

The Flesh of the World is Virtual

There is a vision, touch, when a certain visible, a certain tangible, turns back upon the whole of the visible, the whole of the tangible, of which it is a part, or when suddenly it finds itself *surrounded* by them, or when between it and them, and through their commerce, is formed a Visibility, a Tangible in itself ... It is this Visibility, this generality of the Sensible in itself ... that we have previously called flesh. (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 139)

This reflection began with a consideration of the coincidence between Maurice Merleau-Ponty's idea of "flesh of the world" and Lacan's idea of extimacy, an inside-out relationship that Merleau-Ponty seemed to have made portable. Key to both ideas was the idea of the Thing, the Freudian Thing, which was in Lacan elaborated as the mysterious "object-cause of desire," a remainder, a "partial object," and a permanent loss or lack.

Key to all of these ideas was the Heideggerian idea of ecstasy, standing outside, which in Lacan is treated as alienation — the dissatisfaction that comes with the presumed entry into the Symbolic, where one is "symbolically castrated" — i.e. castrated *by* symbols themselves (a case of reversed predication). The crown is the king more than the king himself.¹

Ec-stasy is epitomized as the subject standing outside of him/herself, and outside of subjectivity in general. Perceptual focus then requires the metaphor of a screen separating the subject from the perceptual. This screen promises passage past its conditional surface and is thus in this sense only a *thin* transparent membrane. Yet, when such a passage takes place, it is an illusion given a technological twist — something is "automated," as when the film-viewer enters into the virtual space created by the camera and sound. The matter is not entirely about the limits of the mechanisms that afford this passage, but about the introduction of a new type of virtuality, a virtuality that is "detached" from the space-time in which life normally moves.

The rules of detachment have to do with defects concealed within motion, scale, and identity, defects that, under the conditions of "extimacy" (reversed predication) acquire the enigmatic quality of the Freudian Thing — i.e. something that resists knowledge, something that retains an irreducible quality of otherness. This resistance connects the Thing to death, not the thematic idea of death as the unavoidable terminus of life, etc., but specifically to the interval Lacan identified as "between the two deaths," the interval, recognized by all cultures, between a first, literal death and a second Symbolic death. This interval could be regarded as the "repayment" of the subject's entry into the Symbolic, a mirror of the mirror stage so to speak.

In ethnographic treatments of the interval between the two deaths, flesh is regarded in Merleau-Ponty fashion, as a true "flesh of the world." The interval is in fact defined by most cultures as the time required for the corpse to reach a state of stability: dry bones, ashes, mummified tissue. The word sarcophagus literally means "eater of flesh." Funerary practices constitute an uncanny anchor to the expanded meanings of flesh, desire, extimacy, and the Freudian/Lacanian Thing. The literary *topos* of the interval between the two deaths, the *katabasis*, provides spatial and temporal models, and features the idea of the riddle and trial.

In detached virtuality, the uncanny is present in the two characteristic forms defined by Ernst Jentsch in his 1909 double essay: (1) the living person, 'A', who is contaminated with an element of death that leads him/her to a predestined fate; and (2) the deceased person, 'D', who "refuses to die" or does not know he/she is dead. The symmetry between these life and death situations suggests the presence of a "double inscription" (AD and DA). One state, in effect, presupposes the other. The life-in-

¹ Let's not forget the self-alienating condition that arises with the "interpellation" of ideology, the inscription of a void at the center of the subject, an enigmatic Other present as demand that cannot be met. This primary example of extimacy requires a symmetrical and opposite "moment," one that Mladen Dolar has characterized as love transference, the last defense made by the analysand in psychoanalysis. By putting the analyst "on the spot" with a forced-choice situation, the unconscious makes a final effort to resist discovery. Just as ecstasy in its other forms resists domestication, we should take seriously the implications of the *domus* in domesticating the unconscious, a return of the *manes* (ancestral spirits) to the domestic hearth — a matter of the uncanny, the radical antipode of the home (= *Unheimlich*). Love and marriage, modalities of the hearth, make it clear that love indeed is a kind of defense, an ideology of the performative. In this function the (arch) demon Eros plays out his Socratic role of ventriloquizing Voice, the voice of the subject-as-unconscious, which can speak only by "signalizing," by ciphers, by half-speech (*mi-dire*).

death of the zombie and death-in-life of the “marked” man or woman are both about the “flesh of the world” and the thin-thick screen that relates the subject to the Thing.

