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# The Age of the Screen: Subjectivity in Twenty-First Century Literature

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy.

Literature and Languages  
The University of Stirling

September 2015

## Abstract

The screen, as recent studies in a number of fields indicate, is a cultural object due for critical reappraisal. Work on the theoretical status of screen objects tends to focus upon the materialisation of surface; in other words, it attempts to rethink the relationship between the supposedly 'superficial' facade and the 'functional' object itself. I suggest that this work, while usefully chipping away at the dichotomy between the 'superficial' and the 'functional', can lead us to a more radical conclusion when read in the context of subjectivity. By rethinking the relationship between the surface and the obverse face of the screen as the terms of a dialectic, we can 'read' the screen as the vital component in a process which *constitutes* the Subject. In order to demonstrate this, I analyse productions of subjectivity in literary texts of the twenty-first century — in doing so, I assume the novel as nonpareil arena of the dramatisation of subjectivity — and I propose a reading of the work of Jacques Lacan as hitherto unacknowledged theorist par excellence of the form and function of the screen. Lacan describes, with the function of desire and the formation of the screen of fantasy, the primary position this 'screen-form' inhabits in the constitution of the Subject. Lacan's work forms a critical juncture through which we must proceed if we are to properly read and understand the chosen texts: *The Book of Strange New Things* by Michel Faber; *The Tain* by China Miéville; *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood; and *Austerlitz* by W.G. Sebald. In each text, I analyse the particular materialisations of the screen and interrogate the constitution of the subject and the locus of desire. By analysing the vicissitudes of subjectivity in these texts, I make a claim for the study of the screen as constituting a central question in the field of contemporary literature.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Adrian Hunter for his exceptional advice, enthusiasm, and indefatigable patience. My thanks also to Prof. Ruth Evans and Prof. David Richards, both of whom contributed invaluable guidance during the writing of this thesis.

My gratitude to Tom, Jane, and Emily, each of whom I cannot thank enough.

Words: 76,436

## Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all critical and other sources (literary and electronic) have been specifically and properly acknowledged, as and when they occur in the body of my text.

Signed:

Date:

## Introduction:

### Step Away From the Limit!

What lurks in the background is, of course, the pre-modern notion of "arriving at the end of the universe": in some well-known engravings, the surprised wanderers approach the screen/curtain of heaven, a flat surfaced with painted stars on it, pierce it and reach beyond [...]¹

This work is concerned with screens. It focuses on many kinds of screen — computer monitors, mirrors, photographs, windows — and considers the manner in which they are represented in literature. At the theoretical level, it is concerned with thinking about *the* screen, with that particular form of object itself, the structural notion that makes a screen *what it is* — that which makes a screen what it is for the experiencing Subject, in other words, and how this relationship between the two is depicted in literary text.

Before we step forward, however, we will step back. This backwards step allows us to broaden our field of view, to attempt to discern the frame which marks out the screen (through) which we behold. This strategy is not regressive: instead it is an attempt to define an alternative approach towards the method in which we figure the screen as an object, by tracking the subjective relationship with the screen in a manner which does not restate the classical notion in which the veil of heaven is pierced by the inquisitive traveller, to paraphrase Žižek. Perhaps the contemporary version of this act would be in beholding and manipulating the screen of

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1 Slavoj Žižek, 'The Matrix, or, Malebranche in Hollywood', *Philosophy Today*, 42:4 (1999), 11-26 (12).

an electronic device, a translucent surface of glass or composite materials. But, thinking of this translucent material of which certain screens are composed: is this material composition not the first hint of the manner in which screens continue to mislead us? Not because the apparent translucency of this clear screen suddenly exposes to the viewer a revelation (which was hidden beyond the veil of heaven for the surprised wanderers), but because it tricks us into thinking that our attention, in studying the screen, must be directed towards it, must be focused upon the information disclosed by it as such.

If Žižek defines a pre-modern relationship of subject and screen in the engravings of the wanderers at the very curtain of heaven, then the recent example which he appends to his analysis demonstrates the manner in which the modern representation of the screen has clung onto this particular notion of 'peeling back the curtain'. In the final scene of Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998), following the revelation that Truman's life is the product of a staged spectacle in which he has been unwittingly engaged since birth, the eponymous star 'steps up the stairs to the wall on which the "blue sky" horizon is painted, and opens up there the door' ('The Matrix, or, Malebranche in Hollywood' 13). This basic action of folding back a screen to reveal a passage towards sublime experience is produced all the more readily as a popular fiction because of the rise of cinema. As Martin Loiperdinger says, discussing apocryphal accounts of the audience's fear of the onrushing locomotive they witnessed on the screen at the first showing of Lumière's *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (1895), 'the fear and panic of the audience facing Lumière's locomotive is retold in the form of an anecdote, [but] its status reaches much higher: reiterated over and over again, it figures as the founding myth of the medium,

testifying to the power of film over its spectators'.<sup>2</sup> In spite of the fact that critics have exploded this founding myth and demonstrated that audiences were sufficiently aware of the artificiality of the images on the screen, it nevertheless remains true that early cinema repeatedly re-stages this fearful interaction between viewer and screen. Robert W. Paul's *The Countryman and the Cinematograph* (1901) depicts a hapless country-dweller reacting with shock and panic at the image of the oncoming steam train which is projected upon the screen facing him, and in Edwin S. Porter's *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (1902) the eponymous rube, confronted with series of projected images (which includes the earlier Edison Manufacturing Company film *The Black Diamond Express* (1896), another 'locomotive picture'), tears down the cinema screen in an attempt to halt the action unfolding within and behind. He succeeds, by discovering the reality beyond the diegesis of the film, by stepping forward beyond the veil. There, he finds the projectionist, with whom Uncle Josh proceeds to fist-fight as revenge for falling victim to the optical illusion. The initially bewildering experience of a *trompe l'oeil*, and the ultimate unveiling which accompanies the disclosure of the truth behind the screen of trickery, is the operation which links the actions of the irate Uncle Josh with those of the surprised wanderers at the curtain of heaven. In other words, one's first response, traditionally, is not to step back from the screen; instead, one finds a way through it.

The suspicion which characterises the present work is that this 'traditional response' is encoded within the very form of the screen itself. The very same object can both obscure space from subjective view and disclose objective, visual information. In either guise, the object presents a portal; it

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Loiperdinger, 'Lumiere's Arrival of the Train: Cinema's Founding Myth', trans. Bernd Elzerm, *The Moving Image*, 4:1 (Spring 2004), 89-118 (92).

reveals the possibility of something *beyond* the phenomenal experience of the subject, either by negating space or representing it, and therefore awaits this moment of puncture by the subject.

The Subject enters view here, and does so in a manner that we will claim to be entirely typical: with a screen. It will be argued here that the only way to properly approach the question of the screen is with the question of the subject, and that claim is made on the basis of an analysis of the work of Jacques Lacan. In Lacan, I suggest, we have already discovered the exemplary theorist of the screen; moreover, the proof of this is to be found in his theory of subjectivity. It is precisely this fact (of the indivisible connection between the subject and the screen) which has tended to obscure in the reception of his work the radical contribution which he makes to the thinking of the screen. In the same way that the screen itself is theorised in his work as performing a complex function of mediation and obfuscation upon both itself and object — the screen, in Lacan, vanishes and materialises according to angle of view — so has this theory itself tended to escape the purview of Lacanian critics, captivated instead, as they are, by the startling theory of the subject which emerges alongside it. We should explain here what it is that differentiates Lacan's work from other popular theories of the subject. I will briefly outline the process which produces the subject in Lacanian theory. I will then argue that his break from the other major Western theories of subjectivity can be clearly traced through his radical application of the figure of the screen as an irreducible fact in the formation of the subject. Following this, I will briefly explain how the figure of the screen appears in Lacan, as the so-called 'screen of fantasy'.



Lacan proposes, in his work, a particular approach to the question of the human 'condition'<sup>3</sup>; he repeatedly returns to this question of the 'condition' of the human as a way to signal the inherent problem of discussing a subject which must split from itself in order to pose this question in the first place. For Lacan, this condition is the result of the constitution of subjectivity. The subject is a symbolic form which is described *in and by* language, law, and social custom, and all other systems of consensual social interrelation. As such, the 'birth' of the subject is defined by a constitutive split, a 'cut'<sup>4</sup> which excludes from the subject the experience of immanent being, which cannot become articulated in these symbolic structures — there is always a deadlock which is encountered in the process of translating the wants and needs of the physical body into the desires of the speaking subject. The constitution of subjectivity, in other words, is, contrary to popular conception — which extends from the Cartesian moment of the *cogito* until the present day — an act of *deprivation* of self-presence.<sup>5</sup> As the human animal enters the social realm (enacted firstly for the child by its maternal and paternal figures) it is moulded by a dual process: through specular captation, it identifies with the immanence of image (Lacan calls this the Imaginary

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<sup>3</sup> This is 'the condition—which is imposed on him [the nascent subject] by the existence of discourse—that his need pass through the defiles of the signifier' (Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink [New York: Norton, 2006], 525).

<sup>4</sup> See 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious' in *Écrits*: 'The cut made by the signifying chain is the only cut that verifies the structure of the subject as a discontinuity in the real.' (*Écrits* 678)

<sup>5</sup> See, particularly, the sections 'The Unconscious and Repetition' and 'The Field of the Other and Back to the Transference' in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (London: Karnac, 2004). Understanding this deprivation of self-presence furnishes us with the precise meaning of the double sense of the 'there' in the sentence 'But the subject is there to rediscover *where it was* — I anticipate — the real.' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 45); the subject is 'located' *there*, in the Symbolic, always outside of the Real, and it is *there* 'for a reason': to perform the function of remaining beyond the Real, towards which it gestures, as the place where it always *was* but never *is*.

register)<sup>6</sup> and through symbolic prohibition and subordination of the image, it forms ego and demand<sup>7</sup> through language (Lacan calls this the Symbolic register). These registers are disturbed by a third, the register of the Real, which manifests as an insistent 'lack' or gap that cannot be filled by image or symbol.<sup>8</sup> With the Real, we find Lacan interrogating the problem of introducing the radical point of negation of a system *into* the system itself.

For Lacan, therefore, the subject's very experience of reality is constituted as fantasy. The fantasy is constructed as a screen which masks the 'lack' — the radical point of negation — *as which* subject is structured. The subject *is* a lack, because it 'contains' a lack which is 'in the Real', and therefore can only ever be found to be lacking. The Real is the realm of that 'being' which is cut from the subject: it 'exists' only as a foreclosed mode of non-experience, as 'that something extra' which we can anticipate in the experience of desire, but never fully grasp — possess, 'return' to ourselves — in an objective state. This is the experience of desire in the work of Lacan. We do not fantasise about what we desire; rather, we teach ourselves to desire by virtue of the formation of our fantasy.<sup>9</sup> We allow our desire to become 'objectivised' by fabricating our own secret formula which will

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<sup>6</sup> See 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience' in *Écrits* for Lacan's account of the formative function of the Imaginary for the subject.

<sup>7</sup> See 'Sexuality in the Defiles of the Signifier' in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* for an account of demand as the effect of speech (and signifier) upon the subject.

<sup>8</sup> See 'Tuché and Automaton' in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* for Lacan's clearest elucidation of the subjective encounter with the Real.

<sup>9</sup> This is the meaning of the 'matheme'  $\$ \diamond a$ : 'Fantasy is defined by the most general form it receives in an algebra I have constructed for this purpose—namely, the formula ( $\$ \diamond a$ ) in which the lozenge ( $\diamond$ ) is to be read as "desire for," being read right to left in the same way, introducing an identity that is based on an absolute non-reciprocity.' (*Écrits* 653). What Lacan here calls the 'lozenge' graphically suggests the masking and fetishising function of the screen in both form and relation. The lozenge indicates a relationship between the barred subject of the signifier and the *objet a* (terms which will both be explained in the coming pages) by pointing to both, but it also suggests a plane surface intervening between the two.

make ourselves comprehensible to the other. It is in this sense that we see the exact manner in which the screen structure is implicated in Lacan, by 'screening' the space in between subject and object. It is an architecture which intervenes in the experience of the subject, constructing and mediating lack (Real), image (Imaginary), and sign (Symbolic).

Lacan's theoretical elucidation of the subject is an attempt to correct what is, according to him, the apparent failure of reason since Freud:

It is nonetheless true that the philosophical cogito is at the center of the mirage that renders modern man so sure of being himself in his uncertainties about himself, and even in the distrust he has long since learned to exercise regarding the pitfalls of pride.

(*Écrits* 430)

For Lacan, this 'mirage' is the crucial fact of subjectivity. According to him, what Freud uncovers in the discovery of the unconscious is the ultimate rebuke of the rational self-present subject: 'The radical heteronomy that Freud's discovery shows gaping within man can no longer be covered over without whatever tries to hide it being fundamentally dishonest.' (*Écrits* 436). Lacan repeatedly issues this challenge<sup>10</sup> and it echoes the anti-philosophical position of Nietzsche, who already deposes man's claim to

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<sup>10</sup> 'I will now dare to define the Cartesian *I think* as participating, in its striving towards certainty, in a sort of abortion' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 141); 'It should be noted that this experience sets us at odds with any philosophy directly stemming from the cogito.' (*Écrits* 93).

rational self-presence years before the third strike<sup>11</sup> of psychoanalysis against the narcissistic delusion of man: 'the intellect is human, and only its own possessor and progenitor regards it with such pathos, as if it housed the axis around which the entire world revolved.'<sup>12</sup> Lacan's realisation of the importance of the Freudian discovery for the twentieth-century project of 'emptying' the subject is by no means unique, of course. Foucault's statement on the disjunction between the 'I think' of 'traditional' philosophical thought and the 'I speak' of modernist literature encounters the same problematic break: "'I think" led to the indubitable certainty of the 'I' and its existence; "I speak", on the other hand, distances, disperses, effaces that existence and lets only its empty emplacement appear.'<sup>13</sup> But Lacan and Foucault's positions on the effect upon the subject of this 'I speak' are markedly different, as Juliet Flower MacCannell notes:

*Structuralism* sees language as a *positive force*, like Foucault's discursive practices that coercively shape the subject and imprint its arbitrary social character. Lacan took the *opposite* position. For him, the subject is *hollowed out* by language; the crucial impact

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<sup>11</sup> 'Humanity, in the course of time, has had to endure from the hands of science two great outrages against its naive self-love. The first was when humanity discovered that our earth was not the center of the universe, but only a tiny speck in a world-system hardly conceivable in its magnitude. This is associated in our minds with the name "Copernicus," although Alexandrian science had taught much the same thing. The second occurred when biological research robbed man of his apparent superiority under special creation, and rebuked him with his descent from the animal kingdom, and his ineradicable animal nature. This re-valuation, under the influence of Charles Darwin, Wallace and their predecessors, was not accomplished without the most violent opposition of their contemporaries. But the third and most irritating insult is flung at the human mania of greatness by present-day psychological research, which wants to prove to the "I" that it is not even master in its own home [...] (Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. G. Stanley Hall [New York: Horace Livelight, 1920], 247).

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Guess and Ronald Spiers, trans. Ronald Spiers (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 141.

<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Thought From Outside*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Zone Books, 1987), 13.

of the symbol lies not in what it actively *marks* on the subject, but in what it *takes* from it.<sup>14</sup>

It is with this hollowing effect of language in mind that we can recognise the importance of the figure of the screen for Lacan's theory of subject, and the reason why his radical interpretation of the subject is so vital to our project. As Lorenzo Chiesa says,

[Lacan's] notion of subjectivity is profoundly incompatible with any philosophy—from deconstructive doxa to certain mistaken readings of Lacan—which limits itself to delineating the contours of a vanishing substanceless subject “at a safe distance”: the Lacanian subject is a subjectivized lack, not a lacking subject or subject of impossibility, even though he presupposes the assumption and overcoming of a purely negative moment.<sup>15</sup>

Chiesa, like many other scholars and biographers of Lacan,<sup>16</sup> organises Lacan's career as a progressive movement recognising the successive prevalence of each of the three registers in his work. In this codification the third and final period of his teaching (usually defined as the period

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<sup>14</sup> Juliet Flower MacCannell, 'Jacques Lacan, 1901 - 1981' in *The Edinburgh Encyclopedia of Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2002), 196-205 [202].

<sup>15</sup> Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>16</sup> See Alain Vanier, *Lacan*, trans. Susan Fairfield (New York: Other Press, 2000); Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989); Jonathan Scott Lee, *Jacques Lacan* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990); Philippe Julien, *Jacques Lacan's Return to Freud: The Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary*, trans. Devra Beck Simiu (New York: New York UP, 1994). As Babette Babich astutely notes, 'Given the tripartite Caesarian (historically Gallic) and trinitarian resonance inevitable in Western culture and irresistible for any Lacanian, Borromean knot-struck analysis, this third period represents Lacan's ultimate take on the Real.' ('On the Order of the Real: Nietzsche and Lacan' in *Disseminating Lacan*, ed. David Pettigrew and Francois Raffoul [New York: SUNY Press, 1996], 43-68 [43].)

spanning the beginning of Seminar XI in 1964 until his death in 1981) comes to represent the culmination of his teaching as an exploration of the Real above all else. The reason that it is necessary to note this fact is that it is this ultimate configuration of psychoanalysis as an inquiry of the Real itself which finally distinguishes Lacan, as MacCannell suggests, from the structuralist theorists of his era.<sup>17</sup> For it is in Lacan's 'Real' period that he comes to express the relation between screen and subject in the constitutive interplay of fantasy and Real: 'it is in relation to the real that the level of phantasy functions. The real supports the phantasy, the phantasy protects the real.' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 41). The 'subjectivized lack' both supports and is protected by fantasy, and it is this coadjuvant relation which Lacan details when he says that 'the phantasy is never anything more than the screen that conceals something quite primary, something determinant in the function of repetition' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 60). For Lacan, the Subject is an effect of the Object: while the subject is organised by the Symbolic prohibition of the phallus, it is also subjected to the insistent remainder of being from the Real, which takes the form of *objet a*.<sup>18</sup> As Lacan shows, the subject emerges from the gap between meaning (the Symbolic) and being (the Real).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> It is also why, ultimately, Derrida's famous critique of Lacan in 'La facteur de la verite' (*The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987], 411-496) perhaps misses its mark, at least if one considers Lacan's thought according to the schema of progression mentioned above. The text that Derrida perhaps *should* have read is Lacan's *Encore*, a product of his 'Real' period which addresses the supposed 'phallogocentrism' of the letter in a manner which was not possible in the text that Derrida *does* read (the 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"', which is a product of Lacan's 'Symbolic' period — roughly corresponding to the 1950s — where he had not yet fully articulated the importance of the Real).

<sup>18</sup> See *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, trans. A.R. Price, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), particularly the sections entitled 'Revision of the Status of the Object' and 'The Five Forms of the Object a', for Lacan's key elucidation of this term. I also discuss it further in this introduction, and in the following chapter.

<sup>19</sup> See the chapter 'The Subject and the Other: Alienation' in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.

What constantly negotiates this boundary between the subject before it falls into the Real is the screen of fantasy.

There is, here, a dialectic of occlusion and representation encoded in the structure of fantasy itself. What is hidden is nothing other than the Real itself, while what becomes 'written' on the phantasmatic screen (the Imaginary structure of reality) is the Symbolic 'substance' (objective 'knowledge' which 'fills in' the subjective experience of reality). This screen of fantasy performs the vital action of negotiating with the Real, and guarantees the psychic stability of the subject. The crucial role of the phantasmatic screen has tended to be under-theorised by Lacanian critics. André Nusselder's philosophical exploration of the screen of fantasy and its structuring effect in human-computer interaction<sup>20</sup> is an exception amongst this group. His work recognises the role of fantasy as a protective operation of the subject in Lacan. As he notes, 'The fantasmatic screen protects us against (a too direct) intrusion of the real.' (*Interface Fantasy* 110), and it is this basic reading of fantasy which underpins my own in this work. This reading of fantasy draws our attention to the importance of avoiding the simple reduction of the Lacanian subject to a primarily linguistic concern. Instead we see that the subject is not merely the effect of the signifier<sup>21</sup> but that, rather, the signifier reveals that the subject is involved in a radical encounter with the lack which is *beyond* the subject itself insofar as that lack *is the subject itself*. The 'subjectivised lack' described by Chiesa is ultimately an encounter with the Real, and that encounter must produce both Imaginary and Symbolic effects. The Symbolic effect is perhaps most readily summarised by the notion of the

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<sup>20</sup> In *The Surface Effect: The Screen of Fantasy in Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 2012) and *Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> A status to which it is often reduced by those who do not read Lacan's dictum that 'the unconscious has the radical structure of language' (*Écrits* 496) too closely.

subject who does not speak but instead is *spoken by* language. The Imaginary effect, on the other hand, is exemplified by Lacan's concept of the 'Mirror Stage', which explains the production of a phantasmatic image of wholeness which persists with the subject for the remainder of his or her life (provided, of course, that the subject remains psychically stable). The present study departs from Nusselder's work in two important respects: firstly, while Nusselder attempts to '(re)articulate the "Lacanian subject" in the age of information' (*Interface Fantasy* 7) by examining the psychological experience of cyberspace (as mediated by the computer screen), the present work is concerned with the attempt to define the ways in which many kinds of screen perform this mediatory function, and so to delineate certain common properties of the screen which we could say are first recognised by Lacan; secondly, because of this insistence upon a *continuum* of screen-objects which are linked by screen-function, we here necessarily highlight the phenomenal field as an elementary dimension of Lacan's theory of subject in a sense that Nusselder does not. The phenomenal field of the subject is bound up in what I call the dialectical function of the screen, where the action of occlusion and representation produces, via the oscillation between the two, a never-quite-stable third position. This third position is the Lacanian subject. Both of these departures from Nusselder, noted above, will be further elaborated in the course of this introduction.

What I propose here, therefore, is a reading of Lacan which pays attention to his depiction and theorisation of this screen, and the screen's relationship to subject and being — in other words, the relationship of the screen to the three registers, and the work it performs in order to constitute the subject as such. But I also propose a reading, alongside Lacan, of Žižek — and this is not simply an expedient or purely interpretative



manoeuvre. This strategy should not be conceived, as it is in Nusselder, as a negative or reductive one; while Nusselder warns of 'the danger of getting trapped in a Žižekian reading of Lacanian theory' (*Interface Fantasy* 3), his entire project is in fact oriented around the following quotation from Žižek, which appears as the epigraph of the introduction to *Interface Fantasy* and is discussed throughout that chapter in the manner of a 'gateway post'<sup>22</sup>:

And is not this dispositif — the frame through which one can glimpse the Other Scene — the elementary dispositif of fantasmatic space from the prehistoric Lascaux paintings to computer-generated Virtual Reality? Is not the *interface* of the computer the last materialization of this frame? What defines the properly "human dimension" is the presence of a screen, a frame, through which we communicate with the "suprasensible" virtual universe to be found nowhere in reality.<sup>23</sup>

Žižek clearly signals the necessity of recognising the relationship between physical and phantasmatic manifestations of the screen. For him the physical screen is always the instantiation of a continuum which Lacan recognises with the theoretical structure of the phantasmatic screen (a thesis which Žižek, nonetheless, never

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<sup>22</sup> To paraphrase Derrida's own criticism of Lacan's choice of the 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"' as an introductory text in the *Écrits*: 'the "Seminar" is placed at the head of the collection, prefaced by an opening which grants it a determining strategic place' (*The Post Card* 421).

<sup>23</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'Cyberspace, or the Unbearable Closure of Being', in *Endless Night: Cinema and Psychoanalysis, Parallel Histories*, ed. Jane Bergstrom (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 96-125 [98].

systematically develops).<sup>24</sup> The screen as a reproducible physical form should not be considered *ex nihilo* 'practical' object, but instead, as Žižek says, a 'human dimension'. Without the form of the screen there is no human subject, and therefore no human.

The point, anyway, is not to criticise Nusselder's aversion to the paradigmatic Žižekian 'version' of Lacan which structures much contemporary popular discussion of the latter, but instead to ask if there is not in fact a virtue to be found in articulating Lacan, where appropriate, *with* Žižek, as I do here. In the same way that Lacan proposes a return to Freud on the basis of an analysis of the latter in light of the linguistic advances of Saussure, I propose that Žižek performs something similar, but characteristically 'twisted', with Lacan: Žižek returns to Lacan on the basis of an analysis of the latter in the light of a Benjaminian reading of the 'debased' popular products of late capitalist, postmodernist Western culture. In other words, he returns to Lacan, not with the modernist structure of an 'advance' with which Lacan re-articulates the Freudian discovery, but with a postmodernist 'post-structure' of retrograde cultural value: 'it is clear that Lacanian theory serves as an excuse for indulging in the idiotic enjoyment of popular culture.'<sup>25</sup> We cannot escape the fact that the primary material of Žižek's exploration of Lacanian theory — popular cinema — presupposes a sensitivity to the form of the screen. In his work, Lacan draws upon his clinical experience as a practicing psychoanalyst. While Lacan was a clinician, Žižek is not. Žižek presents the importance of the screen in Western culture in a manner

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<sup>24</sup> This reading is to be understood in contrast to Nusselder's own analysis, which does not focus upon the relationship of the 'elementary dispositif' to the continuum of screen-objects, but instead the 'final' particular manifestation of that screen in the virtual interface of cyberspace.

<sup>25</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), viii.

which Lacan does not, precisely because the target of Žižek's analysis *is* cultural. When Žižek, in *Trouble in Paradise*, states that 'Capitalism is the first socio-economic order which *de-totalizes meaning*',<sup>26</sup> we are to understand that this implies an unconscious structure in which any particular Symbolic value is expressed asymptotically. In other words, Žižek adapts Lacan for the purpose of cultural analysis in a Jamesonian manner, interrogating the Real of cultural value insofar as it pertains to a particular set of postmodernist 'post-ideological' coordinates which permit the uncovering of the 'unsaid', the slips and distortions, in basic Freudian parlance, of the late capitalist era.

Even at the outset of Žižek's first major Lacanian study, *Looking Awry*, the very figure of *looking*, upon which the investigation is based, implies the object form of the screen. The 'theoretical motif' (*Looking Awry* 3) of looking askance is itself a reference to the anamorphic relation of Subject and Object (gaze) in the scopic field in Lacan,<sup>27</sup> and the simple act of 'looking awry' always presupposes a plane view which frames an 'ideal' version of the object in the first place. If it did not, then how could Žižek state that 'such a mise-en-scene of theoretical motifs renders visible aspects that would otherwise remain unnoticed' (*Looking Awry* 3)? Therefore, while I agree with Nusselder's statement that Žižek '[does not] approach the question of fantasy and the interface in a ... systematic manner' (*Interface Fantasy* 3), I do not agree that this lack of 'rigour' (Nusselder's term) should force an investigation of the screen of fantasy to marginalise or exclude Žižek. Instead, I suggest that our task is precisely the opposite; an investigation of this question of fantasy *must*

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<sup>26</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), 7.

