'Joyce-symptom'. As Jacques-Alain Miller points out, 'The mention of psychosis apropos of Joyce in no way meant a kind of applied psychoanalysis: at stake was, on the contrary, the effort to call into question the very discourse of the analyst *by means of* the Joyce symptom, in so far as the subject, identified with his symptom, is closed to its artifice. And perhaps there is no better end of an analysis': Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Preface', in

Jacques Aubert (ed.), Navarin, *Joyce avec Lacan* (Paris, Navarin, 1988), pp. 9–12, at p. 12.

- 16 The original hysterical position is characterized by the paradox of 'telling the truth in the form of a lie'. In terms of literal 'truth' (the correspondence of words and things), the hysteric undoubtedly 'lies'; but it is through this lie that the truth of his or her desire erupts and articulates itself. To the extent that obsessional neurosis is a 'dialect of hysteria' (Freud), it implies a kind of inversion of this relation: the obsessive 'lies in the form of a truth'. The obsessive always 'sticks to the facts', striving to efface the traces of his subjective position. He is 'hysterized' – that is, his desire erupts – only when, finally, by some inadvertent slip, he 'succeeds in lying'.