It is important to use double inscription to “discipline” inquiry into other aspects of subjectivity, i.e. to not forget how the extimacy of perception, the remainder of reversed predication, or the enigma of the Thing is related to the uncanny and its “virtuality of detachment.” Just as the mind-body problem repeats itself at every “level” — i.e. at every stage, where one attempts to focus separately on “mind” on one hand or “body” on the other — the conclusion must be that it is the *fractal structure* imposed on this classic philosophical conundrum that is, literally, the key to the relationship. The situation is akin to the mathematical phenomenon of recursion, as in the \emptyset that is defined as $1 - 1/\emptyset$, or $1 - 1/(1 - 1/\emptyset)$ Extimacy has the “external result” of paradox and the “internal condition” of topological unity. *This* is the key to the subjectivity’s debt to the uncanny and the uncanny’s manifestation in the virtuality of detachment.

Lacan has offered the means for extending knowledge about this central logic through the four “discourses” (paradigmatic relationships among four key phenomenon, subject, master signifier, signifying chain, and object-cause of desire). Žižek has argued that the four discourse themselves have a fractal quality and can be extended as characters in the space-time of dramatic interaction — i.e. the discourses appear as “characters in a play.” The Lacanian definition of the traumatic Real as a return function (“return of the Real”) works within the logic of regress, where the form of the container “re-enters” the form of the contained. In Žižek’s example, the discourse that defines the overall drama “re-enters itself” as a character. This “ties the knot” of extimacy that holds together the enigma that is the flesh of the world. The knot is topological, which is to say that, like the Möbius band, it is uniform (consistent) and, in its unflinching demonstration of enigma in every part and at every level, authentic.

Between abstraction and materialization, ignorance and revelation, appearance and disappearance, loss and restoration, the fractal of extimacy has at its disposal the full palette — made available by the arts, literature, poetry, architecture, painting, sculpture, etc. — of effects and methods. This allows research and philosophical inquiry to use the rich resources of material culture to refine the terms of this “durable” subjectivity.

The preliminary results of such material-culture studies show that, as Vico had emphasized, that subjectivity must be treated as both dynamic and evolving and invariant. This is the inevitable conclusion of Žižek’s experimental use of the discourses as characters in a play. The implications of this constitute a continually radical revolution in the theories of all the human sciences, a revolution that will always be suppressed, that will always constitute a kind of “unconscious” within the disciplinary paradigms. Yet, ironically, this unconscious is the only discipline worthy of the name. It alone can demonstrate the function of the “automaton” of the unconscious, the essence of subjectivity, as a “function that never sleeps.” Automaton, *chez* Aristotle, is both mechanism and blind chance. Edgar Allan Poe, in his brilliant essay on the famous fraudulent chess-playing robot, “The Turk,” anticipated Alan Turing’s argument about machine intelligence. Both Poe and Turing returned theory to the central role of the curtain, which since Pythagorus has located enigma at the center of any experience of intellectual discovery.

My personal view is that detached virtuality affords a focus for any study of extimacy that balances the interests of philosophy with those of cultural production. Mid-way between the refinement of “mathemes” in the style of Lacan and the archeology of cultural production, especially in works of fiction, film, painting, architecture, etc., is a narrow zone that is analogous to the flesh of the world, a zone defined by the *anxiety* of the subject in its temporal situation. This anxiety must be approached with a precise methodology, and for that I would suggest the idea of the six “revisionary ratios” put forward by Harold Bloom in his study of the intellectual predicament of the young poet in the face of precedents of older strong poets. The key lies in seeing how poetic anxiety involves mirroring and a return to the primary Lacanian condition of the (hysterical) “body in pieces” (*corps morcelé*) recognized retroactively with the appreciation of the Imaginary as a virtual space. This fractal situation is sufficient to open up the fractal function within the discourses, sufficient to add the issues of detached virtuality as permanent components of theoretical study, sufficient to resist permanently the traps of ideological metaphors that persistently aim to convert subjectivity to static paradigms.

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