<sup>27</sup> See 'Anamorphosis' in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*; I discuss these terms further on in this Introduction.

seriously analyse Žižek because the figure of the screen attains the status of *doxa* in his work. If it is not systematically theorised by him then that is because, in his work, the figure structures, at a formal level, the inquiry itself.

Over the course of these pages, I attempt to explore this particular theorisation of the screen via its textual representation in contemporary literature. My intent is to perform a reading of the screen which describes it as a figure of literature *and* as a theorisable cultural object. In other words: this object produces an effect upon the Subject, is implicated *in* the subject, in the textual production of the subject, in contemporary literature. This act of theorisation is not simply instrumental. It is immanent. As we unfold each text, our reading will intertwine the textual and theoretical analysis of the figure of the screen, appending neither one element to the other but conceiving both as a single act of criticism. I attempt to elucidate theoretical concepts as they arise in response to textual analysis, articulating each in light of the other.

As Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard contend in their volume on twenty-first century fiction, the question of the subject, and the constitution of such, is one which retains vital importance for contemporary literature, because it is a question which must be repeatedly articulated in response to social and cultural factors:

[...] things really have changed in the twenty-first century – not just because of the latest nightmares of history [...] – but because of the continuing hollowing out of human cultures and economies by the processes of globalisation, consumerism and marketisation. The integuments of meaning woven by family,

gender, community, class, place, politics, religion, nation, even nature have been burst asunder, in the West at least, by the acceleration of technology, communication and globalisation. Is the autonomous individual central to liberal humanism anything more in the twenty-first century than the subject produced by mediatisation, consumerism and the work regime-digital surveillance? That might be one question which literary criticism exists to ask.<sup>28</sup>

For Adiseshiah and Hildyard, the subject depicted in twenty-first century literature *is* something more than a mere mirage produced by the unfathomable tectonic shifts of global capitalism and free-market economics; but their characterisation of the literary production of such a subject situates a curious ambiguity at its heart:

What happens now in the fiction discussed in this collection is the continuing challenge of modernism, now focused not so much on narrative linearity and character as on the complication and problematisation of realism, and on suspicion of the personal transcendence offered by middle-brow fiction as a deliverance from the always unsettling, often traumatic challenges of the twenty-first century. A destabilised realism is characteristic not just of texts that explicitly invoke the supernatural but those which though soberly secular are a world away from postmodern scepticism. Temporal disordering is repeatedly

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<sup>28</sup> Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard eds., *Twenty-First Century Fiction: What Happens Now* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2.

used to disorient the conventional ideological structuring of experience. The uncanny and haunting frequently enforce the unpredictability and unknowability of experience. All these elements can be regarded as 'neo-modernist' in their challenge to accepted patterns of thought as well as in their rejection of postmodern scepticism. The uncertainty, helplessness and deep pessimism that are often the dominant mood of these texts are matched by the utopian vision, ethical responsibility and attention to the local and the unnoticed that occasionally punctuate them.

*(Twenty-First Century Fiction 12)*

The particular problematic form of realism described by Adiseshiah and Hildyard is one which variously articulates the 'destabilisation', 'disorder', 'disorientation', 'unpredictability', and 'uncertainty' of experience. While we must acknowledge the terms upon which Adiseshiah and Hildyard make their claim — they theorise on the basis of a small but judicious selection of critical essays on the work of contemporary authors — we must also ask whether this installation of another space of uncertainty at the heart of experience is sufficient for the task of differentiating the contemporary literature of the twenty-first century from its pre-millennial postmodernist forebears. The characterisation of twenty-first century literature not simply as an incomplete or tentative field (which, of course, it is) but as itself a reflection upon the incompleteness or partiality of experience is supported by other critical attempts to adumbrate the literary topos of the new millennium. Witness Daniel Olson's conclusion to the introductory chapter of his exhaustive

collection *21st Century Gothic*: 'The secrets I found were [that] the new Gothic, despite its fresh masquerade, still takes us back to the haunting themes of the old Gothic [...].'<sup>29</sup> Read *The 21st-Century Novel*, the report from the Edinburgh World Writers' Conference of 2012-2013, with its strands on the formal and financial effects of technology upon the novel, the question of political engagement and popularity in literary writing, and the final chapter on 'Style Versus Content', and one is left with the question of whether there is a kind of 'content' which marks the break between post- and pre-millennial literature at all. One might also surmise (from that particular volume at least) that the authors of contemporary fiction do not appear particularly inclined to tackle this question. Even Gabriel Josipovici's exasperated renunciation of contemporary literature in *What Ever Happened to Modernism?*<sup>30</sup> might warrant a sympathetic reading in this context. Of course, my own claim here is to no comprehensive statement. I do suggest that by 'stepping away' and re-examining the screen (which is something akin to Nicholas Royle's project of 'veering' which 'impels us to think afresh and otherwise about the borders or opposition between interior/exterior or inner/outer')<sup>31</sup> we find that a strand of twenty-first century literature focuses not only upon reaffirming the superpositioned heart of the subject, or of restating the inescapable modernist values of Western literature, but upon the *work of* the subject engaged in refusing the deep plunge beyond the curtain of heaven, and instead becoming ever more sensitive to the fine threads which hold that curtain closed — which keep the screen, and the subject, intact.

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<sup>29</sup> Danel Olson, *21st Century Gothic: Great Gothic Novels Since 2000* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2011), xxxi.

<sup>30</sup> Gabriel Josipovici, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (London: Yale UP, 2010), x.

<sup>31</sup> Nicholas Royle, *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2012), 7.

Is this an essentially conservative goal? I would argue that it is not. My intent is not to reaffirm the subject as an immutable construct at the heart of the text, but rather to demonstrate the tidal forces which are at work in the constitution of such; the subject is neither its own missing centre nor its impassive facade, but instead the interplay between each. And this interplay is to be detected in the traces and marks borne by the screen. It is this crucial dialectical movement which is often overlooked when critics incorrectly accuse Lacan of negatively theorising the subject. Peter Zima's chapter on Lacan in *Subjectivity and Identity* falls into this trap: '[Lacan] is a structural thinker who, at the beginning of postmodernity, sets out to show how the individual subject is turned into a prisoner of interlocking structures.'<sup>32</sup> This notion, that Lacan's subject extends no further than the being stripped of all agency, residing in the prison-house of language, ignores the central tenet of his 'Real period': that 'The true aims at the real'.<sup>33</sup> In other words, the attempt to define a Symbolic term (such as the subject) always leads to the Real by virtue of the instability of the 'knot' which binds each field together. Since no self-evident subject exists, it can only ever 'aim at the Real'. The notion that Lacan defines an essentially conservative, negative formulation of the subject is a misreading and a misunderstanding of the complex oscillation between Symbolic and Real which defines it. The role of the Imaginary is easily grasped in this case: it is like the trick used in early Hollywood cinema, in which vaseline smeared around the camera lens allowed Rita Hayworth or Marlene Dietrich's skin to 'glow' via an onscreen effect of halation. The screen of

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<sup>32</sup> Peter V. Zima, *Subjectivity and Identity: Between Modernity and Postmodernity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 167.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge 1972-1973 (Encore)*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), 91.



fantasy is the figure which thematises the Imaginary role in the production of a subject. It defines the co-ordinates by which the subject persuades him- or herself that this continual oscillation between Symbolic and Real can be made sensible, and alluring. The screen is always implicated in the disjunction between the suprasensible and the sensible, because 'What speaks without knowing it makes me "I", subject of the verb' (*Encore* 119); in that place between knowing and not-knowing, for Lacan, is what we commonly call 'reality'. Reality, for the subject, is glimpsed through the screen.

My goal is also to bring literary criticism in line with cognate fields which have, in recent years, begun to investigate the theory of the screen. Recent screen-focused studies have tackled the question of textural, environmental, architectural, artistic, and technological surfaces with a view to understanding the screen as something other than an object which topologically renders the function of representation. Narrowing the focus of the theorisation of the screen to its purely representative dimension is the kind of strategy which results in the materiality of the object being disregarded. New research on the theorisation of the screen has focused on the material effects of the screen and surface in a variety of fields, and not simply upon its representative aspect: from gothic architecture in the aforementioned *The Gothic Screen* to Joseph Amato's anthropological history of surface in *Surfaces: A History*. Giuliana Bruno's *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* crystallises for us the particular issue of the screen which arises from these studies, focusing on screens in body, art, fashion, and cinema. This screen, according to Bruno, is an occlusive and connective surface; it gestures towards the subject at the moment that it also deprives the subject. In my opinion, Bruno's project, like that of the many who have worked to

refashion the theory of the screen in recent years, is curiously reminiscent of Lacan's. Bruno, for her part, mentions Lacan once:

we must reflect on the "superficial" relation between the forms of canvas, wall, and screen, for the surface not only mediates their fabrication but also their modification. The hypothesis put forth here is that a fundamental intersection of these forms has taken place, and today we can witness an important change on the surface of media. [...] It is important to review the architecture of this form, for the screen, when it does not remain undertheorized, has too often been treated in film theory as a trope akin to the window and the mirror. But the fabric of the screen discloses a change here. This screen is not a window. It slips away from any conceptual framing in pure perspectival geometry and ideal. And it is also not a mirror. This type of screen is not reflective of any form of split identity, and it supersedes the architecture of the Lacanian gaze.<sup>34</sup>

Bruno's idea is that the textural surfaces of screens enfold all kinds of meanings which do not only correspond to the visual marks which appear upon them. Her claim transposes a Derridean notion of play upon visual texts: meaning is formed by the complex interplay of surface, projection, and the mediation of the interior and exterior levels of the marks which appear as a result of topological difference. And the materiality of surface marks this shift in thought. The screen

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<sup>34</sup> Giuliana Bruno, *Surfaces: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 75.

described by Bruno is one which exists as an apparent multiplicity of materially-distinct yet theoretically continuous forms of itself. She emphasises the connective materiality of the object itself, as opposed to the visual information which is projected upon it, by way of the screen's property to bear projection upon its surface. Her claim that the type of screen of which she speaks can 'supersede' the 'architecture' of the Lacanian gaze is an example of this distinction.

For Lacan, however, the gaze is not simply implicated in the mirror form of a 'split identity', but is instead the mark of a subject emptied of 'meaning' *beyond* a symbolic level. Identity is only split insofar as it is split between the subject, which can 'assume' identity *as formal possibility*, and the subject's being, which is cut from Symbolic experience and cannot fall under the aegis of any identity. In his theory, there is a phantasmatic screen upon which the image of the gaze is projected (the gaze itself is defined as an object by Lacan, existing beyond the subject); at the level of the scopic drive, the subject is always 'looking through a lens' (a symbolic lens) as such, distorted by his or her desire and caught in the gaze of that which he or she looks toward in order to fill this gap.<sup>35</sup> So, while the object in which the gaze irrupts may appear to be a material screen (Lacan reads paintings in this sense, as we will discuss shortly), that screen is already functioning as the phantasmatic screen for the subject. The screen of fantasy, which is vital to the function of the subject in Lacan, can never be superseded because it is already acting *for the Subject* by screening the marks of the Real from his or her view.

The screen of fantasy is only reproduced, for Lacan, in paintings, which reveal the painter's desire to pacify the gaze

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<sup>35</sup> See 'The Line and Light' in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.

and 'trick' or satisfy the eye (which Lacan respectively calls *dompte-regard* and *trompe-l'oeil*). I suggest, however, that we require an additional understanding of the interaction between the phantasmatic and the material screen, towards which Bruno points the way. Lacan's model of the gaze works because of a certain inimical function of the screen which is expressed in its materiality (for Lacan, in a painting, but I suggest that Bruno shows this function can be witnessed in many other screen-objects too) but is already present for him in the immaterial form of screen which is vital to the constitution of the subject. This function of the screen is that which is coming to be recognised ever more clearly by writers like Bruno and Amato:

Surfaces, to suggest a general kind of dialectic [...] establish the contexts, configurations, and juxtapositions of thing and flesh, nature and society, and they nurture life and awaken the mind. Humans forever and constantly move in and out of the world's surfaces, traveling between things and objects, the other and the self. Outsides point toward and come to identify insides.<sup>36</sup>

It is a dialectical motion which produces two distinct, antithetical effects, of representation and occlusion, and synthesises them, not in the form of an object, *but in the form of the Subject*. Lacan understands the result of this dialectic long before anyone else. It is not simply a mediation of separate physical effects (the object both masks and represents space) potentially produced in a single object, but the guarantee of a space of negotiation with the subject. The *dompte-regarde* is produced *in* painting but the form of the

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<sup>36</sup> Joseph A. Amato, *Surfaces: A History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), xiv.

screen, constituting a surface, on a conceptual level is what appears to prompt Lacan to say that 'he who looks is always led by the painting to lay down his gaze'. (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 109). Lacan is at pains to ensure that we understand that the painting is no closer to the function of representation than is the immaterial 'picture' of the subjective experience of the gaze.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile his esoteric treatment of the screen at a conceptual level provides nothing less than a framework for the very function of painting that he goes on to describe:

[...] the screen re-establishes things, in their status as real. If, by being isolated, an effect of lighting dominates us, if, for example, a beam of light directing our gaze so captivates us that it appears as a milky cone and prevents us from seeing what it illuminates, the mere fact of introducing into this field a small screen, which cuts into that which is illuminated without being seen, makes the milky light retreat, as it were, into the shadow, and allows the object it concealed to emerge.

(*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 107-8)

What Lacan is describing here is the material effect of a screen as it intervenes in the play of light. By bringing the concealed object to light (ironically, in the absence of light) Lacan shows how a screen is already functioning *qua dompte-regarde*. Why shouldn't we consider, therefore, the

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<sup>37</sup> '[...] should we see the principle of artistic creation in the fact that it seems to extract [...] that something that stands for representation? Was it to this that I was leading you when I made a distinction between the picture and representation? Certainly not' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 110).

many versions of the screen *beyond the painting* which now work (and I suggest, are on a broader cultural level, *assumed to work*) to trap the gaze and negotiate not only a laying down of its volatile Real effects, but indeed to negotiate the very space of mediation itself? For it is this outcome towards which Lacan points us in his analysis.

Lev Manovich has long since demonstrated that a genealogy of the screen exists, one which figures certain representative features inherent in the painting, the cinema screen, and the computer screen.<sup>38</sup> We can offer an advance upon this genealogy however, following Erkki Huhtamo's criticism of Manovich's work for being too schematic and prescriptive, and consider the continued accretion of function and meaning which, according to Huhtamo and Amato among others, has marked the history of the screen. Huhtamo, for example, has written on the history of the screen in his attempt to construct what he calls a 'media-archeology' of its cultural, social, and ideological role. He notes that the word 'screen' itself first appears in English in the fourteenth century and is certainly in use from the sixteenth century onwards to refer to both a floor-standing object used to partition space and ward off draughts and heat, and a handheld version used to veil the face. 'Whether from heat, cold or a gaze, the screen was a surface that protected by creating a barrier against something uncomfortable or intruding.'<sup>39</sup> (There appears to be an inescapably Lacanian dimension apparent in any reading of that 'something uncomfortable'.) From the eighteenth century onwards, however, the screen begins to acquire a meaning contrary to this original occlusive sense: Huhtamo notes Charles

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<sup>38</sup> See Manovich's *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 95-100.

<sup>39</sup> Erkki Huhtamo, 'Elements of Screenology: Toward an Archaeology of the Screen', *ICONICS: International Studies of the Modern Image*, 7 (2004), 31-82 [35].

Musser's work on the history of screen practices, which places silent cinema and the earlier Phantasmagoria as succeeding forms of an older tradition of spectacle of illustrative projection based around the magic lantern show. 'By 1910 the word had come to be used metonymically, meaning the film culture itself, and often written with capital letters: The Screen.' ('Elements of Screenology' 38). This brief etymology establishes the fundamental dialectic which persists in the form of modern screens. While one aspect of the screen occludes, the other communicates; while one aspect is interior, in other words inward-facing because it partitions and encloses space, the other is exterior, outward-facing because it appears to represent space.

While Bruno is incorrect in claiming that the Lacanian architecture of the gaze can be 'superseded', she does identify the necessity of expanding the definition of the affective screen beyond that of Lacan's much narrower study of 'the painting':

The surface is here configured as an architecture: a partition that can be shared, it is explored as a primary form of habitation for the material world. Understood as the material configuration of the relation between subjects and with objects, the surface is also viewed as a site of mediation and projection.

*(Surfaces: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media 3)*

Not only mediated, one might add; it is structured in a material sense. The issues of the screen as cultural object, the 'architecture' of the surface which marks it, and the subjective response to this materiality of object — an object

which, judging by these examples of recent cross-disciplinary work, continues to accrete cultural and symbolic meaning — these issues must be confronted in literature, too, for there is a necessity in understanding the production and representation of the screen as something other than an object which simply falters and breaks down in a level of unresolved aporetic tension between its representative and occlusive aspects. In other words, there must be a way to figure this object in literature which does not fall into the trap of a classic postmodernist reading of this problem. Bruno's conception not only allows but requires the consideration of different forms of the screen in the attempt to theorise the object. Her work attempts to tease out the connections between screens of many stripes, and it is this kind of thinking which leads me to suggest that there is something at stake for us in extending this inquiry, which has perhaps more traditionally interested fields of visual culture, into that of literary culture.

Binding this inquiry together is the dialectical conception of the screen which underpins my work. The antithetical functions of the screen — occlusive and yet representative — which result from two separate and very different historical objects, as Huhtamo has shown, are combined in the cultural meaning and work of the screen in my thesis. In other words, I am suggesting that the only way to properly theorise the ubiquitous screen which arises in the twenty-first century is to remain attuned to the duality of its function and not allow the tension between its work as partition and projective surface to remain unresolved. There is an effect of the screen which includes both of these functions, affecting the subject simultaneously: as we see in Lacan, this effect, this dialectical outcome *is* the very production of the subject itself. It is towards this outcome that I believe the recent work of screen theorisation leads us.



The underlying premise of this work, therefore, is that we can read, in each of the texts I have chosen, a dramatisation of the generative moment of the subject. If this word, 'dramatisation', bears a heavy load, then it is only because the arena in which it performs its work is already well-reinforced. My contention is that we can only understand the screen by theorising it as a function of the subject; the two are inseparable in our investigation. We only conceive of the full extent of the form of the screen itself when we relate it to a construction of subjectivity. Therefore, the choice of the novel form *qua* proving ground of this thesis is founded upon what is perhaps a distinctly 'old-fashioned' notion: the belief in a theoretical investigation borne by textual analysis. In this sense, I make no claim to the theorisation of the particular *form* of the novel which has not already been explored in Mikhail Bakhtin, György Lukács, Northrop Frye, Ian Watt (and of course we could continue the list: Shklovsky, James, Adorno, Barthes, Johnson, Todorov...).

Text, instead, is to be conceived as providing to us nonpareil access, as it has for a very long time, to the arena of dramatised subjectivity. This conceptual delimitation, of course, excludes a metatextual level of inquiry from the investigation. It is clear, when we follow Lacan on the structure of fantasy, that the literary text in fact performs exactly the function that we associate with the screen in these terms. Indeed, as Žižek demonstrates, the screen of fantasy always functions for the subject on an *ad hoc* basis, the screen being 'filled' with the Symbolic 'matter' of the experiencing subject's 'reality'. For example, Žižek reads a scene depicting a sexual encounter in David Lean's film *Ryan's Daughter* exactly in this manner, noting that the staging of the act accompanied by the sounds of a nearby waterfall is what 'fills in' the phantasmatic frame for the

couple: 'the waterfall sound itself functions as the phantasmatic screen that filters out the Real of the sexual act.'<sup>40</sup> What this demonstrates is that the subject necessarily *performs* the 'screening' of the Real before any understanding of the screen-object is possible, since in this case it is the sound that screens the traumatic Real. The subjective encounter with the literary text is, therefore, the subjective encounter with the phantasmatic screen, since the literary-text-as-screen produces an effect upon the subject by furnishing it with the Symbolic material, to render the process in strictly Lacanian terms, which 'fills in' the fantasy frame in both a phantasmatic and objective sense. In my reading here, however, I suggest that the text demonstrates its ability to provide us with a record of a subject as phenomenon of screen. In other words, the Symbolic 'stuff' of the text is a reduplication of the act in which the reader-as-Subject is already engaged. By excluding this metatextual level of inquiry, the analysis intends to focus upon the central 'act' of the texts themselves; the encounter of subject and screen. When the subject comes into contact with the screen, in each text, this encounter *upholds* the subject, in the same manner in which the presubjective being 'in the Real' is produced as subject by introduction to the Symbolic realm.

Contact with the screen therefore suggests a continuous interaction between screen and subject which produces, and reproduces, each in respect of the other. Importantly, this is not to suggest a moment of psychological formation, but instead a moment which explores the stability of the Subject, the fantasy (in Lacanian terms) which is developed in order to allow the Subject to *continue to become subject*. Each chapter tackles the constitution of the subject in relation to the screen, and in doing so coalesces around a central

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<sup>40</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta, 2006) 50.

theme: in Chapter 1, on Michel Faber's *The Book of Strange New Things* (2014), we think upon materiality; in Chapter 2, on Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2004), upon being; in Chapter 3, on China Miéville's *The Tain* (2001), upon narcissism; and in Chapter 4, on W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2000), upon trauma. The chapters are each formulated along the lines of individual case-studies. This structure, consisting of largely discrete, free-standing chapters, is designed to address the central topic alongside key areas of Lacanian theory: by discussing the topics of being, narcissism, and trauma, which are important terms in Lacan's discourse of the subject, we proceed in the same manner as Royle's 'veer' or Žižek's 'look, awry'. The figure of the screen will fall into focus only when we approach it from radical and incommensurate points. Commonalities between each chapter are to be read as implicit expressions of the central figure of the screen, therefore, because its theoretical structure is what will provide the framework for the study of the text.

Conversely, the analysis of each text is what will allow us to probe and uncover the intricacies of the theory itself. Chapter 1 functions as an introduction to the relationship between the screen as figure and the screen as object. It does so by tracing the question of the apparent materiality of the screen in *The Book of Strange New Things*, investigating the manner in which the screen structures the intersubjective relation in that text. In Chapters 2, 3, and 4, the discussion can be said to centre on an area which corresponds to each of the three registers: in Chapter 2, on being, we glimpse the presubjective Real; in Chapter 3, on narcissism, the Imaginary moment of protective ego-formation; and in Chapter 4, on trauma, the breakdown of the Symbolic order. These demarcations are not absolute, and it is by no means the case that each chapter investigates each register in

isolation. The last chapter, it should be noted, is outsized in both length and influence, because it constitutes the most broad-ranging section of the work. The text which is studied in this chapter, *Austerlitz* demands such a discussion because it charts (with brilliance, we should note) the breakdown of the subject, an event which always necessitates a precise interrogation of each of the three registers. This chapter, therefore, more than the other chapters, necessarily surveys the field of subjective reality which is constituted by that Borromean knot-relationship of the three registers. 'It's easy for you to see that no two rings of string are knotted to each other,' says Lacan of that special knot, 'and that it's only thanks to the third that they hang together' (*Encore* 124). *Austerlitz* details the effects of cutting that ring of string which holds the others to itself, in exactly the manner that the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real are tethered to each other. There can be no more opportune moment to view the ultimate function of the screen in Lacan than that one. It is for this reason that the final chapter runs so large, and occupies its ultimate position within the work.

The presentation of the texts in the order of an inverse chronology should not be read as an investigative strategy. The chapters are not structured in this way in order to penetrate further into the theorisation of Subjectivity. Instead, they are structured around our backwards step. We step away from the screen in order to attune the strategy of our look — as, we will learn, the subject also must. As in Žižek's oft-repeated assertion, that only in psychoanalysis are we allowed not to enjoy,<sup>41</sup> we should remain attuned to the boundaries of subject and being which are held open by their own constitution, the *possibilities* for inscription of subject

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<sup>41</sup> 'Its great task is to break the hold over us of the superego injunction to enjoy, that is, to help us include in the freedom *to* enjoy also the freedom *not* to enjoy, the freedom *from* enjoyment.' (Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2011), 74.)

which the very *inscription* of subject draws for us. This is what, ultimately, we find demonstrated in these texts: not a reaction to Adiseshiah and Hildyard's fresh 'nightmares' (*Twenty-First Century Fiction 2*) of the twenty-first century, but a document of the manner in which it remains always possible to *draw* the subject in light of those historical contingencies. The subject is projected and occluded in our analysis. The subjects here are those for whom the possibility remains not to enjoy; viewed through the screen, viewed *against their screen*, we should realise that this very fact represents, in itself, a great victory for twenty-first century literature.

## Screen of Faith, Trace of Doubt:

### Materiality and Gaze in Michel Faber's *The Book of Strange New Things*

Michel Faber's novel *The Book of Strange New Things* tells the story of a Christian missionary who travels to an alien planet in order to minister to the planet's native race. The concept itself — in the sense that it transplants aspects of the missionary narrative to the genre of Science Fiction — is reminiscent of Stanislaw Lem's *Fiasco*, James Blish's *A Case of Conscience* and, most strikingly, Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow*. The novel does not stray too far, even, from the sort of missionary narrative found in non-SF works such as Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*: it concerns the travails of a teacher of faith who is deeply affected in some way by his contact with a foreign culture. Where *The Book of Strange New Things* diverges from these novels is the manner in which this contact adversely affects the missionary. While Emilio Sandoz' tragic misunderstanding of Jana'ata culture in *The Sparrow* leads to his horrifying brutalisation at the hands of his alien host (to give only one example of the way these novels depict the Pauline hazards of missionary work), the protagonist of *The Book of Strange New Things*, Peter Leigh, instead finds himself in a kind of paradise, ministering to natives eager for the word of God, and supplied by his sponsor with unlimited resources from which to build his church. He muses, in a letter to his wife near the beginning of the novel, that 'the way things are shaping up, it looks like my yoke is going to be easier than that of just about any missionary since the beginning of Christian evangelism. When you think of Saint Paul, getting

beaten up, stoned, shipwrecked, starved, imprisoned ... I'm almost looking forward to my first setback! (ALMOST)!<sup>42</sup>

There is no sign that Peter's faith awaits a moment of peril: nothing points toward the kind of looming crisis (and renunciation) of faith which we witness in Father Sandoz' account of his missionary expedition, for example. Instead Faber's novel explores the interstices which constitute the workings of that faith, the practice of everyday life which is just as vital to the continued functioning of the subject. In order to understand Peter's growing attachment to Oasis, we might recall a quotation which Fredric Jameson attributes to Andre Gide: 'Thank God Balzac never found the truth or the system he had been looking for all his life!'<sup>43</sup> The suggestion for Gide, according to Jameson, is that, had Balzac found what he was looking for, he would no longer have *been* Balzac, nor capable of the work that only he could produce. Along these lines, we could say that Peter Leigh, having already found 'the truth' of the Bible, finds 'the system' on the planet Oasis: the effect of this discovery is to radically alter his relationship with that which he has left behind.

Peter's wife Bea's messages, sent to him via a device called 'the Shoot', appear to describe a rapidly deteriorating situation on Earth. But while Peter reads of food shortage, environmental disaster, and economic collapse at home, he is either unable or unwilling to comprehend the severity of the situation, instead becoming preoccupied with the simple and seductive pleasures of his Oasan mission, learning the native language, building his church, living the Arcadian lifestyle of the Oasans. Unlike Father Sandoz in *The Sparrow* or Father Ruiz-Sanchez in *A Case of Conscience*, Peter's

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<sup>42</sup> Michel Faber, *The Book of Strange New Things* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2014), 141.

<sup>43</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2007), 315.

mission to Oasis accompanies no dark night of the soul; instead, it is Bea, back on Earth, whose faith begins to wane. In one of her final letters to Peter, Bea writes:

The Saviour I believed in took an interest in what I did and how I behaved. The Saviour I believed in made things happen and stopped things happening. I was deluding myself. I am alone and frightened and married to a missionary who's going to tell me that the fool has said in his heart there is no God, and if you don't say it it will just be because you're being diplomatic, because in your heart you're convinced I made this happen through my faltering of faith, and that makes me feel even more alone. Because you're not coming back to me, are you? You like it up there. Because you're on Planet God. So even if you did come back to me, we still wouldn't be together. Because in your heart you'd still be on Planet God, and I'd be a trillion miles away from you, alone with you by my side.

*(The Book of Strange New Things 477)*

The novel details the story of this estrangement from Peter's point of view. This passage reveals both this central theme of estrangement and, more importantly, the particular formulation of it which our analysis of the text must tackle. The fracturing of the relationship between Peter and Bea, the pair who have happily spent their lives together on 'Planet God' and for whom that shared notion has apparently become shattered, is the engine of the plot; but it is upon this phrase, 'alone with you by my side', I suggest, that the stakes of the novel are balanced. Faber's skill is, on the broadest



level, to depict the many discrepancies which overwhelm Peter and Bea's relationship and qualitatively present them as more or less coextensive with one another. The widening spiritual and experiential gap between the two is presented in concert with the physical and social gap which more concretely divides them. The phrase 'alone with you by my side' suggests both that something more essential than the conjunction of subjective and objective incompatibility is to blame for their issues; indeed, it suggests that the very *compatibility* of Peter and Bea cannot salve these wounds. Neither together nor apart, their separation has only shone light upon the gap which already existed between them: this would constitute a very Lacanian reading of the problem indeed, and I want to return to that thought shortly.

We can also read this 'alone-togetherness' from another angle, thinking of the object which is presented in the text as both intervening between and conjoining Peter and Bea. This object is the aforementioned 'Shoot': first mentioned by Peter as 'that thing that USIC installed in our house' (*The Book of Strange New Things* 54), it appears throughout the novel as an unobtrusive piece of computer equipment which is rarely described as consisting of much more than a screen. The purpose of the Shoot is simple; it allows for the transmission and reception of electronic messages across unimaginably vast distances, a kind of email system which provides the only means of communication between Earth and Oasis. In other words, without this device, there is no communication between Peter and Bea: without this screen, there is no language. (There is no other method of communication available to Peter and Bea, no phone or video calls, and the Shoot cannot transmit images.) Its function therefore leads us to describe it as a 'device' for multiple reasons; it is, within the reality of the text, literally a device which allows the protagonist Peter to maintain written contact with his wife; it

is on the narrative level a plot device upon which the novel can hang an epistolary framework; and on a textual level it is a rhetorical device through which the problems of communication and mediation are explored in the context of the intersubjective relationship.

At stake for us in the analysis of this text, I suggest, is the attempt to think the role of the screen in both an intersubjective sense and a materially affective sense. How does it function as a mediatory object in the relationship? How does it affect the subject? Marcel Theroux has noted that the novel's strength lies in its estrangement of the ordinary: 'As well as the literature of authenticity, Faber reminds us, there is a literature of enchantment, which invites the reader to participate in the not-real in order to wake from a dream of reality to the ineffability, strangeness and brevity of life on Earth.'<sup>44</sup> Lacan provides us with a method for analysing the relationship between Peter and Bea which investigates the very structure of this subjective estrangement. This particular kind of reading is enlightening because it emphasises the deadlocks of desire which mark their relationship and, indeed, provides a framework for uncovering the work of the screen for the subject; but I suggest that there is also something missing in readings of Lacan and that these must be reappraised if we want to bring our thinking of the screen-object in line with current work on the subject.

My particular claim is that the screen which we find in *The Book of Strange New Things* is an example of one which must be figured in terms of its material presence, and that this materiality must not be figured as a secondary effect of its apparent simple mediating function. As Siegfried Kracauer

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<sup>44</sup> Marcel Theroux, NYT Book Review: *The Book of Strange New Things*, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/02/books/review/michel-fabers-book-of-strange-new-things.html>> accessed 7/7/15.

notes, 'inner life manifests itself in various elements and conglomerations of external life, especially in those almost imperceptible surface data which form an essential part of screen treatment.'<sup>45</sup> And though we are not dealing with a visual text, the 'materiality' of the object, its depiction in the literary text as such, is expressed here in similar terms; that is, in terms of scene or stage for an inner life. The screen-object remains a physical medium, however, because of its status *as* physical object, as the object which intervenes between them, which separates and yet conjoins the two interlocutors, performing this dialectical function.

This material status as medium is important for us to bear in mind throughout our analysis, because this second kind of functioning of screen-as-medium which appears to be conspicuously absent in the text as such. In this reading of the text, the screen, in its material, objective sense, is a confounding, veiled presence: absent and yet the (non-)function of which makes everything else possible. Nevertheless, I contend, we can find traces of an extant materiality of screen woven throughout the text, working to produce subjective and spatial effects of occlusion and representation. In the first section of this chapter, I suggest that the encounter with the materiality of the screen cannot be reduced to a side-effect of the encounter with the function of the screen: this materiality must be considered in the first instance, even as it does not *appear* in the text in the first instance as such. By closely reading *The Book of Strange New Things*, I attempt to demonstrate the presence and importance of this 'veiled' materiality. Following this, I attempt to deal with this 'veiled' presence in terms of the consequences that it produces for a Lacanian reading of the novel: I suggest that this screen can be read as performing

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<sup>45</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947), 7.

the *dompte-regarde* even though it does not function as fine art. This reading takes into account the material effects of that object which are adumbrated by the text, suggesting that an analysis of the affective materiality of the screen demonstrates the necessity of considering the work of the screen-object in the negotiation with the gaze. I propose that a proper reading of the screen-object in *The Book of Strange New Things* must follow Lacan's analysis along its own levels. In other words, this 'veiled' materiality which denotes an obvious connotation in Lacanian theory from a completely opposite angle — that of the veiled signifier of the 'not-One' or empty subject — is reduplicated in our reading as a veil, another screen, which partitions and projects one thought of the screen-object from/upon the other: we must read Lacan as one who already understands the effect of the screen-object as existing beyond the constraints of painting alone.

Near the end of the novel, Bea sends a message — simply 'There is no God' (*The Book of Strange New Things* 454) — and Peter's reaction to it illuminates the question of the materiality of the screen:

There was no further message from Bea. At his command, a network of ingenious technology searched the cosmos for her thoughts and found nothing. Only that same cry of desolation, still glowing on the screen, just those four awful words, hanging in a contextless grey void. No name attached — neither his nor hers. Just the raw sentence.

(*The Book of Strange New Things* 460)

This description simultaneously points out the materiality and immateriality of the exchange: the conjunction of Peter and

Bea in the moment is revised as a conjunction of the materiality of the Shoot (or the object signified by it, which stands for the technological device and process itself) and the apparent immateriality of the act of communication. Peter and Bea are figured together only in negative terms: neither can be attached (via their name) to the 'raw sentence'. And yet the raw sentence wields total performative power over both: it accomplishes and makes present Bea's irrevocable alienation from her faith and from Peter. Peter thinks of Bea's messages as 'a frozen Present, yet to be experienced' (*The Book of Strange New Things* 232), and in that sense the messages are all the more revealed as the issue of a monolithic partition, which both strips the message of its signified (the other: Bea) revealing a terrifying instantiation of the Real in its namelessness, and is the gateway or passage to a future anterior moment when Bea will have already experienced a present yet to materialise for Peter.

The logic of the operational process of the Shoot — Peter's 'command' initiates the machine's search for Bea's 'thoughts' which returns the empty result — belies the ultimately metaphysical description of the operation itself. Of course the medium through which Bea's thoughts (and Peter's own) are made comprehensible is language, but the possibility of the transmission of that language is entirely predicated upon the 'network of ingenious technology' that serves the Shoot. In this way the description of the Shoot works to minimise the significance of language itself in the process, instead emphasising a kind of conjoined space which appears to issue from the material object. The Shoot itself is 'concentrated', in a rhetorical sense, by a metonymical action which identifies the most potently symbolic part of the device: the screen, standing in for the unfathomable technology which is created by the necessity of communication itself and therefore by the presence of the screen itself; the screen,

'contextless grey void' which is nothing of the sort. For only 'a slim contraption of plastic and steel' (*The Book of Strange New Things* 171) it wields an outsized influence, not only over the characters but over the text itself: while the screen alone stands for the unknowable (and ultimately irrelevant) technology which powers the Shoot, it also subsumes the very act of communication, shaping the flows of Peter and Bea's relationship by virtue of its materiality. Like a black hole, it is detectable by the manner in which it affects its surroundings. And like Lacan's treatment of paintings, which reproduce the effects of an immaterial screen tracing the extent of the subject's vision, this screen requires the consideration of its materiality: it is just that its materiality is veiled, hidden in the text — which is not the same thing as saying that it does not possess materiality at all.

This materiality fits like a cipher in the text: it is both a nonentity and a code which reveals that which is missing from view. Consider Peter's reaction to Bea's letter informing him of a tsunami which has devastated the Maldives: 'In normal circumstances, he would have embraced her; the pressure of his arms against her back and the nudge of his cheek against her hair would have said it all. But now, the written word was all he had' (*The Book of Strange New Things* 130). Peter conceptualises his ability to communicate with Bea as the materiality of the act: there is a physical dimension which expressly excludes the written word, and works instead via an intimate haptic relation based upon the pressure of contact between arms and back, cheek and hair. This materiality is what appears *will have* made that consoling gesture successful: of course it can never be so, can never come to fruition while this particular system of communication via the screen mediates and partitions the interlocutors. The partition 'forces' Peter to employ the written word alone, the description of it as being 'all he had'

signalling that very materiality which it apparently lacks, as if completely insubstantial. He continues, shortly after he finishes composing his reply:

He read the text of his message over, but didn't tinker with it any further, feeling suddenly faint with hunger and fatigue. He pressed a button. For several minutes, his 793 inadequate words hung there, trembling slightly, as if unsure what to do. That was normal for the Shoot, he'd found. The process kept you in suspense each time, tempting you to fear that it would fail. Then his words vanished and the screen went blank, except for the automated logo that said: APPROVED, TRANSMITTED.

*(The Book of Strange New Things 132)*

The curious thing about this passage is the way in which it actually works to undercut the opposition — between the 'authentic' materiality of hapticity and the deficient immateriality of the written word — which appears in the previous quotation. Again, the written word is figured as lacking, 'inadequate'. But the description of Peter's message imbues the words with a material quality, the efficacy of which can be measured in the effect it produces upon the subject. The sudden faintness experienced by Peter is the result of a journey from which he has shortly returned — his first to meet the native Oasans — but he suffers no real effects until this very moment, the moment in which he is also forced to regard the 'raw' sentences of his message. And the echo of his abrupt malaise is to be found in the suddenly skittish '793 inadequate words' which 'hung there, trembling slightly'. This point in the passage inverts our understanding

of the object of Peter's unease: rather than simply experiencing discomfort with the inadequacy of the form of communication itself, it is instead the irruption of the materiality of the screen (which structures this communication) which appears to be affecting Peter. Consider the objective, material quality of the words themselves: they do not merely figuratively 'hang', like charged words in spoken discourse, but instead are literally hung on the screen, suspended and trembling, visually and materially constituting an interruption of Peter's fantasy of irrevocable communication with his wife. The blank screen which appears to envelop the words themselves is again figured without materiality; but this very lack of apparent materiality only calls attention to the fact that *it is only with the material construction of the screen that this communication is possible*. The screen-object itself appears to be both irrupting and lurking within the text.

The hapticity that appeared to be reserved only for the meeting of the two bodies of Peter and Bea is actually plainly represented as a mere fantasy compared to the manipulations which control the screen itself. The hapticity structuring this communication in fact constitutes the only true material relation we can glimpse in this passage: that of Peter and the Shoot. He presses buttons in order to type out a message to his wife. He presses another button to finalise and *perform* the act of communication with his wife. In fact, we cannot fail to notice the language which marks the passage of that moment, in which Peter presses a button which makes the message 'tremble' while he experiences 'fear that it would fail'. The contact that we witness occurs only between Peter and the Shoot, and in its curiously intimate appearance it is structured by a simultaneously veiled and pronounced materiality. The hapticity of the relation, the possibility of contact between Peter and the



screen, demonstrates the materiality of the screen which is encoded by the text; Peter suffers a form of 'performance anxiety' over the encounter with an object which we are hardly told is there. And yet there is bound up in this moment a kind of exquisite denial, as Peter's 'lacking' words are expropriated by the screen and invested by him with a libidinal excess which responds, 'trembling', to his touch, as he experiences a fear of failure. At this moment, the fantasy of intimate contact with his wife is reinvested in the encounter with the screen of the Shoot.

In Lacan's theory of the sexual relation, the male subject<sup>46</sup>, enraptured in phallic jouissance — the masturbatory 'jouissance of the idiot' (*Encore* 81) — never gets close to his partner, the Other: his desire, insofar as it can be said to be his own, is located in the Other and directed at the other whom he supposes to possess the Other, or the Other 'quality' (which is beyond the bounds of possibility). The very thing which that other is supposed to possess is called '*objet a*' by Lacan, or the object of the small other (as opposed to the big Other — the third position of Symbolic law which is proposed by language, and which hangs over the subject) in order to emphasise the process by which the subject is 'emptied' of its content (the subject being constituted by the fact that it must symbolise itself outside of itself in language), and in which it supposes that this other object can fill that hole or gap. *Objet a*, which Suzanne Barnard calls 'an unsymbolizable scrap of the real'<sup>47</sup>, marks the trace of the Real in what Lacan calls the semblance of being, the Symbolic basis of subject which 'mirrors' being: caught

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<sup>46</sup> In other words, the subject *identifying* with the 'position' of the male, rather than the biologically male human — a vital distinction in Lacan, and one which we will discuss further in Chapter 2.

<sup>47</sup> Suzanne Barnard, 'Tongues of Angels: Feminine Structure and Other Jouissance', *Reading Seminar XX*, eds. Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002), 171-185 (179).

between the registers of the Symbolic and the Real, *objet a* 'only dissolves, in the final analysis, owing to its failure, unable, as it is, to sustain itself in approaching the real' (*Encore* 95). We cannot fail to notice that the 'completion' of Peter's attempt to touch his wife via the screen at this moment, signified by the towering and yet impotent message 'APPROVED, TRANSMITTED', is only the result of a solitary endeavour which is masked by the possibility of a satisfactory reciprocal communication represented by the screen. Two readings are apparent: the screen is a Symbolic object, supposed to contain *objet a*, masking an impossible intersubjective relation between Peter and his partner — it is the scrap of a transcendental Real which is only revealed as an excremental, insignificant object in the final encounter; and the screen is performing a double function, defined by its materiality as an object which partitions, masks, occludes, and separates the two at the moment that it also projects, receives, represents, and communicates information between them.

We can see how *objet a* assumes two forms here. Peter's fantasy of *contact* dissolves in the face of the materiality of the screen but is then immediately reconstituted in terms of the screen itself; the object which Peter will suppose to allow himself to move towards the Other takes form, firstly, in Bea's body and then in the screen. The interruption of this fantasy of contact with Bea can be read as constituting the perception of the stain of the Real, or in other words a moment in which the screening fantasy (which should ordinarily prevent the subject's encounter with that which is unbearable and traumatic) breaks down. We can draw an immediate parallel between the irruption of the screen which we have noticed in our reading thus far and with this 'appearance' of the stain of the Real. As Žižek says, *objet a* is an insubstantial object which 'in itself is "nothing but

confusion", and which acquires a definite shape only when looked at from a standpoint slanted by the subject's desires and fears — as such, as a mere "shadow of what it is not" (*How to Read Lacan* 69). The veiled materiality of the object in the text confirms this. In this reading, it would not be the materiality of the screen which affects Peter but instead the horrifying confrontation with that which marks the subject in the field of objects and reveals its constitutive emptiness and lack. The episode of the final, disappointing, time Peter and Bea make love — in the back of their car, on the way to the airport before Peter departs for America and his spaceflight — and Peter's obsession over it attains new significance when we view it in such terms and in light of our reading of the material screen. Peter writes, in his first message to Bea after arriving on Oasis:

Bea, forgive me for not being able to let this go, but I'm still upset about what happened in the car. I feel I let you down. I wish I could take you in my arms and make it right. It's a silly thing to obsess about, I know. I suppose it just makes me confront how far away we are from each other now. Have any husband and wife ever been separated by so vast a distance? It seems like only yesterday I could reach out my arm and you'd be right there. On our last morning in bed together, you looked so satisfied and serene. But in the car you looked distraught.

*(The Book of Strange New Things 54)*

The 'fear of failure' which Peter later experiences in relation to the Shoot finds its origin in this moment. What is intriguing is the way in which Peter infers Bea's disappointment in a

visual sense as opposed to a vocal one. The apparent authenticity of haptic communication, which Peter longs for in his separation from Bea, fails to function, paradoxically, when they are together. In the moment, and in the airport afterwards, Bea reassures Peter that he has no reason to worry: in spite of this, Peter fixates on how Bea *looks*. It is in the act of looking that Peter actually exemplifies the Lacanian dictum that subjects relate only to what they are missing in the Other. While Peter becomes anxious about his impotency to the extent that he is unable to read Bea's distraught face as anything other than a sign of his own 'lack' (a lack of what he can give to the Other), as impinging upon his own subjective fantasy, the revelation later on in the novel that Bea's plan all along was to become pregnant illustrates the fundamental manner in which each partner 'misses' the other's intent. Bea is unsatisfied because she wants to become pregnant, and not because of Peter's impotency, as he supposes. Nevertheless, it is Peter's lack which haunts him, and becomes a mistake which he must attempt to rectify in language: in the very realm which he mistrusts in favour of the imaginary power of touch. On the other hand, we can see in the above passage that there is also already a problem of materiality which weighs on Peter's mind: that of distance and hapticity. His obsession with his performance forces him to confront the problem of distance and the reality of the mediation of their communication. It introduces a new relationship in which that which is at arm's length is only the screen. There is a telescopic effect inherent to their communication. The vast distance which has 'never before separated husband and wife' is now potently symbolised by the Shoot. This dual reading opens a gap for us when we attempt to consider the materiality of the screen itself; for, in Lacan, the screening fantasy is never material as such, and yet it is structured and called forth by an object, *objet a*. The screen-object appears to function in the way Lacan describes

the painting, following the screen implicated in the gaze. The screen we see here is involved in a materially-affective relation with the subject, the hapticity (*the possibility of contact*) of which affirms this effect. Is it possible for us to read the screen of the Shoot as a trap for the gaze, a screen-object which works in more than a representative sense?

Nicholas Daly, in his study of the interruptive meetings between technology and the body which structure modern subjectivity, notes that the figure at the centre of J.G. Ballard's *Crash* is 'the post-crash body, a body scarred but also strangely liberated and libidinized by the encounter with the machine'<sup>48</sup>: by contrast, the encounter with technology in *The Book of Strange New Things* reveals the suggestion of a libidinal relation between body and machine which is problematised by a deeply ambivalent regard for the materiality of that relation. So, while Daly frames a set of increasingly integrated depictions of the relationship between the subject and the machine — from the sensation drama and fiction of the 1860s which stages the near-collision of the body and locomotive, through the acculturation of cinematic sexuality and mortality of the early twentieth century, and culminating in *Crash*, in which the collision is finally depicted 'one last time ... [in] pre-microchip culture' (*Literature, Technology, and Modernity* 8) — when we jump to a twenty-first century depiction of that relation, we cannot help but notice that the materiality of that technological object has come to be figured idiosyncratically by comparison. Is there an interruption *already* woven into the relationship between Peter and the Shoot, one which is the result of an obviation of the ecstatic, climactic *impact* which appears to structure Daly's study? Without the possibility of impact, the materiality of the screen appears decidedly unthreatening by

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<sup>48</sup> Nicholas Daly, *Literature, Technology, and Modernity, 1860-2000* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), 116.

comparison. Nevertheless, we cannot fail to notice that the true hapticity presented by the text is not one which facilitates human contact, but instead one which *demands* human-machine contact, and that this hapticity is structured around a materiality of the screen. Peter's relationship with his USIC colleagues (USIC is the corporation which has established the base on Oasis) is cordial, but that cordiality masks an apparent distance which seems to mark all human relationships in the text. There is an awkward disinterest which marks the relationships between the employees; they are all talented scientists and engineers who appear to Peter to be missing a vital human component. The stale corporate atmosphere of the base only exacerbates this situation, replacing emotional interaction with canned radio documentaries and trite motivational posters: 'The USIC mess hall was humming, not with human activity, but with recorded music' (*The Book of Strange New Things* 62). But more relevant is the distance which develops between the USIC employees and the people they leave behind. Grainger, Peter's closest contact at the USIC base on Oasis, articulates this 'distance' when she informs him that 'This happens. This happens to all of us':

'The rift,' she said. 'It grows and grows, and finally ... there's too much of it to cross. It's like ...'

Words failed her, and she resorted to a gesture instead. Releasing her grip on the steering wheel for a few seconds [...] she held up her hands, palms parallel, separated by a few inches, as though about to press them together in medieval prayer. But instead, she parted them wider, letting the fingers splay

limply, as though each hand was toppling off an axis, falling through space.

(*The Book of Strange New Things* 340-1)

Grainger communicates to Peter the apparently common experience of all the USIC employees on Oasis, the one which he recognises is affecting his relationship with Bea: that of the widening experiential rift between those on Oasis and those on Earth. What is interesting about this episode is that Grainger illustrates the concept with a gesture which emphasises the hapticity of the relation; language literally fails her, and cannot encompass the problem of this rift. The concept can only be symbolised, for her, in thinking of the possibility of contact. This gesture seems to me to be a reiteration of the interruptive paradigm of the screen which we witness in the text, a relation which, in contrast to Daly's study of 'pre-microchip culture', expressly excludes impact, and which in fact figures the exact opposite of an impact in its relational model. In *The Book of Strange New Things* the screen is touched and not-touched, a material object with an immaterial, phantasmic presence.

The goal for us would be to describe this screen-object as doing nothing other than revealing the gaze itself. This initial suggestion of the screen as an absent presence already invites a classic Lacanian reading: it is tempting to figure this screen in two senses, both as a kind of phallic signifier, the signifier of the 'not-One', structuring the relationship between Peter and Bea in its absence, and as an object prompting the eruption of a gaze revealing through anamorphosis the stain of the terrifying and disruptive Real. But the consideration of these effects in a computer screen which displays nothing but text also invites us to diverge from Lacan and consider the immanence of the physical, haptic experience of the

object itself. The text seems to provoke an additional reading of the materiality of the screen, not least because it is very clear that there is constitutive effect experienced by Peter in relation to the screen:

The words were sincere but felt a little forced. That is, he would have spoken them spontaneously if Bea had been cradled in his arms, her head nestled under his shoulder, but ... Typing them onto a screen and sending them into space was a different thing. It changed the colour and tone of the sentiments, the way a cheaply photocopied photograph loses warmth and detail. His love for his wife was being cartoonised and he lacked what it took to display it as the vividly figurative painting it should be.

*(The Book of Strange New Things 399)*

It seems clear from this passage that there is evinced an architecture of the screen which produces an effect in the text. Consider the constitutional position of the screen in Peter and Bea's communication. In this position, where the screen is responsible entirely and materially for the possibility of communication between the two, there is enacted a subtle enfolding of the contradictions of the screen within themselves: the result is the formation of a partitioning object which also connects and commutes as it occludes. In the passage, Peter directly experiences the paradox of the 'contextless void'. While the materiality of the object itself seems to be unrepresented by the text, it is only this very materiality which can account for the effects that it itself produces. Here we witness the screen's effect upon Peter's attempt to communicate with Bea. It is not, as first appears,



the problem of a translation of spoken language into written communication, but instead one of spontaneous intersubjective experience translated into material form. That is why, in spite of the fact that the Shoot cannot display images, the descriptive load of this passage is borne by visual and not mental metaphor. Peter lacks the skill to 'display' the 'figurative painting' of his love, rather than the skill to write or expressly communicate it. His problem is not simply that he cannot communicate with his wife, but that he cannot adapt to the radical form of the object itself.

Therefore, rather than figuring Peter's inability (he literally has a 'lack of what it takes') to communicate with Bea only as an example of Lacan's famous statement on the lack of the sexual relationship, *il n'y pas de rapport sexuel*, we must also consider the manner in which the screen as a material object is implicated in the revelation of that impossible relationship. It is not simply in the action of 'typing' his sentiments that Peter feels they are altered, but by typing them '*onto a screen* and sending them into space' [emphasis added]: materiality and its effects are invoked by this situational distinction. The intrusive object which disrupts the Imaginary completeness of Peter's wordless communication with Bea must be acknowledged in its materiality. This intrusion upon the subject's imaginary space is in some ways a call to the experience of space itself, as Jacques Rancière notes in *The Future of the Image*, thinking of 'the way in which, by drawing lines, arranging words or distributing surfaces, one also designs partitions that enable one to partake in communal space, [...] configurations of what can be seen and what can be thought, forms of inhabiting the material world.'<sup>49</sup> Rancière draws attention to the subjective interventions involved in the construction of materiality which must exist in order to allow

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<sup>49</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007), 91.

the object its own intervention, such as we see with the screen in *The Book of Strange New Things*. Imaginary space for Lacan *is* space, of course, or rather, the Imaginary is indistinguishable from that which the subject experiences as space. But the 'form of inhabiting the material world' in Rancière is the very form of the partition itself: it is the partition which creates the possibility of communal space through the simultaneous act of exclusion of space. It is this dual experience of the screen which Peter encounters when he recognises his own deficiency. The ability to 'display' sentiment is rendered highly problematic when the form of the object is split along its own partition: Peter wants to communicate, to represent his sentiment towards Bea, but fails to understand the manner in which the screen must also occlude the display of sentiment. In the gap between Peter's 'cartoonised' love and the *proper* 'figurative painting that it should be' is the very partition envisioned by Rancière; and of course this partition is found already in the very form of the display precisely *because* of the materiality of the screen which requires it. This materiality is the thing which enjoins the figurative and material aspects of the screen, so that they both function simultaneously as the subject contends with and experiences the object itself. It is called forth by, and could not exist without, the interruptive materiality of the *Shoot* which conjoins Peter and Bea.

In Lacan, of course, there is always an interruptive presence, too. The intersubjective relationship is both predicated upon, and is a function of, the desire of the Other. *Man's desire is the Other's desire*, as he says. The illusion of the sexual relationship is that it is constituted without mediation and can be signified as a total, symmetrical relation; the fact that Lacan wants to make clear, however, is that, after all, we are never alone with our partners:

You are my wife — after all, what do you know about it? You are my master — in reality, are you so sure of that? What creates the founding value of those words is that what is aimed at in the message, as well as what is manifest in the pretence, is that the other is there qua absolute Other. Absolute, that is to say he is recognized, but is not known. In the same way, what constitutes pretence is that, in the end, you don't know whether it's a pretence or not.<sup>50</sup>

Although delivered relatively early in his career before he had fully grasped the importance of the dimension of the Real in psychoanalysis, this quote indicates to us the manner in which Lacan conceives of the Other in both a Symbolic and a Real dimension. As Žižek notes:

we need to resort to performativity, to symbolic engagement, precisely and only insofar as the other whom we encounter is not only the imaginary semblable but also the elusive absolute Other of the Real Thing with whom no reciprocal exchange is possible.<sup>51</sup>

In other words, the 'founding value' of the performative utterance — the fact that, by naming another as your master, you oblige them to enter into that relationship with you and treat you as if they were such — which characterises the subject's engagement in the Symbolic mode does not encompass the total aspect of the Other. If, in the Symbolic

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<sup>50</sup> Jacques Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 1993), 48.

<sup>51</sup> Slavoj Žižek. 'The Real of Sexual Difference' in *Reading Seminar XX*, eds. Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002), 57-75 (70).

sense, desire is first and already determined by the Other, since desire can only be articulated according the symbolic structure of language, law, and society which precedes it in the subject, then in the real sense desire is experienced as the desire of the Other, of the Other itself desiring. Symbolic space allows the articulation of terms with which desire can be said to follow or transgress social norms: this is the Other in its Symbolic dimension as a Third term intervening in the subject's pursuit of desire. But the real dimension of the Other is as 'Thing'<sup>52</sup> which calls forth the subject's desire, announcing desire in its unfathomable raw state: this is Žižek's reading of the 'orders' of the Other. It is in this Real dimension of the Other that we witness the necessity of the Symbolic semblance — *objet a* — which tends towards the Real. Because the 'Real Thing' (in other words, *das Ding*, the Thing) is utterly unfathomable, and approaching it is unbearable for the subject, the subject must designate the thing in the other (*objet a*) in which it locates desire — it is for this reason that *objet a* maintains a banal, excremental character. The sublime forever eludes it.

Although the Other is that which utterly exceeds the subject — is, as Žižek calls it, the 'automatism that runs the show' (*How to Read Lacan* 40) — it is also experienced by the subject in the impenetrability of *another subject*, in the essential confusion by which the other appears to be both subject and object: in, for example, the fact that what ones wife 'knows about it' is not what oneself 'knows about it'. This is the result, for Lacan, of the subject's assumption of the Symbolic space, or in other words the entry into language, which in an utterly constitutive way *supposes* the other to know. This assumption of the other, a specific subject whom I imagine gives me access to the interiority of their being, is

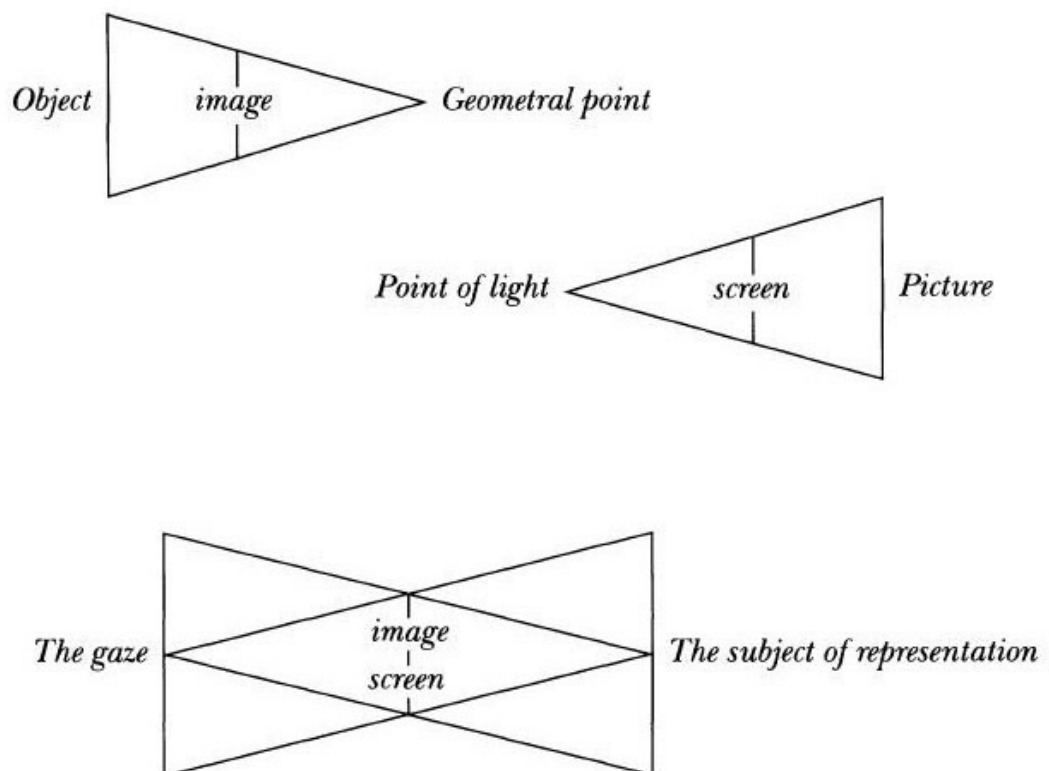
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<sup>52</sup> The 'Thing', or *das Ding* will be explored in more detail in Chapter 2. It is to be conceived as the 'primordial' object of the Real itself.

guaranteed by the possibility of the Other: the 'big' Other that is language, which creates the possibility of an other term in the first place by allowing my interaction with it. But the Other as Thing escapes this Symbolic dimension every time the subject becomes close to witnessing it 'head-on' as such. That is why Lacan says, as we noted earlier, that *objet a* 'only dissolves, in the final analysis' unable 'to sustain itself in approaching the real.'

This impossibility of sustaining itself in the Real is a mark, perhaps counterintuitively, of its visibility, and the point at which this thought of the Other and *objet a* becomes relevant to the thought of the screen in *The Book of Strange New Things*. For Lacan, as Žižek notes, 'the object-cause of desire is something that, viewed from in front, is nothing at all, just a void: it acquires the contours of something only when viewed at a slant' (*How to Read Lacan* 68). The object-cause of desire (*objet a*) is that which exists beyond the subject, 'apparently something', but really only animated by the particular (phantasmatic) rendering of the subject's desire in the first place. The anamorphic status of the object-cause of desire (and the anamorphic outcome of its appearance as gaze) is most famously illustrated by Lacan in his reading of Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors*. Thinking of this object-cause emphasises for us the importance of understanding Lacan's particular use of the term 'screen' in the field of the gaze. This screen is an immaterial projective/occlusive surface which is implicated in the function of the extra-subjective gaze. For Lacan the screen is implicated in the scopic field, which entangles the form of the gaze with the function of desire. The 'gaze' here is a defamiliarising term with an 'inside-out structure' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 82): it is 'inside-out' in the sense that it is figured by Lacan as emanating from a point beyond the subject. It is important to understand that the structure of

the gaze, in Lacan's theory, does not amount to 'that which I look upon also looks upon me'. The gaze is, for the subject, an object which does not consist in vision but in imagination; it reaffirms the dictum that man's desire is the desire of the Other by emphasising the fact that our position is inherently neither subjective nor objective, although we appear to ourselves to oscillate between these positions. Instead we are subject to the same laws of light which make possible our own ability to perceive. In this way, the gaze, like language, pre-empted the subject: that is why Lacan calls it 'a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 84). The screen enters this structure of the gaze at the meeting point of the subject and the other's gaze.



Lacan's diagram of the relation is reproduced above<sup>53</sup>. In the first figure, the 'geometral point' of the eye views the object, apprehending an image dependent upon that geometral position; in the second figure, the reverse action seems to occur, the 'point of light' which emanates from the object signalling to the subject at the geometral point that it too, shall we say, is 'part of the picture' — a picture in which it retains the position of an object itself. The final figure, which interlaces the two previous diagrams, confirms the position of the 'point of light' as that of the gaze itself, 'existing' beyond the 'subject of representation' as a result of the mere possibility of the subject possessing the capacity to view another object. As Lacan notes, 'That which is light looks at me, and by means of that light in the depths of my eye, something is painted [...] something that is an impression' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 96); this 'impression' is the anamorphic stain which fundamentally asserts the subject's powerlessness in the scopic field:

This is something that introduces what was elided in the geometrical relation — the depth of field, with all its ambiguity and variability, which is in no way mastered by me. It is rather it that grasps me, solicits me at every moment, and makes of the landscape something other than a landscape, something other than what I have called the picture.

(*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 96)

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<sup>53</sup> See the chapters 'The Line and Light' and 'What is a Picture?' in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* for original diagrams; they are found on pages 91 and 106, respectively.

The 'grasping' of the subject, that action which plays out as the gaze makes itself known in the picture, is accomplished for Lacan on the level of the final mysterious term — the screen. Hal Foster, in 'Obscene, Abject, Traumatic', gives an account of its nature:

The meaning of this last term, the screen, is obscure. I understand it to stand for the cultural reserve of which every image is one instance. Call it the conventions of art, the schemata of representation, the codes of visual culture, this screen mediates the object-gaze for the subject. But it also protects the subject from this object-gaze, for it captures the gaze, "pulsatile, dazzling and spread out", and tames it in an image.<sup>54</sup>

The screen, we can see from Lacan's diagram, appears coextensive with the image apprehended by the subject. Foster notes the dual purpose of this screen, which only becomes apparent once the objective nature of the gaze is realised. For it is the purpose of the screen to both mediate the gaze and to protect the subject from its Real effects. This function of mediation which Lacan recognises as imperative in the working of the gaze is the expression of a constitutive dialectical aspect of the screen. This mediation involves the work of both an occlusive and a representative function of the screen.

The correlative of the picture, to be situated in the same place as it, that is to say, outside, is the point of the gaze, while that which forms the mediation from the one to the other, that

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<sup>54</sup> Hal Foster, 'Obscene, Abject, Traumatic', *October*, 78 (Autumn, 1996), 106-124 (109).



which is between the two, is something of another nature than geometral, optical space, something that plays an exactly reverse role, which operates, not because it can be traversed, but on the contrary because it is opaque — I mean the screen.

*(The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis 96)*

This screen of which Lacan speaks does possess a materiality because it always only intervenes between the subject and the object from which the gaze erupts. In other words the screen is that which seems to pre-empt *that which we would call a screen in material or objective terms*: and yet it performs the very work that we associate with the screen-object. That is why Lacan calls the screen opaque. In spite of its immateriality, it produces a structural effect upon the resolution of the gaze, so that even when we think our vision is unencumbered we are supposed to realise that there is an eternality of the screen. Foster draws out the implications for this eternal screen: it 'tames' the gaze in an image. So in Lacanian terms the image is never possible without the screen itself, and this screen, as Foster says, as product of symbolic function, is granted to humans alone:

Humans [...] have access to the symbolic — in this case to the screen as the site of picture-making and viewing, where we can manipulate and moderate the gaze. In this way the screen allows the subject, at the point of the picture, to behold the object, at the point of light.

*('Obscene, Abject, Traumatic' 109)*

So, how does this screen relate to the material screen, the screen-object which we find in *The Book of Strange New Things*? Our goal is to think of the screen as possessing a materiality, and the material object which we find in the narrative — the screen of the Shoot — displays a similar dialectical aspect to the conceptual screen implicated in the Lacanian gaze. In other words, the screen performs a contradictory function of occlusion and representation simultaneously. We can discover that function produced in the gaze, where the screen is the guarantor of the subject's approach towards the object of desire, both preventing and allowing the non-relation to function. This aspect of the screen is not lost in Lacan. That aspect of the material partition, that which divides the space which produces sense-effects for the subject, which conjoins the visual and mediatory sense: it is found in the painting.

The screen in *The Book of Strange New Things* cannot be thought of in only its scopic dimension, either as the object from which the gaze erupts (which would ultimately render the object itself irrelevant) or as a screen similar to the one which is implicated in the field of the gaze. We have shown that there is a veiled materiality of object expressed in *The Book of Strange New Things*: that materiality of object, precisely because it is veiled, demands the analysis of its effects. It is the screen which marks Peter and Bea's material separation; it is the thing which prevents them from communicating on a level which is not strictly homologous with the function of the immaterial screen of the gaze, even if we can see that both screens are structured around a similar dialectical action. This is the key outcome in our attempt to think about the parallel effects of a Lacanian reading and our affective reading of the text: we notice that the screen, in whatever manner it is figured, appears to express a duality of

action, in which it simultaneously represents and occludes space according to its own partition. What Lacan does not consider (nor has he cause to) is the manner in which this model of the screen might be applied in a material sense beyond the painting, its effects witnessed in a material sense. This is why I tackle this question of the screen in literature: it is here that we witness the representation of the subjective effects which are provoked by this dialectical action. In other words, it is here in which the occlusive and representative aspects of the object are shown to resolve themselves by producing the subject; indeed, this resolution is already achieved because the screen-object is already negotiating the space which makes it possible to negotiate the surrender of the gaze for the subject. As a result, the subject must form a complex relationship with the object itself, which it cannot bypass as simply a 'visual device'. The object materially affects the subject, and this fact cannot be ignored when the screen as a form *and* as an object assumes the position, arguably, of cultural ubiquity.

What is the effect of the veiled materiality of screen expressed in the text? We should be clear on this point and not simply explain the effect of the screen as a side effect of the physical distance separating Peter and Bea. Distance, without the conjoining presence of the screen, would remove the possibility of communication. Instead, it is only once communication is first possible that it can afterwards be prevented. But further than this, the veiled materiality of the screen exemplifies the fact that the theorisation of the screen in Lacan entirely accounts for the effects of the screen experienced by Peter. In this way, there appears to be another affective screen arising in our exploration of the screen itself: one which works in a similar way (in theoretical form alone, not function) as that which Lacan calls the

'lamella'<sup>55</sup>; in other words, it is an amorphous form, plastic, which adopts the structure of an object and yet remains itself. Lacan is talking about the 'scrap of the real' which persists for every subject from the moment of birth, becoming *objet a* in its objective expression: we might see something similar in the thought of our reading here, in which we attempt to work towards theorising the screen by remaining sensitive to the iterations of itself which arise through our reading. In this way, a partition separates our discussion of an immaterial screen and a material one. But it is not purely an occlusive partition which blocks our view of one or the other; instead it performs the function of the screen that I have set out to discuss, one which separates and occludes even as it allows the representation and projection of space or information. And it does so in a way which forms a pliant screen, a veiled surface which, when draped over a topology, preserves the features of the spaces above and below itself.

This image of a screen which, finally, remains unable to do anything but preserve the separate levels of experience in which it intervenes is found in *The Book of Strange New Things*. Early in the novel, Peter reflects on the limits of the screen: what it can accomplish, what it can project, and what it must hide. He writes in a message to Bea:

I miss living through the visible moments of life with you. Without you at my side, I feel as though my eyes are just a camera, like a closed-circuit camera without film in it, registering what's out there, second by second, letting it all vanish instantly to be replaced by more images, none of them properly appreciated.

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<sup>55</sup> The lamella is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

(*The Book of Strange New Things* 159)

Peter's inability to 'properly appreciate' the 'images' that he encounters is not, as at first it might seem, an effect of the primacy of a visual mode of communication in his and Bea's relationship. Instead, it returns to the relation which we established earlier: a relation structured around the apparent authenticity of a material form of contact, of the hapticity which is established as the guarantor of the Imaginary completeness of their non-verbal communication. The metaphor of the eye as camera obscures the true nature of Peter's worry. It is not that he wishes to share the image itself, it is that he is worried about the lack of permanence of image, the lack of content and object which he cannot experience as Bea would, were she alongside him. The problem is not that Bea cannot see the image, but that Peter cannot record it. The image itself is, after all, simply one further remove from the 'inauthentic' written word. Peter's desire is to experience contact with his wife, to make that which exists for him take object for her.

We can also read Peter's discomfort with the transience of the unrecorded image in light of the gaze. Lacan conceives of the gaze and the voice as the object of psychoanalysis, in the sense that they are objects, for him, which exist beyond the subject and prevent the assumption of a total self-identity: there is always an anxiety to be experienced in my relation with the object which reminds me that I do not look or speak without the act occurring in the field of the Other. That is why Lacan says that '*The objet a in the field of the visible is the gaze*' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 105). The gaze is the eccentric fragment — or stain, as Lacan says — which appears upon the image of the object in view (the 'image' we will remember, is the extent

of the subject's vision itself, the fantasy which 'appears' on the immaterial screen through which the subject must always view objects), reminding the subject of the point from which it is already gazed upon. This eccentricity of the gaze reveals the mediating action of the screen:

Only the subject — the human subject, the subject of desire that is the essence of man — is not, unlike the animal, entirely caught up in this imaginary capture. He maps himself in it. How? In so far as he isolates the function of the screen and plays with it. Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze. The screen is here the locus of mediation.

*(The Four Fundamental Concepts of  
Psychoanalysis 107)*

The subject is able to negotiate with the gaze because of the presence of the screen. The screen is that which is granted to the subject in its constitution in the Symbolic realm. As Foster notes: 'This is the function of the screen: to negotiate a laying down of the gaze as in a laying down of a weapon' ('Obscene, Abject, Traumatic' 109). The screen functions by mediating between what Žižek calls 'the dialectic of view and gaze'.<sup>56</sup> Peter, therefore, encounters in the 'missing' recording of the image precisely the torsion of the eccentric object coming to bear upon his subjectivity. He fails to negotiate a laying down of the gaze, to tame it in a form which would compensate for the gap between himself and his wife. That is why he is so upset about the lack of picture or video transmission:

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<sup>56</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'The Undergrowth of Enjoyment: How Popular Culture can Serve as an Introduction to Lacan', *New Formations*, 9 (1989), 7-29 (8).

If only I could send you a photo or a movie!  
 How quickly we adjust to what's provided for  
 us and want MORE ... The technology that  
 allows me to send these words to you, across  
 unimaginable distances, is truly miraculous ( -  
 a blasphemous assertion??) yet as soon as  
 I've used it a few times, I think: Why can't I  
 send pictures as well?

(*The Book of Strange New Things* 159-60)

As Lacan notes, the function of art may sometimes be that of a *trompe-l'oeil* — a tricking of the eye — but it always works as a *dompte-regard*: a taming of the gaze. Were Peter permitted to transmit pictures and videos, they would certainly perform this basic function of image, artistic or not. That is because for Lacan the image always reveals, in a sense which cannot be glimpsed in the act of perception itself (though it does occur there too), the hole which marks the irruption of the gaze *behind* the screen. This is a reflection of the hole which marks the pupil in the human eye. But this theory of function is not concerned purely with representation; in fact it is not concerned with representation at all. The creation of the work of art reveals the desire of the artist: not the desire to represent, as in the *trompe-l'oeil*, but in the desire to tame, *dompte-regard*. This is the way in which Lacan recognises, before any other, the radical work of the screen-object. By reading the painting as an expression of the artist's desire to contend with that which ceaselessly attempts to burst forth from behind it, Lacan provides the exact model which describes the very necessity of recognising the materiality of the object itself. The 'content' of image as such is not where the work of taming is performed: 'For me, it is a question of creation as Freud designated it,

that is to say, as sublimation, and of the value it assumes in a social field' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 111). This is what most readings of the gaze fail to recognise; the structure of the screen, with its dialectical function of occlusion and representation, is what allows the gaze to first *become recognised*.<sup>57</sup> The position of the screen in the architecture of the gaze is fundamental, so the question should not revolve around, as it has so often, the 'return of the Real' in art. It should instead interrogate the return of the Real in the form of the screen-object, in the material echo of that immaterial, structural form which Lacan theorises as the central component of the vision/gaze dichotomy. Lacan shows us the manner in which the dialectical tension of occlusion and representation is resolved in the screen: in the negotiation of space which *permits* the negotiation with the gaze. The screen-object is *already negotiating*, already permitting the negotiation with the gaze which reveals the desire of the subject caught upon its surface. The outcome is that we need not regard art as the exclusive domain of the *dompte-regard*: this functions on any screen in any culture well-versed in the encounter with the ubiquitous and yet mysterious object itself.

So the limit of the technology (upon which the prospects of Peter and Bea's communication relies) effects a structural limit, not in the possibility of communication but in the exposure of the levels of materiality uncovered by this relationship:

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<sup>57</sup> And we cannot help but recognise, thinking of Huhtamo's work on the historical development of the screen, that the object itself cannot predate the immaterial, ahistorical screen Lacan implicates in the gaze. Therefore we can consider two possibilities for the origin of the screen for Lacan: either the screen-object, as it arises through various historical functions and meanings, is an expression of a deeply-seated, 'primal' unconscious screen already at work throughout the development of human perception; or the screen-object is that which allows Lacan to postulate a screen function insofar as we can understand it in this sense in the first place.



Peter stared at the screen. It was pearlescent grey, and his text hung suspended in the plasma, but if he adjusted his focus he could see his ghostly visage: his unruly blond hair, his big bright eyes, his strong cheekbones. His face, strange and familiar.

*(The Book of Strange New Things 160)*

Can there be any clearer demonstration of this passage from immaterial to material screen, from the uncovering of desire to the affective space which must be revealed as a function of that uncovering? Here Peter contends with the experience of three levels of the screen: *on* the screen, the text of Peter's message hangs in the representative space luring his vision towards it; his gaze is trapped before a shift in perspective alerts him to that which is *beyond* the screen, the occluded space signalled by the appearance of Peter's reflection, the glinting light which draws the eye, reminding the subject that he or she is always gazed upon, always unable to contain the gaze, always an object separated from *objet a* by some screen or other; the screen *itself*, a material object upon which these two images are superimposed, admitting each, negotiating as it is, producing and reproducing *the possibility of the subject*.

## There Is No Oryx:

### Desire, Subject and Meaning in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

I don't want to indulge in overdramatization. All ages have thought they had reached the most extreme point of vision in a confrontation with something terminal, some extra-worldly force that threatened the world. But our world and society now bring news of the shadow of a certain incredible, absolute weapon that is waved in our faces in a way that is indeed worthy of the muses. [...] It's not something I invented, since we are bombarded everyday with the news of a weapon that threatens the planet itself as a habitat for mankind.

Put yourself in that spot, which has perhaps been made more present for us by the progress of knowledge than it was before in men's imagination — although that faculty never ceased to toy with the idea; confront that moment when a man or a group of men can act in such a way that the question of existence is posed for the whole of the human species, and you will then see inside yourself that *das Ding* is next to the subject.<sup>58</sup>

Lacan's disquisition on the end of the world strikes me as particularly useful for thinking upon a work of post-apocalyptic fiction. Here is *das Ding*, the mysterious Freudian object 'in the world', rendered by Lacan as the proto-object of the Real itself — in other words, the object before objects may become articulated, the very Real rejected at the first cut of subjectivity, which becomes 'left over' in the constitution of *objet a*. Unlike the object-cause of desire, *objet a*, however, *das Ding* is no excremental object which

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<sup>58</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 2008), 128-9.

eludes our grasp, fitting into the symbolic order precisely as the lack which overflows such order. Instead it is the very sublime, traumatic, Real form of the Other, the Other *before* we encounter it as such in the Symbolic field. Ostensibly, Lacan's point in this passage appears to be this: when we encounter the idea of an extra-worldly force, for example the one represented by the extinction-threat of nuclear bombs, we approach something like *das Ding*, which *precedes* that terminal point which all ages have figured as the most extreme moment of encounter in human experience. *Das Ding* is 'something that is far beyond the domain of affectivity, something moving, obscure and without reference points owing to the lack of a sufficient organization of its register' (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 127). It is this lack of organisation which demonstrates that the Thing is 'next' to the subject. In other words, it is the exteriority of the subject's *exterior*, the world of objects; it is radically opposed to the constitution of knowledge. This is why Lacan continues the fictional scenario above, where one encounters the man with his 'finger on the button', so to speak, with an appeal to the 'subject of knowledge':

You will see that you will beg the subject of knowledge who has given birth to the thing in question — the other thing, the absolute weapon — to take stock, and you will also wish either that the true Thing be at that moment within him (in other words that he not let the other go or, in common parlance, "let it all blow up") or that we know why.

(*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 129)

What Lacan depicts here is the subjective encounter with that which escapes knowledge. The appeal to the other,

here, to that man ready to pose the question of existence, is an appeal to make present something which is beyond the possible knowledge of the subject. Perhaps this is why, in the final confrontation between James Bond and the villain in which the fate of the world is at stake, Bond must always foil the villain, or why destruction otherwise proceeds according to a series of accidents, as in Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*. It is not possible to present that moment of failure of the Thing, that point in which the Thing is not within the other and instead is *truly* 'in the world', at which we truly encounter the terminal moment. We cannot subjectivise this moment.

It is for this exact reason, however, that we can characterise post-apocalyptic fiction as a *response* to apocalypse; in other words, it is a response to that moment which cannot be depicted, the moment of apocalypse itself. In Lacanian terms, what a post-apocalyptic text does is interrogate the breakdown of the Symbolic register for the subject. It materialises the insistent traumatic Real, that which 'exists' beyond the law of society, and questions the very fantasy screen which permits social interaction with my neighbour. Once we lose the law of prohibition, once our desire is no longer safely situated and our consensual phantasmatic relationship to the screen breaks down, the anarchic relationship to total *jouissance* draws near, no matter whether we are battling murderous gangs, zombies, killer robots, or starvation. Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, the first novel of what has come to be known as the 'MaddAddam Trilogy' along with *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013), explores the aftermath of that moment when, to quote Lacan, one might pose the question of existence for the human species. Through environmental destruction, transgenic manipulation, social disintegration and cultural apathy, the text follows the collapse of society and the apparent destruction of mankind, tracking the lives of

a number of characters across both sides of the apocalyptic divide. Atwood focalises the narrative through Jimmy, a boy out of step with society who grows up in a gated compound (reserved for the elite: the families of the scientists working for powerful biotechnology corporations) on the East Coast of the United States. The technological advances of the corporations (genetically modified animals, consumer products, miracle drugs) wield much influence over the general public, socially and economically deprived and confined to the rundown 'pleeblands' which cover most of the country. As a teenager, Jimmy befriends the mysterious Crake, a young genius who grows up to head his own lab, called Paradice, for one of the most powerful corporations; he also meets Oryx, who works alongside Crake at Paradice. Jimmy believes that Oryx is the girl he has loved since he was a teenager, a girl he and Crake first see on an internet porn site when she is only a young child, and for whom Crake also harbours a secret obsession. Crake, unbeknownst to his corporate masters, secretly plots the end of humanity, and he succeeds in encysting a hemorrhagic virus in his new libido-enhancing drug, the BlyssPluss Pill, which appears to kill everyone on the planet excluding Jimmy. Jimmy, in his post-apocalyptic isolation, assumes the name Snowman,<sup>59</sup> and acts as a ward for Crake's ultimate 'invention': the Crakers, a group of genetically-engineered humans designed by Crake to correct what are, according to him, the inherent flaws of humanity, and inherit the Earth.

At stake in our analysis here is the notion that this text does in fact, as Lacan states, demonstrate that 'the Thing is next to the subject'. In other words, the text is not focused, I

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<sup>59</sup> Throughout this chapter I refer to Jimmy and Snowman interchangeably: I follow the text in doing so, i.e. according to the character's self-identification. Generally speaking, the 'Jimmy' sections of the text refer to his 'pre-apocalyptic' life, while the 'Snowman' sections correspond to his post-apocalyptic seclusion. At times I also refer to 'Jimmy/Snowman' when the argument appears to apply to the character in a general sense.

propose, on the questions of environmental destruction, genetic engineering, the capitalist annexation of scientific or artistic discourse, and so forth, but rather it depicts this post-apocalyptic scenario in order to explore the critical relationship between the subject and the Thing. The important fact, however, is the method it employs to accomplish this: it does so by examining the Imaginary and Symbolic processes which constitute the screen of fantasy for the subject, demonstrated through the textual production of Jimmy/Snowman's fraught relationships with Oryx and Crake via the video, computer, and photographic screens which structure and mediate in these relationships, and Jimmy's narrative depiction as 'a child of the screen' — a boy who, in the absence of his uninterested parents, develops a formative association between screen fantasies and the pursuit of *meaning*.

As Atwood says in 'Writing *Oryx and Crake*':

The *what if* of *Oryx and Crake* is simply, *What if we continue down the road we're already on? How slippery is the slope? What are our saving graces? Who's got the will to stop us? [...] It's not a question of our inventions — all human inventions are merely tools — but what might be done with them; for no matter how high the tech, homo sapiens sapiens remains at heart what he's been for tens of thousands of years — the same emotions, the same preoccupations.*<sup>60</sup>

While the narrative hinges upon the various applications of human invention, the text itself seems to question, according

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<sup>60</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing, 1970-2005* (London: Virago, 2005), 323.

to Atwood, the human *use* of invention, and the manner in which human meaning is revealed through this. Atwood's final statement here is cryptic: does she mean that humanity is essentially immutable, or does she instead mean that humanity remains to be fully understood? I believe that her intention is for this statement to be read in both senses, and that the kind of 'human meaning' she intends to query is more complex than it might, at first, appear. There is a crucial distinction between this proposal, and prevailing critical opinion of the novel. Karen F. Stein, for example, suggests that 'At the heart of *Oryx and Crake* is a compelling and urgent question that guides Atwood's speculative fiction: what does it mean to be human in an era of biotechnology and genetic engineering?'<sup>61</sup>; Coral Ann Howells proposes that 'Atwood is asking the same question that serious moralists have always asked: What does it mean to be human?'<sup>62</sup>; while Lucy Perry states that 'The message of the novel is: render human nature irreducibly malleable and permeable, and the consequences, which for Atwood seem to be pure and simple entropy, will return humanity to a primitivism idiosyncratic of a much earlier point in evolutionary history'.<sup>63</sup> In each of these readings, the very term which it seems the text itself places into question — the question of the 'human' — is the one which is not scrutinised. It appears to me that, in order to read the text properly, we must bear this question of the human in mind: this question is not 'what does it mean to be human?' — rather, I suggest, it is 'how can a human mean?' The text wants to interrogate *the very possibility of*

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<sup>61</sup> Karen F. Stein, 'Problematic Paradise in *Oryx and Crake*' in *Margaret Atwood: The Robber Bride, The Blind Assassin, Oryx and Crake*, ed. J. Brooks Bouson (London: Continuum, 2010), 141-55 (142).

<sup>62</sup> Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 171.

<sup>63</sup> Lucy Perry, 'Intimations of Immortality: Semiologies of Ageing and the Lineaments of Eternity in Contemporary Prose' in *Twenty-First Century Fiction: What Happens Now*, eds. Rupert Hildyard and Siân Adiseshiah (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 162-82 (175).

*the human meaning*, the human, as such, *meaning something*, and whether that is itself possible. In this regard it is incredibly suggestive to read *Oryx and Crake* alongside Lacan's hypothetical doomsday scenario: Lacan demonstrates the Thing beside the subject at the moment preceding apocalypse, and *Oryx and Crake* continues it at the moment following. This reading demonstrates, in other words, that very part of the human which *cannot mean*, the very part of oneself which is barred from our knowledge precisely because, in order to *mean something*, we must become constituted underneath the sign of the signifier, must become subject to it.

While the post-apocalyptic 'side' of the novel examines the subject of knowledge in the situation where knowledge rapidly cedes its place to *jouissance*, its 'pre-apocalyptic' obverse, the 'dystopian' United States of Jimmy's youth and young adulthood, explores the role of the screen of fantasy in the constitution of social order:

I would argue that [*Oryx and Crake*] is not a classic dystopia. Though it has obvious dystopian elements, we don't really get an overview of the structure of the society in it [...] We just see its central characters living their lives within small corners of that society, much as we live ours. What they can grasp of the rest of the world comes to them through television and the Internet, and is thus suspect, because edited.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'The Handmaid's Tale and *Oryx and Crake* "in Context"', *PMLA*, 119: 3 — Special Topic: Science Fiction and Literary Studies: The Next Millennium (May, 2004), 513-517 (517).



Atwood signals specifically the work of a frame and a screen, here: the frame of fantasy, which 'edits', or in other words mediates, as screen or a lure, the experience of the object-cause of desire which 'fascinates' the subject. The 'total workings' of society — its very structure, which by definition traverses the subject who must enter into it to *become* subject — cannot be made available or comprehensible, present, for the subject; one has no way of approaching that totality or understanding it 'objectively', and instead one must remain enmeshed in the workings of one's own fantasy, which 'fills' the gaps in the Symbolic structure of the Other, the gaps of the Real, and makes it comprehensible from our 'point of view'. Atwood demonstrates this impossibility of transcending the screen of fantasy (in other words, the impossibility of transcending one's own desire *and* remaining subject) which would mean 'fulfilling' desire and closing the gap of subjectivity, grasping that Thing in the world fully in its immanence, through the 'love triangle' formed by Jimmy, Oryx, and Crake. I will organise this chapter as such: by focusing on Jimmy, Oryx, and Crake, in turn, at each point addressing what I believe are crucial deficiencies to be found in the critical analyses of each character and demonstrating the prevailing influence of the screen. The point that must be corrected here is that these analyses tend to be predicated on the question of *human* rather than *subjective* meaning. In the first section, I ask whether Jimmy/Snowman should not properly be termed an 'ethical' character rather than, as he so often is described, a 'moral' one, and how this should affect our reading of his introduction of Symbolic law to the Crakers. I then address a fundamental misconception in the reading of Oryx, which either presents her as a simple 'mystery', what I believe to be a re-inscription of the trope of the 'mystery woman', unrepresentable by the text, or ignores her altogether as a mere foil for the main drama involving Jimmy and Crake. Such analyses fail to pay attention to the

text's production of Oryx as character twisted already by Jimmy's fantasy. The text interrogates the production of fantasy and the 'position' of the Thing, the irruption of the Real, in its depiction of Oryx, demonstrating both the constitution of the subject and the foreclosed *meaning*-human, the human being. Through Oryx, I argue, the text explores the implications of Jimmy's formative life as a 'child of the screen'. I move to Crake in the final section, addressing his motive as the author of the text's apocalypse and *his* relationship with Oryx, both of which are usually dismissed as inscrutable portions of the narrative.<sup>65</sup>

Perry and Howells both read Jimmy/Snowman as an essentially 'moral' character, one who is altruistically concerned, in his post-apocalyptic life, with the wellbeing of the Crakers. Perry, for example, claims that 'Snowman signifies the literary/historical past: the good or noble savage, the idealised indigene of a more primitive, pre-technological world. [...] The tree-dwelling Neanderthal figure of Snowman represents natural goodness and Romantic primitivism, as well as the sort of anti-corporate themes that Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984* were renowned for' ('Intimations of Immortality: Semiologies of Ageing and the Lineaments of Eternity in Contemporary Prose' 177). Meanwhile, Howells suggests that 'Snowman [...] is both mouthpiece and butt of Atwood's satire, but [...] he does not become alienated from human beings. On the contrary, he emerges as a morally responsible man and the novel's unlikely hero, who regards the prospect of entering again into human relationships with a kind of fearful excitement.'<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> None of the analysis is conducted in isolation. I discuss all three characters in each section; I have merely chosen to organise each section predominantly around a single character.

<sup>66</sup> Coral Ann Howells, 'Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Visions: *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*' in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* ed. Coral Ann Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), 161-75; 169.

While I would argue that Jimmy/Snowman should be more properly classified as an *ethical* rather than a moral character,<sup>67</sup> to me it seems that characterising Snowman's actions in terms of moral absolute misses the point. Instead, the important fact to understand here is that Snowman, in his act of watching over the Crakers, is responsible for derailing Crake's intent to create a society beyond the life of the signifier by introducing the Crakers to religion, to Symbolic law, and to language. In other words, the post-apocalyptic section of the book details Snowman's introduction to the Crakers of *the screen of fantasy* — the Crakers, in this sense, are *beings who are becoming subjects*. The post-apocalyptic section of the novel therefore reflects the 'pre-apocalyptic' section in the sense that Jimmy's childhood as a subject of the screen comes to fruition in that apparently hopeless future.

The creation of the subject in the shadow of Symbolic law — that which ultimately requires prohibition, hierarchy, division, and so forth — is exactly what Crake seeks to forestall when he creates the Crakers:

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<sup>67</sup> What is the distinction between these terms, between morality and ethics? For Lacan, the former must be divorced from the level of the evaluation of the 'good'. He proposes this thesis: '[...] the moral law, the moral command, the presence of the moral agency in our activity, insofar as it is structured by the symbolic, is that through which the real is actualized — the real as such, the weight of the real' (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 23). Here we see that with which the subject is forced to contend 'in order to act in the right way' (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 22): it is the very 'condition' of the self, the barred subjectivity which is 'our condition as men' (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 22) which we must choose to bear. To act ethically, therefore, is not to act according to a prescribed 'good', but instead to, as Joan Copjec suggests, '[...] insist on separating ourselves from, rather than surrendering to, this incomprehensible part of our being; we insist, in other words, on prolonging the conflict with ourselves.' (Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (London: Verso, 2015), 92.) In these terms, Snowman is the psychoanalytic subject, the analysand who poses the question of himself: 'what do I mean?' He is riven by desire, is selfish, egotistical, estranged from his self: and he chooses to remain so, by affirming his commitment to the Crakers. He does this, not for their benefit, *but for his own*. He does so in order to *retain* his internal conflict, his division, which can only be maintained as such in society, in concert with others.

[...] there would never be anything for these people to inherit, there would be no family trees, no marriages, and no divorces. They were perfectly adjusted to their habitat, so they would never have to create houses or tools or weapons, or, for that matter clothing. They would have no need to invent any harmful symbolisms, such as kingdoms, icons, gods, or money.<sup>68</sup>

Crake seems to implicitly understand that this, the very barring of the subject by the signifier, the traumatic birth of subject in the realm of the Symbolic, is the birth of desire itself. Ursula K. Heise suggests that Crake's plan to create true 'posthumans', as Perry (among others) describes the Crakers, ultimately achieves the opposite effect:

[...] the Crakers turn into humans rather than posthumans by the end of the novel, as their newly discovered ability for artistic representation — they have made an effigy of Jimmy during his absence — signals the emergence of just the kind of culture that Crake aimed to preclude in his genetic programming.<sup>69</sup>

Snowman sabotages Crake's work at every moment of his interaction with the Crakers, because he unwittingly inculcates them with the fundamental basis of Symbolic law. Perry's contention that 'Snowman is astride the primitive on the one side – in his primordial and arboreal nature – and the futurist on the other in his (albeit unwitting) perpetuation of

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<sup>68</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (Bloomsbury: London, 2003), 305).

<sup>69</sup> Ursula K. Heise, 'The Android and the Animal', *PMLA*, 124: 2 (Mar., 2009), 503-510 (507).

Crake's work' ('Intimations of Immortality: Semiologies of Ageing and the Lineaments of Eternity in Contemporary Prose' 178) misses a crucial point: that this divided subject is 'monstrous' (*Oryx and Crake* 101) for the Crakers not because they fear him, but because he represents the vision of their *future, not their 'primitive' past*. When Snowman eats the weekly animal offering provided for him by the herbivorous Crakers, they 'can't help but peeking. The spectacle of depravity is of interest even to them, it seems, purified by chlorophyll though they are' (*Oryx and Crake* 101). They are interested in Snowman precisely because, in his 'depravity', he materialises, for them, that 'X' of obscene surplus beyond the ken of the subject which the proto-subjective Crakers must renounce in order to form, indeed to *perform*, a 'normal' community: the community which is subject to social law based on Symbolic prohibition, and which, for each subject, is mediated by the screen of fantasy. It is a proto-society of the screen, in some senses ominously akin to the dystopian America which, via Crake, is ultimately responsible for its creation. The Crakers' wholehearted acceptance of this 'new' social mode is signalled when, near the end of the novel, they construct an effigy of Snowman and chant his name: 'We made a picture of you, to help us send out our voices for you' (*Oryx and Crake* 361). The Crakers, at the conclusion of the text, are unwittingly sublating the being of Snowman, preserving only his trace in the Symbolic figure which now represents him for each of them. This moment enacts the transubstantiation of the obscene primal (father) figure into the Symbolic figure of the law. *Jouissance* is cut from the Crakers *as subjects*, because they are now founding a register in opposition to the biological cycle of generation and corruption. They learn the

power of Symbolic law: 'We knew we could call you, and you would hear us and come back' (*Oryx and Crake* 361).<sup>70</sup>

These amount to preparatory remarks. The importance of Snowman's 'transgression' against Crake (ironically, in the foundation of a Symbolic law *in Crake's name*) is that it demonstrates Snowman's constitution as a subject fraught with the anxiety and frustration which accompanies the screening of desire. We must return to the 'pre-apocalypse' of Snowman's youth in order to track the appearance of the screen. It is in the relationship between Oryx, Crake and Jimmy that we witness most clearly the 'circulation' of desire which marks its own impossible satisfaction. Indeed, the crucial point for us is the realisation that the text explores the subjective experience of a life lived *staring at the screen of fantasy*. The work of the screen is interrogated by the text overwhelmingly in the figure of Oryx, who appears both as an evanescent figure, the 'core' of whose being is unavailable to Jimmy, and as something which is *too* present, which cannot be depicted precisely because it is impossible to do so. In this sense she is a function of Jimmy's fantasy — learned by screen interaction — and is also something *other* than this. She appears, in other words, *as* screen, as *figure of* screen, and as that which cannot be screened.

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<sup>70</sup> A final point can be made on the connection of the development of this Symbolic law and the text's examination of subjectivity, thinking of Marc Bosco's claim of the connection between *being* and symbol: 'The novel suggests that rather than the philosopher's definition of the human being as *animal rationale*, it is more accurate to say *animal symbolicum* — that is, symbol-making being — to convey the centrality of symbols and metaphors to our humanity, which first find expression in questions about our origins and our end.' (Mark Bosco, S.J., 'The Apocalyptic Imagination in *Oryx and Crake* in *Margaret Atwood: The Robber Bride, The Blind Assassin, Oryx and Crake*, ed. J. Brooks Bouson (London: Continuum, 2010), 156-71 (163-4.)) A precise clarification should be made here: symbol-making does not make us human, does not explain the core centrality of our being; rather, in Lacan, it takes us *further away* from the experience of self-presence. It deprives us of that exact experience of our 'true' nature. This fact is crucial to our understanding of a subjectivity split *before* itself, and indeed the relationship of the screen to this Subject.

Oryx humours Jimmy's desire to 'construct' her: 'Sometimes he suspected her of improvising, just to humour him; sometimes he felt that her entire past — everything she'd told him — was his own invention' (*Oryx and Crake* 316). Jimmy's intent is to render Oryx as a comprehensible, graspable object, becoming attainable through the narration of her life story. The text repeatedly signals the instability of Oryx's presence (which is why it is odd that this fact is so rarely acknowledged in critical analyses of the novel). 'Her name wasn't Oryx, she didn't have a name' (*Oryx and Crake* 90):

[...] now he's come to the crux in his head, to the place in the tragic play where it would say: *Enter Oryx*. Fatal moment. But which fatal moment? *Enter Oryx as a young girl on a kiddie-porn site, flowers in her hair, whipped cream on her chin*; or, *Enter Oryx as a teenage news item, sprung from a pervert's garage*; or, *Enter Oryx, stark naked and pedagogical in the Crakers' inner sanctum*; or, *Enter Oryx, towel around her hair, emerging from the shower*; or, *Enter Oryx, in a pewter-grey silk pantsuit and demure half-high heels, carrying a briefcase, the image of a professional Compound saleswoman*? Which of these will it be, and how can he ever be sure there's a line connecting the first to the last? Was there only one Oryx, or was she legion?

(*Oryx and Crake* 308)

This passage, I propose, does not simply produce Oryx as another materialisation of the trope of the 'mysterious woman', as elusive and mystical presence whose essential

being Jimmy fails to comprehend (the fallacy of which Lacan reveals in his analysis of the phenomenon of courtly love); instead, what we encounter is a carousel of image, the very model of fantasy which distorts a lack — not in 'Oryx', *but in the Other*. Oryx, in other words, is depicted in the text as a character *already distorted by Jimmy's fantasy*. The strange fact of this reading, however, is that it does not simply reduce Oryx to a fiction of Jimmy's fantasy. In other words, it does not simply restate Oryx's 'central mystery as woman' from another angle; instead, it demonstrates the constitutive fiction of fantasy itself, reveals the very frame which traces a screen upon which Jimmy projects his own desire. The text does not produce Oryx as a mysterious woman, flitting in and out of Jimmy's life; rather, it produces an obvious fantasy, Jimmy's fantasy of 'Oryx', as a double of the subjective 'presence' of Oryx which we must attempt to differentiate in our close reading. The impossibility, for Jimmy, of answering the question of whether 'there was only one Oryx' makes this perfectly apparent. It is obvious to us, as readers, that there is only one Oryx; we meet her, in the text, in the Paradise dome (she is viewed through the screen of a window), working for Crake. The other characters, the young girl on the pornographic website and the teenager on the news report, are not the same person, nor are either of them Oryx, as Jimmy supposes in his fantasy. 'Oryx', for Jimmy, *is* fantasy. She herself cannot answer Jimmy's questions, cannot confirm that she is 'herself' as Jimmy constructs her, not because *she contains* a central mystery, but because *Jimmy situates that central 'mystery' within her*. Oryx demonstrates the circulation of *objet a* as the ungraspable target of desire, her appearance in the text subject to Jimmy's overwhelming impulse to pursue her and to have revealed to him, by her capture, the 'essential' thing:



He could never get used to her, she was fresh every time, she was a casketful of secrets. Any moment now she would open herself up, reveal to him the essential thing, the hidden thing at the core of life, or of her life, or of his life — the thing he was longing to know. The thing he'd always wanted. What would it be?

*(Oryx and Crake 314)*

This possibility of the revelation of 'an essential thing' tantalises Jimmy ever since he first encounters 'Oryx' (in other words, Oryx when 'she didn't have a name'). As the teenaged Jimmy and Crake watch child pornography together on an illegal website called HottTotts, Jimmy experiences the irruption of the gaze itself, gaze as object *qua* desire *and* lack, as he sits enraptured by the screen:

None of those little girls had ever seemed real to Jimmy — they'd always struck him as digital clones — but for some reason Oryx was three-dimensional from the start. [...]

The giggles must have been recorded, because they weren't coming from the three girls: they all looked frightened, and one of them was crying.

Jimmy knew the drill. They were supposed to look like that, he thought; if they stopped the action, a walking stick would come in from offside and prod them. This was a feature of the site. There were at least three layers of contradictory make-believe, one on top of the other. *I want to, I want to not, I want to.*

Oryx paused in her activities. She smiled a hard little smile that made her appear much older, and wiped the whipped cream from her mouth. Then she looked over her shoulder and right into the eyes of the viewer — right into Jimmy's eyes, into the secret person inside him. *I see you*, that look said. *I see you watching. I know you. I know what you want.*

(*Oryx and Crake* 90-1)

When reading this passage, we should bear in mind one of Žižek's more gnomic descriptions of the gaze: 'the anamorphic distortion of reality is the way the gaze is inscribed into the object's surface'.<sup>71</sup> At first glance, it seems as though that anamorphic distortion which signals the presence of the gaze is undetectable here. After all, Jimmy's *vision* is unaffected and he encounters no hinderance, no distortion of the image of Oryx. In order to account for this apparent discrepancy, we must remember to emphasise the *objective* nature of the gaze: the gaze is that which deprives the subject of the apparent mastery of the field of vision, that which pierces the screen of fantasy and, in doing so, revokes the immediate self-presence of subjectivity. Bearing in mind this fact, can we not see, therefore, that the anamorphic distortion which signals the gaze's inscription upon the object is represented by that uncanny experience of a 'complete' presence — of a third dimension which appears in addition to the flat surface of the screen upon which Jimmy views the two-dimensional image of Oryx? This fact, I suggest, exemplifies Jimmy's status as a child raised — in the absence of father and mother — by the screen-object itself.

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<sup>71</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'Grimaces of the Real, or When the Phallus Appears', *October*, 58 — Rendering the Real (Autumn, 1991), 44-68 (47).

That object, until this point in the text, does *not* stand for the screen of fantasy itself, that screen upon which my fantasy obscures and defines the 'lack' that appears to cause desire, but instead is the screen which depicts the fulfilment of hallucinatory fantasy: in other words, fantasy understood in the common sense of the word, as opposed to the particular Lacanian sense. The pornographic scenarios which are displayed upon the screen involve the satisfaction of repulsive, obscene wishes:

[...] they'd roll a few joints and smoke them while watching the executions and the porn — the body parts moving around the screen in slow motion, an underwater ballet of flesh and blood under stress, hard and soft joining and separating, groans and screams, close-ups of clenched eyes and clenched teeth, spurts of this or that. If you switched back and forth fast, it all came to look like the same event. Sometimes they'd have both things on at once, each on a different screen.

(*Oryx and Crake* 86)

In this passage, in comparison with the previous example, Jimmy and Crake are disassociated from the images upon the screen. The images blur and interleave with one another, become indistinguishable, and do not trouble the 'frame' of the screen itself; nothing overflows the image. There is no interjection of subject. The image does not directly affect Jimmy. There is no moment in this passage comparable to Oryx's sublime appeal to his 'secret inner person'. After watching the pornography and executions, Jimmy feels a sense of personal violation, but it is characterised by a lack of substance:

Jimmy [...] would wobble homewards [...] feeling as if he'd been to an orgy, one at which he'd had no control at all over what had happened to him. What had been done to him. He also felt very light, as if he were made of air; thin, dizzying air, at the top of some garbage-strewn Mount Everest. Back at home base, his parental units — supposing they were there, and downstairs — never seemed to notice a thing.

(*Oryx and Crake* 86-7)

It is this 'thin-air' which distinguishes fantasy in the common sense from fantasy in the Lacanian sense. The clue, of course, is to be found in the improperly situated 'absent presence' of his parents. By this point, Jimmy's mother has left her family, and Jimmy's 'parental units' are comprised of an uninterested father and his father's girlfriend. Those 'units' fail to fulfil their own function — are not units at all, but perhaps more aptly described as fractions. Because *they* fail to notice Jimmy, he himself desires to be noticed by the Other, to have his 'essential meaning' disclosed in the revelation of the Other. The gaze which irrupts in the screen, which is marked by the 'three-dimensional' presence of the figure of Oryx, by *her* acknowledgement of his look which distorts the screen-object itself, is to be conceived in opposition to the indistinguishable parade of gore and pornography which precedes its appearance. In contrast to his 'homewards wobble' following the earlier dual-screen viewing orgy of sex and death, Jimmy's response to Oryx's gaze becomes unrepresentable in the text. Crake prints a screenshot of the moment of Oryx's look towards the camera and offers it to Jimmy:

"This a keeper?" Crake said. "You want it?"

"Yeah," said Jimmy. He could barely get the word out. He hoped he sounded normal.

(*Oryx and Crake* 91)

The passage ends with this exchange, which we could say forms a response to Oryx's assertion that she knows what Jimmy wants. Crake poses the question, and Jimmy can hardly speak. It is at this point that it becomes clear for us that 'Oryx' can only be viewed through the focalising lens of Jimmy's fantasy; her presence in the text must always remain doubled by Jimmy's allocation of that additional surplus of the Real within her, *objet a*.<sup>72</sup>

It is therefore up to us to *read Oryx*. But how might we read her, when there is no Oryx? Stein, who relegates the discussion of Oryx to a footnote in her essay 'Problematic Paradise in *Oryx and Crake*' (by no means the most dismissive treatment of the character among scholarly criticism of the novel), sums up the most common error in the

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<sup>72</sup> In this sense, Oryx is doomed to repeat the 'three layers of contradictory make-believe' that the abused children on the HottTotts site are forced to endure. For the girls, this '*I want to, I want not to, I want to*' is rendered, on the first layer, as a formal, Symbolic agreement, enforced by the threat of offscreen violence ('I want to be here, because I am forced to want to be here'); on the second layer is the Imaginary protest against their molestation, in other words, the way their acquiescence is characterised by the notional, but futile objection raised by their outward distress, which they are encouraged to perform by their masters because it is the 'feature of the site' — 'They were supposed to look like that' (*Oryx and Crake* 90); on the third layer, at the level of the Real, is the inescapable fact that they *are* there and have, given the minimal choices available to them, opted to remain there. In the case of Oryx's textual presence, we might read this stratification of 'make-believe' thus: on the Imaginary layer, the layer of fantasy, is 'Oryx', the image formed for Jimmy by a conjunction of the absent presences of his mother, his parents, the various girls that he attaches to the signifier 'Oryx', and the woman who appears in the text as Oryx with whom he becomes involved in a relationship; on the Symbolic level, the *point de capiton* 'Oryx', the signifier which organises the 'meaning' of this presence itself, in opposition to the 'empty' images which work as screen or lure; finally, on the level of the Real, the subject herself, each individual subject against whom Jimmy performs a violence by reducing her to *objet a*, overflowing at certain points the fantasy screen of the focalising point of the narrative: Jimmy himself.

'identification' of the character: 'Oryx [...] embodies the whore/Madonna dichotomy. She is a victim [...] She becomes a medium of exchange between Jimmy and Crake. [...]

However, her story is beyond the scope of this essay' ('Problematic Paradise in *Oryx and Crake*' n178-9). Stein, at least, mentions Oryx — many gloss over her 'presence' in the novel entirely. Nevertheless, even accounting for the fact that the thrust of Stein's essay does not warrant more than a cursory mention of Oryx, the fact is that the essay itself performs a quite standard dismissal of Oryx's character as 'a victim' 'beyond the scope' of criticism. It's a telling turn of phrase, for Oryx literally is beyond the scope of criticism, as such — precisely because she is *not* a single character. From whichever angle we approach her, Oryx is designed by Atwood to elude our grasp. As we have seen, the status of her *name* is repeatedly problematised by the text: "Oryx," he says. "I know you're there." He repeats the name. It's not even her real name, which he'd never known anyway; it's only a word. It's a mantra.' (*Oryx and Crake* 110). *None* of the people that Jimmy associates with the name itself are named Oryx. But Oryx is only the example *par excellence* of the text's repeated meditation on the difficulty of 'pinning down' subjectivity under the auspices of the signifier, a problem also signalled by the 'duality' of Jimmy and Snowman, Glenn and Crake:

The Crake side of him must have been there from the beginning, thinks Snowman: there was never any real Glenn, *Glenn* was only a disguise. So in Snowman's reruns of the story, Crake is never Glenn, and never *Glenn-alias-Crake* or *Crake/Glenn*, or *Glenn, later Crake*. He is always just Crake, pure and simple.

(*Oryx and Crake* 71)

Snowman's language here reveals the impossibility of making of the subject anything more than a signifier. Crake *the Subject* is defined, not by the exclusion of what '*Glenn* is', or what '*Glenn, later Crake* is', but by the differential exclusion of the signifier which relates to Crake in series. When Snowman says that 'there was never any real Glenn', he refers not to the questionable ontological presence of Glenn, but to the impossibility of making Crake anything more than an object, the supposed inner being of whom is radically withheld not only from Jimmy, but from Crake himself. 'Glenn', therefore, is *not* a disguise. Glenn is, rather, a mark of Jimmy/Snowman's own dim awareness of 'the bar' of subjectivity, the fact that 'being born with the signifier, the subject is born divided. The subject is this emergence which, just before, as subject, was nothing, but which, having scarcely appeared, solidifies into a signifier' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 199). Jimmy recognises, in his unhappy childhood, the nascent suspicion that something in his own subjectivity is divided *by itself*. 'There had been something willed about it though, his ignorance. Or not willed, exactly: structured. He'd grown up in walled spaces, and then he had become one. He had shut things out' (*Oryx and Crake* 184). Jimmy's growth, *in* and *as* 'walled space', represents a sensitivity towards what Lacan calls the 'defiles' of the signifier, or in other words, the process by which those biological instincts of the body are alienated in their symbolic expression by the subject, by the expression of demand towards the Other. Jimmy searches for access to the interiority of being throughout the text, but not to the interiority of his *own* being: instead, to the interiority of the Other. He recognises that the experience of 'Crake', Crake's being as such, is foreclosed, when he reduces Glenn to a mere disguise. The signifier 'Glenn' represents the subject only for another signifier, not for

another subject: there is an essential bar blocking Crake from view, just as much as there is Glenn.

Conversely, however, Jimmy remains the subject of a screen. In other words, he remains caught in the network of desire which structures his fantasy. His demand to Oryx is the repeated demand for some interior information, but this demand is always rejected; as in his dream, Jimmy cannot truly ask for what he wants, because he is unable to express it, to form the demand as such: "No, wait," Snowman calls, or wants to call. His mouth won't move. "Don't go yet! Tell me..." (*Oryx and Crake* 336). He cannot complete the sentence. Rather, what he desires is *not to ask*. Jimmy wants to be presented with that interiority of the object of desire without asking, without needing to form his demand, and instead to find it projected *for him* upon the screen. In other words, he wants to find, in the series of women which stretches, for him, from his mother to Oryx, an interiority for which he is not required to *work* to uncover, with the kind of emotionally-manipulative 'technique' he regularly employs in order to seduce women: '[...] he'd preferred sad women, delicate and breakable [...] He'd liked to comfort them, stroke them gently at first, reassure them. Make them happier, if only for a moment. Himself too, of course; that was the payoff' (*Oryx and Crake* 100). The correlative of his dream ('Don't go yet! Tell me...') is in the vision he repeatedly experiences before sleep:

At the edge of sleep a procession would appear behind his eyes, moving out of the shadows to the left, crossing his field of vision.

[...] The girls were calm, they were grave and ceremonious. They'd look at him, they'd look into him, they would recognize and accept



him, accept his darkness. Then they would smile.

*Oh honey, I know you. I see you. I know what you want.*

*(Oryx and Crake 261)*

His fantasy, which locates his desire in 'Oryx', is one which consists in the action of revealing and encountering her 'interior truth', which already knows what he wants. Jimmy remains blinded by the pursuit of his desire, in spite of the work of the text, which consistently problematises Oryx's presence and her representation. Not only is Oryx present, for Jimmy, in the guise of three different people, but her presence as disembodied voice is related to that specifically phantasmic entity which, as Snowman, he can occasionally sense 'drifting towards him on her soft feathery wings' (*Oryx and Crake* 238), and which he repeatedly attempts to conjure forth: 'At first she's pale and shadowy, but if he can say her name over and over, then maybe she'll glide into his body and be present with him in his flesh [...] But she's always evasive, you can never pin her down' (*Oryx and Crake* 110). This central absence reappears throughout the text, as Jimmy encounters the unravelling fantasy. In another dream, he encounters his mother's *absence*: 'he never dreams about his mother, only about her absence. [...] On a hook her dressing gown is hanging, magenta, empty, frightening' (*Oryx and Crake* 277). This absence itself is the true source of Jimmy's fear, a fear which is ironically materialised as he becomes the Last Man on Earth. The dressing gown itself signifies that irruptive void of the Real. It delineates the contours of the object to which the Real attaches, without which that lack could not become apparent. The magenta dressing gown later reappears in another dream, but this

time the image of his mother has returned with it. As he seals himself alone inside the Paradise complex as the apocalypse occurs, Jimmy witnesses a vision which materialises the circulation of the object-cause of desire behind the screen of fantasy:

Then he'd [...] sit in front of the empty screen. All the women he'd ever known would pass in front of his eyes in the semi-darkness. His mother too, in her magenta dressing gown, young again. Oryx came last, carrying white flowers. She looked at him, then walked slowly out of his field of vision, into the shadows where Crake was waiting.

(*Oryx and Crake* 345)

The repeated appearance of a central absence is contrasted with this figure of 'the procession'. Is there any clearer representation of those two positions of the experience of *jouissance* than in this passage?<sup>73</sup> The lures of *objet a* pass before Jimmy's eyes, upon or before a (blank) screen, beginning with his missing mother and ending with the ungraspable object of Oryx herself (the failure of the phallus itself: Jimmy 'misses' every single one of them, in all senses). Oryx is displayed *simultaneously* in the fullness of her subjectivity, passing beyond the screen of Jimmy's fantasy and into the 'shadows' of a relationship that cannot be

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<sup>73</sup> Here Jimmy's position as focaliser of the narrative is thrown into sharp relief as Oryx's position as what Lacan calls that unsayable signifier, 'woman', is made apparent: Oryx exemplifies this position, demonstrating that what Lacan is saying is not that there is an essential prescription of 'woman', in other words the biological female, as 'mysterious and unknowable' but rather that there is a method of being, a *jouissance* associated with the position of woman which is available to any subject 'identifying' with that position, whether they are biologically male or female. The point is that that this Other *jouissance* available to women is unsayable, because, unlike phallic *jouissance*, it cannot 'miss its mark', it is not subject to that phallic 'bar' of language itself. It cannot be symbolised, and since it cannot be symbolised, it cannot be said to exist; this does not mean that it *does not exist*, only that it cannot be *said* to exist.

formulated in language, cannot be represented in the text: *Oryx, for herself, is not an object*. In opposition to Gina Wisker's claim that 'she remains a mysterious figure existing behind the screen onto which male fantasies are projected',<sup>74</sup> we can instead say that Oryx is depicted in a Lacanian sense, in other words as experiencing that phallic *jouissance* and the Other *jouissance*, an experience which is available to her alone as ~~woman~~. In other words, she exists behind and before the screen. She manifests something which cannot be contained within the screen of fantasy, walking towards Crake, who himself is a cruel, godlike, impassive, mechanical feature of the text. Oryx for Jimmy is the reduction of the Other to its excremental object, *objet a*; Crake, for Jimmy, is the Other in its indefatigable, terrifying guise as *das Ding*, the Thing. Oryx's relationship with Crake persists beyond the torrid and torturous sexual relationship which she enjoys with Jimmy, where neither of them can relate to one another, where something of herself is fully concealed from him, inaccessible to him; her relationship with Crake, such as it is, is something beyond sex, something mechanically satisfactory — 'Crake's sexual needs were direct and simple, according to Oryx; not intriguing, like sex with Jimmy. Not fun, just work' (*Oryx and Crake* 314) — but not simply exploitative, as Elliott suggests, because it is underpinned by a maniacal dedication and belief by Oryx in Crake's power. Theirs is a relationship which seems unrepresentable in the text:

"I believe in Crake, I believe in his" — she groped for the word — "his vision. He wants to make the world a better place. This is what he's always telling me. [...] He has found the

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<sup>74</sup> Gina Wisker, *Margaret Atwood: An Introduction to Critical Views of Her Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 157.

problems, I think he is right. [...] Crake is a very smart man!"

Jimmy should have known better than to bad-mouth Crake. Crake was her hero, in a way. In an important way. As he, Jimmy, was not.

*(Oryx and Crake 322).*

Locating her 'position' in the novel becomes the key to answering the question of who Oryx 'is', because her 'mystery' for Jimmy is not only a barrier erected by Jimmy to mask the impossibility of the consummation of their love: rather, Oryx retains this mystery precisely *because* she is exposed to Jimmy. The apparent 'core' of her being is presented, and yet it remains unfathomable for him in its unspeakable essence; all he can do is relate to his own fantasy of her. Jimmy never talks to 'her':

Someone to talk to was nice, Oryx used to tell him. "You should try it sometime, Jimmy," she'd say, kissing him on the ear.

"But I talk to you," he'd protest.

Another kiss. "Do you?"

*(Oryx and Crake 49)*

There is a 'dislocated' voice of Oryx which only grows more potent upon its separation from her body. When Snowman leaves Paradise near the conclusion of the novel, stepping past Oryx and Crake's remains, the voice returns to jarringly renounce the body:

He picks up his sticks and heads out through the airlock doorway, avoiding Crake's gaze, Crake's grin; and Oryx, in her silk butterfly shroud.

*Oh Jimmy. That's not me!*

*(Oryx and Crake 357)*

While the voice disavows its connection to the body, it also suggests, by the same token, that *it itself* cannot ever have been in a position to authenticate its own claim. This is the *voix acousmatique*,<sup>75</sup> the voice as partial object separated from the body, experienced without body, in opposition to the body. The voice does not belong to the body of Oryx, but instead is the irruptive *objet a* which 'exists', as such, only for Jimmy/Snowman. In other words, it is detached from the other itself, purely 'interred' for Snowman in a way which manifests the lack in the Other; it materialises quite clearly the phantasmatic status of 'Oryx', 'filling in' for this lack itself. The voice returns throughout the text to demonstrate, with dramatic irony, the network of fantasy in which Jimmy is caught. As Howells notes, the epigraphs of the novel (from *Gulliver's Travels* and *To the Lighthouse*) demonstrate 'male and female voices [...] in counterpoint' (*Margaret Atwood* 172), dramatising the text's interrogation of the cultural and gendered associations of scientific and artistic imagination. But they also demonstrate the role of the voice, I suggest, after cultural association, after gendered association, as something *cut* from the subject: the voice in its mysterious objective state, as that which may 'inform and not amuse', as Gulliver intends, while it simultaneously manifests equivocation and indeterminacy, as Lily Briscoe speculates.

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<sup>75</sup> See Chapter 4 for a discussion of the *voix acousmatique* as object of the Real in greater detail.

Howells, by contrast, suggests that the voice provides a marker of authenticity in the text, a kernel of unmediated reality 'in a high-tech world of artificially constructed reality':

This raises questions about a politics of representation where everything is mediated and rescripted so that nothing is verifiable. How, for example, can Jimmy make sense of the video of his mother's execution which the Compound guards show him when he knows how easily it could have been digitally faked? The answer comes when he hears his mother's voice speaking directly to him from the screen: '*Goodbye. Remember Killer. I love you. Don't let me down.*'

(*Margaret Atwood* 175)

According to Howells, Baudrillard is the model for reading this triumph of 'simulation' over 'reality' — but she also notes, following Baudrillard, that reality can always reappear when social law and convention breaks down. In this sense we can view the cause and effect of Crake's plan. Crake 'never stops playing computer games' (*Margaret Atwood* 176); he follows Extinctathon (one of the numerous video games based on global destruction which he and Jimmy regularly play together) through to its conclusion, and Jimmy is left to encounter the real consequences of Crake's act:

As sole survivor, Jimmy/Snowman is riddled with guilt at his own moral stupidity in confusing 'not real' with 'real' as he realises he has been duped as much by his own wilful ignorance as by Crake's treachery [...] He

carries the mark of his moral myopia with him into the post-human world, for his sunglasses are missing one lens, and what are we to make of his exchange for a pair of 'new two-eyed sunglasses', which he finds on his return to the RejoovenEsense Compound at the end of the novel?

(*Margaret Atwood* 176)

We can see, noting the distinction between the Baudrillardian 'real' and the Lacanian register of the same name, that there is another possible reading of the voice and status of the real which runs contrary to Howells' analysis.<sup>76</sup> Howells suggests that it is the 'authentic voice' of Jimmy's mother which allows him to distinguish between the video of her death and a faked simulation of such, in other words that this is the point at which the simulation is revealed, left adrift by the return of referential reality, which appeals directly to Jimmy's 'real' experience. But when we read the text closely, it becomes apparent that the outcome of this episode is not simply that Jimmy is able to verify that this video is 'real' (in other words, a genuine recording of his mother's death); instead it is that he is experiencing *the failure of the frame of fantasy*. For our analysis, this distinction is crucial, because what we locate here is the text engaging directly with the production of the screen itself:

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<sup>76</sup> For Lacan, the Real does not refer to any level of conscious subjective experience, as it does for Baudrillard. Instead it is an irruptive dimension which reminds us that our subjective constitution in language bars from ourselves the very experience of our 'internal core', which must be lost forever as such: that indefinable quantity which, though we propose it as an addition to our lived, mundane experience of reality, is also paradoxically figured by the subject as a pure, authentic experience itself.

[...] Why did she have to drag Killer into it? So he'd know it was really her, that's why. So he'd believe her. [...]

What if the whole thing was fake? It could even have been digital, at least the shots, the spurts of blood, the falling down. Maybe his mother was still alive, maybe she was even still at large. If so, what had he given away?

(*Oryx and Crake* 259)

It is clear that the introduction of his mother's voice in the video *does not* persuade Jimmy that the recording is authentic: instead, what Jimmy experiences while watching the video is the level of Real trauma. He struggles to orient his fantasy — the fantasy of his still-absent mother who will remain 'at large' and *remain absent* — in light of the video, which destroys the fantasy as such. Jimmy's mother can only remain absent as long as she eludes capture by the CorpSeCorps. In other words, his proposal, that the video might be 'fake', is actually a fantasy of *authenticity*. Jimmy, as a child of the screen, expects the video to confirm to him the truth by corresponding to the fantasy which locates his desire. The video frustrates him, however, *precisely because it introduces the voice of his mother*. 'Then the sound came suddenly up. *Goodbye. Remember Killer. I love you. Don't let me down.*' (*Oryx and Crake* 258). When his mother's voice suddenly corresponds with her image, Jimmy is forced to contend with that contingent element of the Lacanian Real itself. He experiences this first as gaze, which irrupts beyond the frame of the video-picture — 'Pan to close-up: the woman was looking right at him, right out of the frame: a blue-eyed look, direct, defiant, patient, wounded.' (*Oryx and Crake* 258) — and then as voice. It is not without reason that Lacan also



calls the drive, at the level of the voice, the 'invocatory drive'; that call ('Don't let me down') is the call of the Other, Jimmy's experience of the voice presented in an oddly dissimulated manner in which it is not quite clear whether the voice is 'real' (in a Baudrillardian sense), is attached to his mother, or whether it jarringly overflows the scene itself, escaping the frame in the same manner as her gaze, as object of the Real itself, *objet a*. This is event is so disturbing for Jimmy — 'The next few weeks were the worst he could remember' (*Oryx and Crake* 259) — not only because it reveals the death of his mother, but because it forces him to contend with a complex moment at which the screen itself breaks down and signals the failure of fantasy. Jimmy, a child raised by television and computer screens saturated with base fantasies — fantasy understood in the common sense, wish-fulfilment fantasies of violence and pornography — struggles to comprehend this experience of the sudden disunity of screen and fantasy<sup>77</sup>.

The central question here, therefore, is the inscription of the 'authentic' presence experienced by the subject. As we see,

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<sup>77</sup> This question of the unity of screen and fantasy is connected to Howells' suggestion that Snowman's acquisition of his new sunglasses, which have two lenses rather than one, is a symbol of his newly-enlightened outlook: 'he goes back to the Crakers in a different frame of mind and wearing his new 'two-eyed sunglasses [...] Jimmy/Snowman is seeing differently, not because his physical space has changed but because his perspective has changed, with the prospect of entering again into human relationships' (*Margaret Atwood* 182-3). What do these new sunglasses really stand for? Is it not the case that, rather than symbolising a 'new' perspective on the post-apocalyptic world (an emotional catharsis, the prospect of new fulfilling relationships, an end to the despair of Crake's legacy), they instead denote the renewed perspective which looks squarely upon the fantasy screen itself — the fantasy screen which only appears when 'social relation' is established, which can only function as a 'subjective' response to the creation of the subject itself, 'in' the community of the signifier? It seems clear that Snowman, as the Last Man, comes closest, closer than anyone can ever come, to escaping his fantasy and confronting the trauma of the Real itself, in a world in which he is apparently doomed to never again encounter another human being. His goal, in response to this situation, is to attempt community, to teach desire, by inculcating in the Crakers the rudiments of symbolic language, contrary to Crake's wishes. As he leaves Paradise for the second time, near the conclusion of the narrative, Snowman is 'seeing differently' because he is encountering the renewal of his fantasy screen itself, the fantasy screen that he has so often witnessed broken down. In other words, he is *not* 'seeing things as they truly are', has not made a 'positive' step as such: instead, he has reaffirmed the fantasy itself.

the representation of the screen in the novel at once produces and problematises the presence of an apparent authenticity of 'meaning' *and* experience. For Jane Elliott, the text is a sign of the break in North American literature from 'traditional' postmodern strategies of representation, which obscure the presence of any supposed ultimate referent.<sup>78</sup> For Elliott, *Oryx and Crake* embodies the repudiation of this postmodern strategy because in the text 'the reader is privy to the narrowing of a gap that is both physical and representational: from over there to over here, from image or fiction to something closer to reality, from dead sign to living presence.' ('The Return of the Referent' 350). Her thesis is a version of that popular reading of contemporary fiction as a 'return to realism' in response to postmodernism, but in my view it is based on a misreading of *Oryx and Crake*. This is not to say that I disagree with her broader point; it is for certain that *Oryx and Crake* does *something* different in the way it represents 'representation' itself: what I would argue, however, is that the innovative feature of *Oryx and Crake*, in this regard, is to be located in the manner in which the text figures representation according to the presence of screens. These are screens as the form of object which reveals, rather than the truth of representation, the fantasy of our own perception of it as such; more than this, it reveals, following Lacan, *the constitution of our own subjectivity as we open ourselves to the fact of perception*.

When Elliott says that 'Oryx seems to materialize into [the text], gradually replacing her pixelated image with her fleshy, immediate presence' ('The Return of the Referent' 350) she mistakes the 'physical presence' of Oryx for that of her 'subjective' appearance in the text. The name 'Oryx'

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<sup>78</sup> Jane Elliott, 'The Return of the Referent in Recent North American Fiction: Neoliberalism and Narratives of Extreme Oppression', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 42: 2 — Theories of the Novel Now, Part I (Summer 2009), 349-354 (349).

structures the appearance of the figures materialising in the text under that name. Jimmy's phantasmatic screen narrative 'reconstructs' the materialisation of these discrete figures around a signifier — a *point de capiton* which pins down the meaning, for Jimmy, of the signifier 'Oryx', and creates a node around which he might structure his fantasy (which, as we have seen, stretches not just from the abused child and young woman, but all the way back to his mother).

But this does *not* mean that we are simply reframing the novel in a 'classic' postmodern context, and reaffirming the presence of Oryx as something which 'disappears' from the text as a result of the direct impossibility or morally-problematic fact of her 'immediate' representation as such. In order to demonstrate this, we should consider two apparently contradictory statements by Žižek on Lacan's 'postmodernist' strategies:

For those used to dismissing Lacan as just another 'postmodern' relativist, this may come as a surprise: Lacan is resolutely anti-postmodern, opposed to any notion of science as just another story we are telling ourselves about ourselves, a narrative whose apparent supremacy over other — mythic, artistic — narratives is grounded only in the historically contingent Western 'regime of truth' (to use a term rendered popular by Michel Foucault)

*(How to Read Lacan 64)*

'It is only with Lacan that the 'postmodernist' break occurs, in so far as he thematizes a certain real, traumatic kernel whose status remains deeply ambiguous'

*(Looking Awry 143)*

This apparent tension, in which Lacan is described as both postmodernist and anti-postmodernist, is, I would suggest, a dialectical strategy by Žižek, designed to highlight the manner in which Lacan maintains a necessary ambiguity in his rendering of the register of the Real. It is the status of the Real itself which is at stake in Žižek's two 'versions' of Lacan: in the 'postmodernist' Lacan, the Real identifies a field beyond symbolisation which occurs at the 'point' of symbolisation itself, rendering the 'traditional' postmodernist project, which consists in uncovering the lack of a universal meaning or logic with the differential play of signifying systems, as 'a modernist procedure *par excellence*' (*Looking Awry* 142); Lacan identifies a Real kernel which refuses to submit to this uncovering process because of its own ambiguous state, in which it is revealed by and closed off from the system of signification which creates meaning. It represents an insistent traumatic shard in the very experience of 'meaning' itself. By the opposite token, the 'anti-postmodernist' Lacan, according to Žižek, distinguishes between the 'relative' meaning produced by alternative narrative codes and an 'absolute' kind of meaning which is expressed most notably in science itself; here there is a character of the Real, *savoir dans le reel*, or knowledge in the Real, which, if we know Lacan, is precisely the place where knowledge, as he defines it, *cannot exist*. It is because the Real is not a trans-historic core, but instead the effect of the gaps in meaning created by the Symbolic process itself that, conversely, there must be a 'thing' before the Thing — 'a knowledge of the laws of nature directly inscribed into the Real of natural objects and processes' (*How to Read Lacan* 74-5). But this thing can never be stated as such, and in fact

cannot even impinge upon the Real which we recognise only through the gaps and inaccuracies of the Symbolic field.

What we notice here, curiously, is that the 'postmodernist' and the 'anti-postmodernist' Lacan seem, in effect, to fulfil the requirements of their obverse positions. The postmodern Lacan appears modernist in his assertion of a 'missing' thing, while the anti-postmodern Lacan appears exactly postmodern in his refusal to account for that thing beyond the Thing — in other words, the thing which exists 'two steps removed' from language and meaning. Herein we witness what Žižek has called the 'parallax' (*Living in the End Times* 244) of the dialectical process: the dialectic does not reveal a 'new' third position which reduces thesis and antithesis to functions of one or the other; instead it demonstrates that the third position is really the gap between the previous two, and that the space which maintains this gap is what creates the possibility of a change in perspective itself. In other words, the 'two Lacans' here enact this perspectival flip in order to demonstrate the radical effect of the Real as that which becomes possible for us to detect only as it is properly impossible.

Returning to Elliott's reading of *Oryx and Crake*, we can see that what, according to her, defines its status as a break from postmodernist strategies of defamiliarisation of the referent is, appropriately, the narrowing of the gap between referent and text. The referent itself returns to view as opposed to disappearing after the stresses of *différance*:

I suggest that contemporary North American fiction is marked by such *dramas of immediacy*, as I term these and other similar moments. Despite what might at first seem the obvious connections, I argue that this shift in

representational politics owes less to an increased sense of the reality or threat of third-world suffering than it does to transformations internal to North American culture itself, specifically those related to neoliberalism. As a result, there is something paradoxically and disturbingly allegorical about these texts; ultimately they deploy extreme instances of oppression to say something about representational politics rather than the other way around.

('The Return of the Referent' 350)

What Elliott *actually* suggests, however, as we can see if we read this passage closely, is that the referent is no closer to making its return. The reality of the kind of narrative of which Oryx is an example — of an exploited, marginalised individual, the telling of whose story itself might constitute a violence if it were deployed in terms of the social and cultural apparatus which oppresses her in the first place — is in fact no closer to becoming a *sensible* reality of that cultural apparatus. In effect, this guarantees that the textual 'appearance' of the referent itself does not constitute a further marginalisation of the oppressed figure: but it also demonstrates the fact that *the appearance of Oryx is simply that*. It is appearance itself, or a further layer of abstraction which obscures the fact that the referent truly does not approach the level of the text. What Elliott proposes, in fact, is that not only does the text not recover an anti-instrumentalist field of representation, *it also* does not offer a response to that tradition; instead it merely surveys that field, performing a further mediation: 'the formulaic quality of the novel makes sense if we read it not simply as an anti-instrumentalist text but rather as a text about a tradition of

anti-instrumentalism that has become outdated and inadequate' ('The Return of the Referent' 352).

By contrast, when we read *Oryx and Crake*, thinking after Lacan, we see that it is precisely the 'gap' between referent and text in which the dialectical movement of the Real becomes 'visible' — visible, as parallax. There we see how Oryx appears as the subject of a signifier — not only as the foreign woman sold into sex slavery but also as the little girl on the screen, and as the young woman on the tv newscast — the being evacuated from self-present subjectivity, and *also* simultaneously for Jimmy, the endlessly cycling object of desire. As such, Oryx cannot be confined to this reductive appearance as 'complete' or whole referent: the text makes it completely clear that even as Jimmy makes of her a signifier, a *point de capiton*, her 'meaning', her being, escapes him; because, as Lacan shows, her being escapes herself. It is through a screen that we must fantasise that our being is *not* alien as such. That absolute alterity of the irruptive Real is *us behind ourselves*. It is us 'behind' our own screen, and our subjectivity displayed upon it, *for ourselves*.

What this means is that Lacan maintains the tension between the modernist and postmodernist strategies of the production and analysis of meaning and representation by both performing and criticising each in turn. This is the reason that Žižek does not make the claim to a 'post-postmodernism'. The bind in which Elliott is caught is the emblematic quandary of this very proclamation. For example, Elliott notes that:

Oryx materializes in the novel, I believe, not so much because the oppressed other has become more connected to the West through the machinations of capital but because a

nonreferential approach to such others was the watchword for a whole generation of anti-instrumentalist thinkers. Given this tradition, nothing dramatizes the end of anti-instrumentalism quite like the representational immediacy of the oppressed other.

('The Return of the Referent' 353)

Yet at the same moment she emphasises Oryx's disappearance from the novel, reduced to a mere symbolic prize of the main actors, Jimmy and Crake:

At the heart of the novel is the contest between Jimmy's and Crake's diametrically opposed approaches to instrumentality as a whole, and Oryx is situated as the grand prize in this contest. Given Oryx's symbolic status, the immediacy of the oppressed other in *Oryx and Crake* seems to function more as a sign of the eradication of anti-instrumentalism that is its cause.

('The Return of the Referent' 353)

Elliott cannot reconcile the demand for Oryx's materialisation as referent with her simultaneously elusive representation in the novel. The reason for this is that there *is no* reconciliation possible, other than as barred subject, as subject which ultimately lacks self-presence and appears only through a screen. There can be no coincidence in the fact that Oryx appears before Jimmy upon a screen on each occasion of her 'materialisation'. The advance of reading after Lacan is that we do not offer an alternative to a postmodern reading by producing a further layer of obscurity to our reading. Rather than proposing Oryx as an example of the 're-



materialisation' of the referent (but only insofar as she is still masked by the cultural 'representational strategy' which the text itself criticises), we should instead say that 'Oryx' does not appear in the first place, there is no 'Oryx', no unity of being and subject under the signifier 'Oryx' to begin with, but there is *not* no Oryx. Her appearance as such is only 'visible' once it is represented upon a screen, but this reveals the very presence of being which is barred by language and can be located according to the irruptive Real. *This is* precisely what the text describes already. The advance of *Oryx and Crake* is therefore in the manner that it is attuned to the *presence of the screen* upon which the fantasy of Oryx appears. Through this screen, it is revealed that 'Oryx' contains no substantive truth-value or meaning, is only created by her referential status for Jimmy, even as her own subjectivity revolts against the image; Oryx maintains her own 'covert' kernel of Real *jouissance* which is unavailable to Jimmy, and will not submit to his 'hand-wringing over the truth-status of Oryx's life narrative' which 'is simply beside the point' ('The Return of the Referent' 352). Ultimately, for Elliott, the 'ethical', poststructuralist response to the marginalised other involves raising that other to the level of a sign which organises referentiality around its own non-referential status:

When poststructuralist theory attempts to avoid representing the other, I would argue, it [creates] the image of an other whose alterity may be left intact provided we avoid sullyng it through the controlling powers of signification. Thus the downtrodden symbolize both the lost, primal unity of word and thing and the assumption that, now that such unity is lost, any attempt to recover it will simply result in the erasure of the thing by the word.

Ultimately, poststructuralism's approach to the

other arises from an attempt to treat that other with the utmost in ethical anti-referentiality, but this attempt is founded on a highly referential act, which positions that oppressed other as the sign and locus of the Left's own reverential anti-instrumentality.

('The Return of the Referent' 353-4)

What Lacan shows us, however, is that the ultimate alterity of the other is *already* 'intact' *in spite* of the controlling powers of signification': because that process is the very thing that alerts us to the Real that cannot be 'captured' by that system. In Lacan, the 'ethical' approach is not 'anti-referentiality', nor indeed is it the 'return' of it as such. The ethical approach is instead to act according to our 'condition' (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 22), our condition as subjects 'split' by subjectivity. In this case, 'anti-referentiality' cannot be considered an ethical treatment of the other, because there is something of the other that can *only* consist in referentiality. Equally, there is something that only consists beyond referentiality; Lacan's work is the attempt to elucidate this fact, and make of that 'reverential anti-referentiality' something more than only the obverse of whichever discourse of mastery defines the oppressive, instrumental work of 'referentiality'. (Elliott mentions Orientalism and Capitalism in this regard.) I would argue, therefore, that the text treats Oryx according to an absolute ethical circumspection.

This level of circumspect ethical consideration within the text is implicitly connected to the function of the screen of fantasy. We can find this exemplified no more clearly than in the failure of Crake's ultimate plan. Before the Crakers are able to inherit the Earth, the apocalypse must be rendered via a

simple pill: 'The Pill would put a stop to haphazard reproduction, the Project would replace it with a superior method. They were two stages of a single plan, you might say' (*Oryx and Crake* 304). I would suggest that the BlyssPluss Pill is the more horrifying half of Crake's plan, because it attacks the notion of desire itself:

The aim was to produce a single pill, that at one and the same time:

a) would protect the user against all known sexually transmitted diseases, fatal, inconvenient, or merely unsightly;

b) would provide an unlimited supply of libido and sexual prowess, coupled with a generalized sense of well-being, thus reducing the frustration and blocked testosterone that led to jealousy and violence, and eliminating feelings of low self-worth;

c) would prolong youth.

These three capabilities would be the selling points, said Crake; but there would be a fourth, which would not be advertised. The BlyssPluss Pill would also act as a sure-fire one-time-does-it-all birth-control pill, for male and female alike, thus automatically lowering the population level.

(*Oryx and Crake* 294)

The language and form of this passage, in which the bulleted list of effects is followed by an advertising lingo-inflected prose paragraph detailing the 'fourth effect', bears the hallmarks of Crake's antipathy towards language and the subject itself. The truly important effect of the pill, the one which condemns the user to sterility, inflicting violence in total secrecy, is the one that will not be listed; and yet its description (by Crake, filtered through Jimmy/Snowman) 'pops' with hyphenated buzzwords, 'sure-fire one-time-does-it-all'. Crake's 'discursive strategy', as such, his intoned scientific discourse and argument, is repeated here; the list itself enumerates the potential physical consequences of desire — STIs — the potential fantasy catalyst of desire — the image of youth — and the unconscious fuel of desire — libido — and details the 'solution': forced sterilisation. Perry suggests that Atwood is commenting only upon the repression of anxiety caused by ageing through the cultural obsession with youth:

Atwood's polemic centres upon the notion that we become immortal not necessarily when medicine and technology can defer or cure us of the death of the susceptible body, but when its promises of reversibility and correctability lessen the fear of death, and when the cosmetic illusions of youth, health and vitality help repress awareness of the ageing process. [...] Immortality is a state which falls into banality with this view of perpetual youth as not the emancipation from an implacable reality but the simple repression of it.

('Intimations of Immortality' 176)

What we might see instead, however, is that Atwood is not focused on the 'simple repression' of mortality-anxiety, but instead upon the horror, according to Crake, of rampant desire — desire, in other words, which overflows the screen of fantasy:

Needless to say, Crake continued, the thing would become a huge money-spinner. It would be the must-have pill, in every country, in every society in the world. Of course the crank religions wouldn't like it, in view of the fact that their *raison d'etre* was based on misery, indefinitely deferred gratification, and sexual frustration, but they wouldn't be able to hold out long. The tide of human desire, the desire for more and better, would overwhelm them. It would take control and drive events, as it had in every large change throughout history.

(*Oryx and Crake* 295-6)

There is an added level of irony to the fact that Crake chooses *this* pill, that which destroys desire, to destroy the world. But the attempt to model a human society based around that of the bonobo (*Oryx and Crake* 293), saturated with libido, polyamorously directed in order to avoid 'intraspecific aggression' (*Oryx and Crake* 294), is also the literal destruction of desire, without which the subject, and therefore society, cannot be constituted. The destruction of desire, indeed, as Atwood suggests with the blackest irony, would be *fuelled* by desire itself: Crake is certain that the 'tide of human desire' would ensure the total success of the pill. What Crake proposes, in Lacanian terms, is a society

constituted around the immediate 'realisation' of *jouissance* — in other words, a contradiction in terms.

The architect of the apocalypse, therefore, exemplifies the failure of the screen of fantasy. Unlike Austerlitz, who, as we will see in Chapter 5, experiences the breakdown of the screen of fantasy, Crake *aims* at the Real: in other words, what Lacan calls 'a subjective destitution',<sup>79</sup> a Symbolic death, is his goal. In Crake we encounter another example of a character whose 'core being' is rendered unavailable to Jimmy (and to us); in contrast with Oryx, however, Crake is depicted as a character whose 'inner life' is unknowable precisely because it threatens to present, frankly, the full horror of the Other in its guise as the unfathomable Thing 'lurking beneath' the face of the other. Crake, the prized student, the leading scientist, 'the alpha wolf, the silverback gorilla, the head lion' (*Oryx and Crake* 300), the very model of success in the society depicted by the novel, is also the one who is capable of perpetrating the greatest act of horror. He is akin to what Rilke describes as the 'neighbour', the violent presence lurking beneath the face of my double:

There exists a creature, perfectly harmless when you see it; you scarcely notice it and forget it again immediately. But as soon as it manages somehow to get unseen into your ears, it develops there; it hatches, as it were, and cases have been known where it has penetrated into the brain and has thriven devastatingly, like those pneumococci in dogs that gain entrance through the nose.

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<sup>79</sup> For more on the concept of subjective destitution, see Chapter 5 also.

This being is one's neighbour.<sup>80</sup>

In other words, Crake materialises the ultimate outcome of the 'unmasked' neighbour; without the imposition of Symbolic structure which regulates our intersubjective relations, which pacifies the threat which accompanies 'immediate' contact between beings *before* the level of subject and other, the 'core' of one's being, exposed to light, may reveal the most horrifying level of traumatic experience. The target of Crake's desire, as we come to realise, is not simply the death of humanity: on the contrary, indeed, it is its very survival. The true horror of his action is that he must not only die with everyone else in order to accomplish this survival, but indeed achieve the object of his death drive, in other words, achieve a Symbolic death; he must become separated from society, adrift from all other subjects. This Symbolic death is one which can only be achieved by properly removing himself from society, by renouncing his social ties, his position, his 'value' as a subject. In this sense, we should say that Crake experiences *two deaths* in the text, following Lacan's claim of the subject 'between two deaths': one death in which he biologically ceases to exist, and one death in which he does so symbolically.

Crake sees an end to desire as the only means of ensuring the survival of the planet and of humanity itself. In Lacanian terms, he wants to *remove* the bar of subjectivity by refusing the entry into symbolic law which splits the subject. In other words, in Crake's society, there will be no phallus, no circulation of desire; no *having*, when there is no phallic prohibition anyway. But what drives Crake towards this goal? Stein provides a teasing gesture towards the answer when she notes that

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<sup>80</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. John Linton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 159.

When we learn about Crake's childhood and adolescence, we discover the cultural origins of his obsession with death and destruction, as Atwood openly satirizes our culture's glamorization of violence, its exploitative sexuality, and its disregard for the natural environment.

('Problematic Paradise in *Oryx and Crake*'  
149)

The suggestion here, of course, is to locate Crake's obsession with death and destruction within 'culture'. From where does that 'cultural' fascination arise? Here we must consider the death drive in two distinctive, yet related senses elucidated by Žižek:

For Freud, the death drive is not merely a decadent reactive formation [...] but rather the innermost radical possibility of a human being. [...] What death drive strives to annihilate is not the biological cycle of generation and corruption, but rather the symbolic order, the order of the symbolic pact that regulates social exchange and sustains debts, honours, obligations.<sup>81</sup>

[...] *death drive* does not designate the positive content one should directly refer to in order to explain some event ("people kill each other in wars because of the death drive"), but the empty frame within which the game of

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<sup>81</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'There is No Sexual Relationship: Wagner as a Lacanian', *New German Critique*, 69 — Richard Wagner (Autumn, 1996), 7-35 (25).



historicization is taking place: it maintains open the minimal gap, the delay, between an event and the modes of its historicization, of its symbolic inscription [...]<sup>82</sup>

What Žižek describes here is the very possibility of the death of being, elucidated in the symbolic framework which acts against death itself. The death drive does not, itself, compel me to murder and kill my neighbour; instead, it forces me to contemplate the return to the immortality of the Real, or, in other words, that level of immortal being which is denied to the subject upon its birth. It is for this reason that Lacan refers to Antigone 'between two deaths' in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. There is biological death and Symbolic death: the Symbolic death is the goal of the death drive, because it is the only possible way of recuperating that original wholeness which is left behind by the subject. As Maire Jaanus says, Lacan, 'by reversing normal ideas about life and death, shows sexed life up as a loss of immortal life so that sex becomes, paradoxically, the death of immortality, while death, on the other hand, becomes a desire for immortal life'.<sup>83</sup> It seems clear that *this* is the death that Crake aims for, not only in the death of humanity (which is replaced by a creature, the post-human Children of Crake, which he proposes shall escape this Symbolic deadlock) but for his own death, which is a subject glossed over in critical accounts of the novel.

Considering this possible account for Crake's ultimate aim, does it therefore also become possible for us to speculate

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<sup>82</sup> Slavoj Žižek and F.W.J. von Schelling, *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World*, trans. Judith Norman (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 38.

<sup>83</sup> Marie Jaanus, 'The Demontage of the Drive' in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* ed. Richard Feldstein et al. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 119-36 (131).

with regard to the reason for which Crake murders Oryx? Stephen Dunning's winding account of the logic of this act is suggestive of the mystery surrounding the question:

We know that Crake loves Oryx, and that he is aware of her relationship with Jimmy. Jealousy and revenge may suggest themselves [...] But we have seen no previous evidence of sexual possessiveness, which Crake, in any case, would likely disdain as atavistic egoism; moreover, he appears genuinely fond of his friend. In the end, Crake simply cannot explain himself, which is inevitable given those vital human qualities that slip through his net of numbers.<sup>84</sup>

We should return to this passage in the text itself:

Crake's beige tropicals were splattered with redbrown. In his right hand was an ordinary storeroom jackknife, the kind with the two blades and the nail file and the corkscrew and the little scissors. He had his other arm around Oryx, who seemed to be asleep; her face was against Crake's chest, her long pink-ribboned braid hung down her back.

As Jimmy watched, frozen with disbelief, Crake let Oryx fall backwards, over his left arm. He looked at Jimmy, a direct look, unsmiling.

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<sup>84</sup> Stephen Dunning, 'Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*: The Terror of the Therapeutic', *Canadian Literature*, 186 (Autumn 2005), 86-101 (96).

"I'm counting on you," he said. Then he slit her throat.

Jimmy shot him.

(*Oryx and Crake* 329)

Is it not the case that Crake here seeks to assume, as Žižek has described it, 'the "excremental" position of a saint, of *objet petit a*, which precludes any intersubjective relationship of empathy'?<sup>85</sup> Crake does not simply want to destroy humanity, as we have seen: rather, he wants to rescue it from what he sees are its essential failings. But in order to perform this monstrous act, he must remove *himself* from the network of symbolic exchange and debt. His *name* must not be allowed to persist after his death, for that would frustrate the entire purpose of the act itself; it would allow the Crakers to make of him a symbol of their own creation.<sup>86</sup> By accomplishing his own Symbolic death, by obeying the death drive, Crake can guarantee his own exclusion from the Crakers' future.

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<sup>85</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment* (London: Verso, 1994), 93.

<sup>86</sup> And we must remember, of course, that this symbolic death would preclude the circulation of that signifier which marks the very name of the Crakers themselves; by removing his self from the symbolic network of exchange, Crake removes the possibility of a debt owed by the Crakers to their master.

The extraordinary fact of the text is that Jimmy keeps Crake's memory alive, in spite of Crake's private and public crimes.<sup>87</sup> Why? Because Jimmy implicitly recognises that Crake's is a failed state: without the prohibitive law of the father, desire does not exist. Jimmy/Snowman keeps the signifier 'Crake' in circulation because he recognises that it functions according to the process by which Symbolic power is manifest as the negation of being:

In the dawn light he punched in the door code for the last time and opened up the bubble, and led the Crakers out of Paradise. They noticed the remains of Crake lying on the ground, but as they had never seen Crake when alive, they believed Snowman when he told them this was a thing of no importance — only a sort of husk, only a sort of pod. It would have been a shock to them to have witnessed their creator in his present state.

(*Oryx and Crake* 351)

Crake becomes *aufheben* in his name, the dead Symbolic father whose rule of law functions precisely because his

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<sup>87</sup> But why leave Jimmy alive? We should read Crake's final act as a desperate psychotic attempt to strike against the screen of fantasy itself. Crake understands, once the Crakers begin to question their origin, that he cannot extricate himself from the symbolic position of creator. Instead, he enlists Jimmy to accomplish this for him. Crake attempts to guarantee the dissolution of his relationship with Jimmy by 'hystericising' him. In clinical terms, for Lacan the hysteric is one who refuses the relationship with the Other. By murdering Oryx, by expressing his culpability to Jimmy for the apocalypse, Crake objectivises Jimmy, compels Jimmy to 'act out' against his own reduction from subject to object of the Other, from actor to a mere cog in Crake's machination. We can see a similar situation in Žižek's reading of P.D. James' *A Taste for Death*: 'Sir Paul's attitude [...] of indifferent provocation [...] objectivized the murderer, reducing him to an instrument of the Other's will, and so left him with no choice. In short, what compelled the murderer to act was the experience of having his desire coincide with the victim's death drive' (*The Metastases of Enjoyment* 93). Thus the meaning of Crake's final words to Jimmy are clear. He is counting on Jimmy, not only to watch after the Crakers, but to kill Crake in both senses: to end Crake's life, and leave his name, as the author of the unconscionable and obscene act of destruction of humanity and Jimmy's love, unsaid.

being is negated by its own sublation. The symbol of 'Crake' overflows the 'husk' of the being which lies on the floor of the Paradise bubble. The creator of the Crakers has never been 'alive' for them. Raising Crake to the level of pure symbol in contradistinction to the man's own wishes is Jimmy's 'revenge', as such, but it is an entirely *ethical act*. Jimmy/Snowman transubstantiates Crake, in death, as the very symbol of that which he attempts to destroy.

Here Jimmy/Snowman embodies the spirit of that subject which we discussed at the outset: faced with the one who controls the fate of mankind, can't we see that *das Ding*, the Thing, is next to the subject? In other words, the Thing, that inhuman, sublime presence, is the very thing that one hopes, one supposes according to their desire, will 'stay the hand' of the one with their finger on the button: this hope is the very basis of the screen of fantasy, the screen according to which Jimmy has been born as subject, and survived the very apocalypse. As Snowman ponders a course of action in the final pages of the novel — entreat the newly-discovered group of survivors he has encountered, kill them, or be killed — he reduces the moment to a single question; not 'should I kill them?', nor 'should I talk to them?', but 'what do you want me to do?'; or, as Lacan says, *Che vuoi?* The question is the appeal to the Other, to the Other in that monstrous guise of *das Ding*, the Other in its Real dimension which is impossible to comprehend or to scrutinise. By posing this question, however, Snowman commits the final ethical act which guarantees the screen of fantasy in the brave new world. He ensures that the gap of subjectivity remains open in the text, by posing the question to the Other, by *asking what is the Other's desire*. This very act signals to us that he will not follow Crake, that he will continue to believe in the other which 'will understand something of himself'; it signals to us that the text, in ending with the words 'Time to go' (Oryx and

Crake 374), is enacting the ceaseless movement of desire. It is calling forth the screen of fantasy.

## Not a Mirror:

### The Return of Narcissism, and What Happens When You Don't See a Vampire in China Miéville's *The Tain*

It is [...] clear why vampires are invisible in the mirror — they have read Lacan, and, consequently, know how to behave [...] <sup>88</sup>

China Miéville's novella *The Tain* is marked by what I suggest we call a 'return of narcissism'. By this I mean that, in depicting a fantastic London overrun by monstrous mirror creatures, the text explores the implications of the psychoanalytic dictum that love and desire are marked with a primarily narcissistic character. What is at stake in this reading is the realisation that the text performs a counterintuitive manoeuvre. In spite of its depiction of fantastical events, it serves to demonstrate the most minimal level of subjective fantasy, in the Lacanian sense; in other words, it analyses the character of fantasy as that which appears to provoke desire itself. The weird deformations which are visited upon the city and its reflections in the text conversely help us to define the basic character of narcissistic desire in (*and*) the terms of a screen. The level of fantasy, in Lacan, is akin to what is commonly understood as the level of a basic *reality*. It defines the interaction of the subject with the external 'social' structure, and is always conceptualised by Lacan as a form of screen which not only intervenes in the subject's perception, but indeed *produces*

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<sup>88</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'Grimaces of the Real, or When the Phallus Appears' October, 58 — Rendering the Real (Autumn, 1991), 44-68 (55).

the subject's ability to perceive. What this means is that the structure of desire which is articulated by Lacan does not only reveal to us the level of fantasy which constitutes the speaking being, the subject, but *also* the cultural production of the screen. It furnishes us with a logic of the screen's cultural standing by emphasising the central function of the screen *for* the desiring subject. The appearance of the screen is therefore of theoretical concern, but it intersects with the study of 'cultural product' at every step.

In *The Tain*, I suggest, we discover a text which treats narcissism with absolute circumspection. Narcissism is not simply depicted as the symbol of a disordered culture, but instead becomes a marker of the resounding form of subjective desire. Within the experience of desire is implicated the form and function of the screen, and I claim that this fact compels us to analyse the text in terms of its representation *of* the screen. In *The Tain*, we find a repeated depiction of one type of screen: the mirror. The episodes of fantasy and horror which appear throughout the text are connected to this material object, the striking feature of which, in *The Tain*, is that it has ceased to function; but the value of the novella lies in the manner that it couches the analysis of the subjective level of fantasy in the tale of a post-cataclysmic London. Society breaks down, it seems to say, when we can no longer safely situate the products of our fantasy. The episodes of horror (which consist in the depiction of deformed reflections appearing to spring to life and murder their subjective counterparts) are therefore far *less* terrifying than the revelation of the breakdown of the screen which actually prevents this, in a metaphorical sense, from occurring. The screen works to guarantee subjective stability, to orient fantasy and prevent the destabilising revelation of the impossibility of desire (in other words, the impossibility of attaining the object of desire) from



threatening the subject's consistency. *The Tain* depicts, therefore, the catastrophic outcome which accompanies the *dissolution* of fantasy. In this sense, we can reframe the description of the novella provided by M. John Harrison in his introduction from the first, limited print run of the text: 'This is a history of mirrors. A history of narcissism. A history of culture through the history of the tain, the silver of the mirror.'<sup>89</sup> What I suggest is that, rather than presenting a history, simply, of flawed narcissistic Western culture, a kind of notional morality tale in which we are warned against the danger of narcissistic delusion at the expense of more 'virtuous' social involvement (neatly summed up in the text by the image of a distorted mirror which no longer obeys the whims of its self-obsessed master, which refuses reflection and instead responds with violence), *The Tain* engages with the fact that narcissism is directly implicated in our ability to desire, and to pursue our desire in a socially productive way. In other words, in presenting a Weird horror tale which is apparently divorced from social reality, Miéville ranges far closer to the 'heart' of that social reality, as such, than he would had he produced a generically 'opposing' work of realism. To restate, therefore, in more formal terms: rather than simply presenting the *explanandum*, in this case the mysterious and unexplained fiction of a horror fantasy, we find that the text already reveals the *explanans* itself, the subjective fantasy which structures the experience of culture in a manner which *calls for* its very *explanandum*.

In studying the text, therefore, we must bear in mind the manner in which the subject 'interacts' with culture in Lacan. This interaction is really the experience of a stratified series of screens, screens which repeat the dialectic of occlusion

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<sup>89</sup> China Miéville, *The Tain* (Harrogate: PS Publishing, 2002), 4. (Excluding one further reference to this edition — signalled by *The Tain* (2002) — all other references to the text in this chapter are from the reprint in *Looking For Jake and Other Stories*.)

and representation, of screening space in order to perform the negotiation between 'present' and 'beyond' which makes the constitution of the subject itself possible. For Lacan, who introduces the Borromean knot precisely in order to conceptualise the interdependence of the registers of subjectivity, the subject's *experience* always implies the intersectionality of culture. Culture is 'marbled' with subjectivity, and must be read as such. In other words, in fantasy, we find the unconscious, and therefore we also 'locate' the unconscious *in* culture. As Lacan states in *Encore*:

There is, according to analytic discourse, an animal that happens to be endowed with the ability to speak and who, because he inhabits the signifier, is thus a subject of it. Henceforth, everything is played out for him at the level of fantasy, but at the level of a fantasy that can be perfectly disarticulated in a way that accounts for the following — that he knows a lot more about things than he thinks when he acts.

(*Encore* 88)

Catherine Belsey comments on this passage in her *Culture and the Real*, suggesting that Lacan here defines the 'three distinct levels of human existence: first, the animal, the human organism in the real; second, the world of fantasy, of conscious social and cultural reality, that language invites us to inhabit; and third, the *un*-conscious, the element subtracted from consciousness that knows, none the less, more than we think'<sup>90</sup>; the important fact of this explanation,

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<sup>90</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Culture in the Real* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 39.

however, is to be found in the manner in which it emphasises both the constitution of the subject in the extimate field beyond his or her design, and the corresponding materialisation of this field itself. This is not to simply state that 'we create culture'. Rather it is to suggest that the production of the screen as a particular and ubiquitous cultural form represents a perpetuation of the very structural element which permits the subject his or her entry 'into' culture. The subject 'knows more than he thinks' precisely because the coordinates of his or her desire are already pointed towards the Other, *by the Other*. We only reproduce the possibility of a relationship with the Other *thanks to the Other*. It is for this reason, I suggest, that we must interrogate the imbrication of the screen as cultural form. Therefore, if we ever wonder *why* it is utterly necessary to theorise the screen following Lacan, we can answer with something along the lines of Žižek's explanation of the Lacanian principle of the 'eccentric' nature of the unconscious:

When, a couple of years ago, the disclosure of Michael Jackson's alleged 'immoral' private behaviour (his sexual games with boys under age) dealt a blow to his innocent Peter Pan image [...], some perspicacious commentators asked the obvious question: what's all the fuss about? Wasn't this so-called dark side of Michael Jackson all the time here for all of us to see, in the video spots that accompanied his musical releases and that were saturated with ritualized violence and obscene sexual gestures [...]? This paradox illustrates perfectly Lacan's thesis according to which 'the unconscious is outside', not hidden in any

unfathomable depths — or, to quote *The X Files* motto: 'The truth is out there.'<sup>91</sup>

If, as Lacan suggests, the unconscious is located 'outside', then the 'truth' of our subjective constitution is indeed 'out there'; it is there for us to trace according to materialisations of 'itself' which are ceaselessly manifested in cultural productions. By the same token, when we recall Lacan's precise formulation of this concept, we can see that it is this very structure upon which we must rely in order to articulate *anything* of it in the very first instance. As he notes, 'The unconscious is the sum of the effects of speech on a subject, at the level at which the subject constitutes himself out of the effects of the signifier' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 126): as soon as the subject can become constituted at the level of language, the effects of the very possibility of this constitution itself are circumscribed *as the unconscious*. It is for this reason that fantasy in Lacan must be conceived at the level of what we commonly call reality. While Lacan suggests that the subject has always experienced this screen which focuses fantasy and renders reality 'marginal' — it must certainly be the case if, as Lacan suggests, 'the unconscious has always been present, it existed and acted before Freud' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 126) — it is not the same thing at all to say that the subject has always *known* it. Forty years after Lacan, perhaps we are catching up; *The Tain*, first published in 2002, is, I suggest, evidence of this fact: evidence that we can read the subjective interaction with the screen in the products of culture.

This chapter will be split into three sections. In the first, I explore the presentation of narcissism in *The Tain*,

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<sup>91</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'Fantasy as a Political Category: A Lacanian Approach', *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, 1:2 (Fall 1996), 77-85 (77).

suggesting that the text contends with the question of whether narcissism is simply a 'socially disruptive' turn towards self-interest and interiority. I read the text as unexpectedly challenging this notion, instead situating narcissism along the lines of Lacan's assertion that narcissism performs a vital function in 'properly' situating the desire of the subject. In the second section I continue this analysis by focusing on the figure of the 'vampire' in the text, arguing that *The Tain* constitutes a 'reformulation' of this figure compared to the 'traditional' Gothic and Romantic vampire. This is because, in psychoanalytic terms, the text relocates the 'core' of the figure's horrific presence from the oral drive to the scopic drive. The reason for this shift is related to the 'visual' materialisation of the screen in culture, which increases the opportunities for problems of vision as an effect of the proliferation of screens. The final section concludes by suggesting that *The Tain* must be read as a text depicting the subjective 'catastrophe' which follows the breakdown of the screen of fantasy. Only by 'reaffirming' the desire of the Other, by *returning* to narcissism, which for Lacan is connected to the ideality of the Other, can the world of *The Tain* be saved. Indeed, I suggest, there would be no possible ending otherwise. Likewise, the text informs us: without a proper understanding of desire, the proliferation of the screen invites the danger of becoming caught, not *in* the image like Narcissus himself, but by the excess which eternally threatens to overflow the image itself.

In psychoanalytic terms, narcissism defines a fantasy field by which objects are marked with a sort of mysterious and unique character which entices the subject, and appears to provoke desire and promise the fulfilment of love. In Freud, this is expressed in two senses: primary narcissism, which is a 'libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation, a measure of which may justifiably be attributed

to every living creature<sup>92</sup> and is expressed in *becoming* subject; and secondary narcissism, which describes the object choice of the desiring subject, in other words the subject already constituted as such. Thus there are two narcissisms: the primary form which is common to all subjects, because it marks a period in which the infant is focused entirely on the satisfaction of bodily needs, and persists into adulthood, and the secondary form which arises only pathologically and denotes a 'disordered' relationship with the self and other objects. We can see how these two forms describe the process by which the subject constructs a fantasy which promises the gratification of an imaginary wholeness: they identify not only the classical self-love of Narcissus, but indeed a fundamental step in the process by which the desiring subject learns to experience love. The outcome is therefore that, as Lacan says, 'the field of love [...] [is] the framework of narcissism' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 193). Narcissism, and by extension love, in this sense, does not consist in finding satisfaction in an image; rather, it locates that satisfaction in something that is supposed to exist beyond the image, an excess in which we fail to recognise the work of our own desire, or that which promises something beyond the self. Joan Copjec summarises the subjective outcome of this reading of narcissism:

What one loves in one's image is something *more* than the image ("in you more than you"). Thus is narcissism the source of the malevolence with which the subject regards its

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<sup>92</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 67-102 (73-74).

image, the aggressivity it unleashes on all its own representations.

*(Read My Desire 37)*

In *The Tain*, we find a strangely literal example of this aggressivity of the self toward its representation. Its intertext is Borges' 'The Fauna of Mirrors', the central conceit of which *The Tain* loosely adapts. In both texts there exist malevolent beings trapped in mirrors — our reflections, which are in fact autonomous entities, enslaved by our image and forced to represent us in the tain of the mirror. The narrative of *The Tain* concerns the aftermath of a war between humanity and these reflections, which are referred to as 'imagos'. We follow the protagonist, a man named Scholl, on a sort of picaresque across a bombed-out post-apocalyptic London, on his way to meet the 'Fish of the Mirror', a character established in the Borges story as leader of the imagos. Meanwhile, a secondary narrative intercuts, following the tale from the point of view of an imago with whom Scholl comes into contact.

What is interesting about the novella is the way in which it depicts this aggressivity of the self and its representations. The antagonistic relationship between the self and the fantasy of representative image is rendered quite literally via the depiction of a city and populace which have become estranged from their own reflections (and disfigured by their lack thereof). Scholl explains that some inexplicable shift in physics linked to the presence of the imagos has rendered reflection impossible:

'There is something called the Phong model, Scholl said. [...] It's a model to show how light moves. [...] The model used to describe how

light bounced off concrete and paper and metal and glass [...] But something happened, and now Phong describes a turning key. It used to be a sliding scale. [...] It's become a threshold.<sup>93</sup>

This produces an elementary kind of denaturation of the city: 'The streets were wet again. It was like a warning. London was never so alien as after the rain, its tarmac and slate turned into what would once have been mirrors' (*The Tain* 253). The city in this sense becomes an externalisation of the processes which govern the subjective relationship with the image. The text confounds us, of course, by presenting this alien city which refuses to meet our expectations; indeed, the setting is quickly established in the text with the representation of a conjunction of geographical and architectural landmarks which appear to be marked by an odd relationship with light. We are introduced to Sholl, lying on the ground somewhere in the South Bank:

The puddle was directly below his face, and it was blank, as he had known it would be.

He looked closer, until he could see faint patterns. A veil, the ghosts of colours and shapes moved across the thin skin of water: incomprehensible but not random, according to strange vagaries.

The man stood and walked away. Behind him the sunlight hit the Thames. It did not scatter: it did not refract on the moving river into little stabs of light. It did other things.

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<sup>93</sup> China Miéville, *The Tain in Looking For Jake And Other Stories* (London: Pan McMillan, 2005), 225-301 (246).



(*The Tain* 228)

Then:

The man crossed the river. He stopped below the Grosvenor Bridge, and clambered up its girded underside. Where it should have been a curve of shadows, the bridge was punctured, broken by thick rays of light.

(*The Tain* 228)

What we encounter here is a kind of mystery regarding the interaction of light and object. It becomes apparent over the course of the novella that London has been destroyed, and Miéville delights in dreaming up new ways to present this destruction, from an immolated Kentish Town which perpetually smoulders in a 'transmirror pyrosis' (*The Tain* 277) to 'the structure that now dwarfed the Brixton Prison. *Jebb Ave. filled with something like cuckoo-spit. Funnel-tower still rising — threads snagging chimneys. Something inside moving*' (*The Tain* 235), as Sholl's personal notes eerily announce. But this initial glimpse of Grosvenor Bridge and the Thames is enough to suggest to us that there is a disturbing discontinuity between object and vision in the text, that something *else* seems to interpose between the subject and object. The light does 'other things', and the Bridge, though we understand it has been wrecked by battle, appears to be destroyed in the moment at which we encounter it, pierced by the rays of light themselves.

In Lacanian terms, this mystery of light and object is expressed as the gaze, which locates this interposing object in the subjective experience of an externality of the gaze

itself. One of Lacan's key ideas is to situate the gaze on the side of the object rather than the side of the subject. The effect of this is to deprive us, as subjects, of a self-presumed mastery of our own grasping gaze, emphasising the fact that there is always a point in any picture from which we are first gazed upon, always a point (which Lacan described as a spot or stain) which disturbs our ability to observe the object from a safe, detached position. In other words: the gaze beholds us, we do not 'hold' the gaze. The odd status of light in the descriptions of the Thames and the Grosvenor Bridge above hint towards this kind of deprivation of scopic mastery in the sense that it depicts light as an object of unpredictable agency. The interesting thing about *The Tain*, therefore, is that London is presented as an alien, visually disturbing scene, not simply because there is something 'wrong' with the city itself, but because, prior to this, there is an interpolation which disturbs the subject's ability to comprehend that scene from a position of mastery. When Sholl and his group recount their stories of the point at which they first became aware of the mirror revolt, the 'moment the reflections went wrong' (*The Tain* 278), the common feature among their recollections is the disruption of the image. One man describes how 'I was all covered in shaving foam, and I look down to rinse it, and when I look up again my reflection was *waiting* for me. It hadn't looked down at all' (*The Tain* 278), while another

[...] had stood in front of the mirror in his morning nudity, and had seen aghast that where he was detumesced, his reflection was erect. [...] One woman told in a voice still hollow at the memory how she had spent long disbelieving minutes at breakfast looking at the mirror beside her husband and back at him, watching his reflection meet her eye —

not the eye of her reflection but her own eye  
 — and mouth obscenities at her, calling her  
*cunt cunt cunt* while her husband read his  
 paper, and now and then glanced up and  
 smiled.

(*The Tain* 278)

The source of the horror of these moments stems from an uncanny sense of a kind of discontinuity between, on the one hand, the subject's position of phantasmatic mastery — in other words, the position through which everything I 'see' is mediated by that narcissistic (mirrored) screen of fantasy which defines the scope of my desire, and situates my gaze — and, on the other, the eruption of an uncontainable excess which marks the limits of that fantasy, which indeed reveals it *as fantasy*. If anxiety is, as Lacan suggests, the subject's reaction to the *overproximity* of that point of excess, in other words, is caused by the revelation of the Imaginary nature of the fantasy itself, then what we see here are the products of that fantasy becoming revealed as gaze. In each case, the subject performs an act of narcissistic intent. As the first man grooms himself, he looks up to find that his reflection already gazes upon him in the moment of the act itself (the Other already looks at us, we already perform such an action in the name of another *anyway*); the second man, in a reversal of the first, already gazes at himself, his reflection cannot look at him 'preemptively', but what he encounters in this moment of complete exposure and naked vulnerability is an obscene display of sexual arousal, the image permeated with excessive libidinal investment; the woman, in a further twist, gazes not at her own reflection but at that of her husband — the disturbing fact in this case is not that the reflection insults her, but that it insults her *in his image*, that it expresses an image which disturbs her fantasy of a loving, caring husband.

In each situation, we can see that the true source of the horror is not the supernatural nature of the incident itself, but instead is something closer to Žižek's humorous example of the gaze as object:

We all know the uncanny moments in our everyday lives when we catch sight of our own image and this image is *not* looking back at us. I myself remember once trying to inspect a strange growth on the side of my head using a double mirror, when, all of a sudden, I caught a glimpse of my face in profile. The image replicated all my gestures, but in a weird uncoordinated way.<sup>94</sup>

The reflection does not always act as we would expect it to, and the curious fact of *The Tain* is that the image *is* looking back at the subject, looking back in a 'weird uncoordinated' way which should not be possible according to narcissistic fantasy.

This fantasy extends to the city, when we consider the rain-slick surfaces of London: this film which coats the city disturbs us not because it is essentially alien in its non-reflective state, but because it leaves no space for us to locate ourselves in the environment; that *lack* of space is the source of this experience of an 'alien' environment. In other words, the city is itself being structured by the fantasy screen of the subject. In this case, the London of *The Tain* should be properly described as an Other London: a London in which the bizarre horrors which appear all over the city are not transgressions, but actually the expression of a battle to maintain the central narcissistic fantasy of the subject. 'Other'

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<sup>94</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)* (London: Verso, 2010), xi.

in this sense refers precisely to Lacan's big Other, the symbolic third term imposed by language, the one that always intervenes in 'communication' between subject and other. The Other is the one to whom I address myself, the agent which imposes the law of social interaction. By Other London, therefore, we refer to the city not as a minimally distinct term, but conversely as a space which is inherently familiar, precisely because of the narcissistic bonds of fantasy which structure subjectivity. That is how the return of narcissism marks the space of this Other London: by producing a version of London which initially appears as fantasy (in the most generic sense of the word), *The Tain* actually depicts a city space which is a fantasy in the most precisely psychoanalytic sense. It reveals those basic coordinates which structure desire, those narcissistic impulses which form part of the answer to the question 'what am I for another?' In this case, the city is opaque screen, like the non-reflective mirror which coats its surface in the text, upon which narcissistic desire is projected.

The 'objects' of reflection, the imagos, assume three seemingly opposed, and yet interlinked forms in the text. On the one hand they exist as disembodied features (floating hands, eyes, lips, and so forth — the Freudian 'partial object' rendered *par excellence*); on the other hand, they are 'vampires [...] the most comprehensible of the imagos' (*The Tain* 247), which are degraded reflections of human figures which paradoxically cast no reflection in the mirror; and finally, they 'appear' as amorphous 'things' which flit beyond vision: 'Something moved away from him, up the wall, in a lizard motion not quite like anything Sholl had ever seen. [...] This close to Hamsptead's heart, the fauna of mirrors were playing' (*The Tain* 253). This bizarre taxonomy in effect materialises the Lacanian triad of Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. The disembodied partial objects are Imaginary, they

materialise the image devoid of substance, other than it appears as such for the subject: 'For centuries they had been spawned in thousands, little resonances of reflection, shed by passion in makeup compacts, dresser mirror triptychs, glazed gym walls' (*The Tain* 254). They are the image of the object which has been 'decoupled' from the body, 'existing' as such irrespective of the Symbolic semblance of order. The 'vampires', meanwhile, exist as pure Symbolic terms; they appear as 'total' objects, or, in other words, they 'objectivise' the reflection of the subject, existing without the 'bar' of subjectivity: 'Each vampire concentrated, moving in its own shuffling path, tracing repeating patterns with autistic precision, ignoring its siblings completely. The vampires muttered to themselves.' (*The Tain* 255). The vampires appear human, but, as we shall expand upon shortly, contain an 'excess' of subjectivity owing to their apparent lack of lack. They 'miss' the very thing which is missing in us, because they appear to contain the object itself, appear to be complete and 'recoupled' with that object. It is for this reason that they appear doomed to trace their own path according to an incomprehensible pattern in the passage above, and why they mutter only to themselves: they appear as pure symbol, beyond intersubjective relation. Finally, the amorphous 'things' represent the irruption of the Real, the not-quite-containable excess which threatens the stability of the other terms and appears to arise because of the very fact of their existence: 'Way overhead, just below cloud, a sudden point of focus came into clarity and was gone. An imago, a full imago, in its own barely perceivable form' (*The Tain* 255).

The interrelationship between all three registers is characterised very well by the text in the sense that each object manifests the 'comprehensibility' of that register. While the partial objects are 'instinctual' creatures with no apparent subjectivity (the sky is filled with 'doves', for example: 'They

were not birds. The flock did not move in avian curves, but spastically, changing speed and direction more suddenly than birds could ever manage. [...] They were animals, scavengers. [...] Each dove was a pair of crossed human hands, linked by thumbs' (*The Tain* 229-30)), the vampires are 'trapped' in the form of the subject, 'trapped in their prison uniforms' (*The Tain* 282) and unable to escape: they emphasise the crux of the subject, which only becomes subject by 'trapping' itself in, or rather becoming trapped by language. 'Beyond' this, however, is the insistent dimension of the Real, 'in its own barely perceivable form', which assumes no form other than that which is *not* Imaginary or Symbolic. It might be said to be that which 'surmounts' those terms if it were at all possible to articulate itself without them. We also understand the sense in which each term relies on its relationship with the other in order to constitute itself, and the way that each term disrupts the boundaries of the other in this relationship precisely in order to *maintain* those boundaries. The figure of the vampire, for example, demonstrates the disintegration of the subject in the pure fact of its Symbolic constitution: the only way to constitute the subject thus is to account for the impossibility of a total symbol, or in other words to admit the destabilisation of the Symbolic by Real; thus, by 'adding' the object of the Real to its being, the vampire becomes that which can only ever escape the subject. It becomes the very thing that the subject is not, in constituting itself as subject, by positing the 'recoupling' of the subject and the imaginary lost object. It is this very point of 'recoupling' which the screen of fantasy, which *the lure of narcissism*, protects the subject against. Why? Because that recoupling can never occur: it can only reveal the traumatic 'lack', the irruptive point of the Real which allows the subject to constitute itself in the 'first place'. The 'vampires' of *The Tain*, therefore, warrant further investigation.

When Sholl decides to attack a swarm of vampires in Hampstead Underground Station in order to gain information concerning the location of the Fish of the Mirror, their unprecedented proximity presents him with the opportunity to experience at first hand the disturbing fact of the deformation of the image:

In the frozen moment of light Sholl saw the faces of the crowd. They loomed over him and his dazed attacker. So far as he could read emotion in those faces, faces that wore human features without facility or empathy, they looked stricken. Discomposed and desperate.

*(The Tain 263)*

The vampire imagos (which are also referred to in the text as 'patchogues') materialise the very notion of the third term to which, as Žižek says, we are repeatedly referred by popular culture:

The mention of the 'living dead' is by no means accidental here: in our ordinary language, we resort to indefinite judgements precisely when we endeavour to comprehend those borderline phenomena that undermine established differences such as that between living and being dead. In the texts of popular culture, the uncanny creatures that are neither alive nor dead, the 'living dead' (vampires, etc.), are referred to as 'the undead': although



they are not dead, they are clearly not alive  
like us ordinary mortals.<sup>95</sup>

This formal 'third' is a position which reappears throughout Lacan, as the term which disturbs the Imaginary coherence of a stable, 'wholesome' duality: we find it reformulated in the discourse of the Other, *objet a*, language, and the Real, among other figures (and of course it is canonised in psychoanalytic theory with the Oedipal triangle). This third term in Lacan is something which exists for the subject *beyond* or prior to the intersubjective relation. The source of its radical alterity stems from the fact that it must already escape that duality in order to introduce disruption.

What is interesting about the 'vampires' of *The Tain* is that they are so named purely because of their relationship to image. The text implicitly suggests that the popular idea of the fictional vampire originates with the patchogue, and this modification of the figure of the vampire is indicative of the text's representation of the subjective experience of the screen:

Mirrors betray us. When we came through, we murdered those whose bodies had bound us, and there was no one among our tormented comrades left behind in our place, no one forced to mimic us from beyond the glass, as we had mimicked you. There was nothing in the tain made to take our shapes: we were invisible in the mirror, we had no reflections. When you saw that, you screamed, and called

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<sup>95</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'A Hair of the Dog That Bit You' in *Lacan's Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure and Society*, ed. Mark Bracher et al (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), 46-73 (62).

us things. We are the patchogues: that is our name. But you called us vampires.

(*The Tain* 251)

Sholl's experience of the 'faces that wore human features without facility' can therefore be read as the experience of the collapse or disintegration of the screen of fantasy in the face of the irruption of the Real. Something monstrous appears to 'animate' this excess *in* the image, bursting literally out of the screen: it is akin to the 'life instinct' which Lacan designates with the name 'lamella', which we will return to shortly. Sholl is unable to project his narcissistic fantasy upon the object itself, unable to screen the traumatic alterity which marks the vampires from the humans, from 'us ordinary mortals' caught up in the consensual fantasy in which our common terms are the *representation* of life and death. The vampires are the *images* of the dead; the condition of their 'birth' is that they murder and supplant the living 'original' of their image. This process is described by the imago as 'murder, a coming through. You would not withstand us, [...] staring up dumb as your own faces came for you, your own arms crooked and pushing through the mirror' (*The Tain* 249). Interestingly, therefore, the disturbing fact of the vampiric figure consists in the manner in which the text modifies that classic representation of the oral drive, and relocates the figure under the vicissitudes of the scopic drive. As Lacan says:

Let us turn to the oral drive. What is it? One speaks of phantasies of devouring, *of being gobbled up*. [...] Since we refer to the infant and the breast, and since suckling is sucking,

let us say that the oral drive is getting sucked,  
it is the vampire.

Indeed, this throws some light on that singular  
object — which I am trying to unstick in your  
minds from the food metaphor — the breast.  
The breast is also something superimposed  
[...] Thus we see clearly enough, at this level,  
the nature of the subject's claim to something  
that is separated from him, but belongs to him  
and which he needs to complete himself.

*(The Four Fundamental Concepts of  
Psychoanalysis 195)*

The 'vampires' of *The Tain* do not produce horror for us at the level of the oral drive. To be sure, there appears to be something of 'a sucking' occurring in the text, in the sense that the vampires seem to draw from the 'life-essence' of those they murder in order to constitute themselves. The connection between the dead body and its own murderous image is made in the 'arms crooked and pushing through the mirror', a bizarre vanishing-point in which the body meets and is swallowed by its reflection. The vampires 'devour' their prey, but in a highly figurative manner; there is no visceral feast of blood. Instead it is a feasting of the image upon body. The vampires therefore more clearly seem to disturb at the level of the scopic drive, introducing a disturbing excess to the image themselves, not because of their additional 'presence' animating the image, in other words as being where they should not, but precisely because they add *nothing other than that which escapes representation*. The moment at which the subject is caught 'staring up dumb' as its own face lunges toward it is the moment of gaze at its most formally distinct. It is the point at which I am put into the

picture, the point at which the picture-frame defines my own position prior to the moment that I can master it with my own grasping vision; as such, it deprives me of my position of subjective mastery. In *The Tain*, this deprivation is total: the vampires reify the experience of the objective gaze in a manner which appears to circumvent the transfer of blood, the obscene version of the sucking action of the oral drive. The gaze as object appears, for the subject staring dumbly at his or her own reflection, on the side of the vampire, with the vampire — *in* the vampire. The screen of fantasy breaks down at that moment; the mirror literally shatters as the vampire 'leaves' the tain, murdering the subject:

Coming through the mirror was a one-way trip:  
we broke the glass as we passed. We  
showered those whose forms were our  
prisons with jagged splinters as we arrived, so  
that they were bleeding and crying out before  
we touched them.

(*The Tain* 283-4)

The vampires, therefore, are terrifying *prior* to their objective effects. In other words, that which is *in them* which produces the effect of horror does so *already*, before the vampire becomes the object of the drive. The explanation for this is to be found in the partial object, the object which we figure as 'decoupled' from ourselves, the return of which to our body we suppose will satisfy our desire, will figure us as 'whole again'. As Copjec says, reading Lacan, the vampire occupies a position in relation to this object, *objet a*, in which it functions as an objectivisation of the very *lack* of objectivity. It is the lack of a lack, which in itself suddenly closes the presumed 'distance' between subject and object. There is no simple 'proximity' to this object; instead, it is its *overproximity*

which provokes the subject's anxiety and calls forth the experience of an insistent trauma<sup>96</sup>:

The danger that anxiety signals is the overproximity of this object *a*, this object so *inalienable* that like Dracula and all the other vampires of Gothic and Romantic fiction it cannot even be cast as a shadow or reflected as a mirror image, and yet so *insubstantial* that like Murnau's *Nosferatu* it can appear in a puff of smoke.

(*Read My Desire* 119)

As we can see, thinking of the vampire-as-object's relation to the oral and scopic drive, *The Tain's* advance on the 'traditional' vampire of Gothic and Romantic fiction is that it abrogates the 'role' of the oral drive in the textual production of horror in order to directly materialise the vampire as a figure whose 'power' is manifested in the disturbance of the scopic drive. It describes this inability, the inability to be exchanged as object of gaze, as *the* source of the vampire's uncanniness. This seems to represent a particularly novel twist to the formula when we consider that Copjec's reading of the partial object and the vampire oddly neglects to consider precisely those examples mentioned above, in which Dracula, *Nosferatu*, and others embody the disturbing appearance of the gaze itself, the gaze-as-object, in favour of analysing the primal object of the oral relation: the breast. She notes that vampirism constitutes a troubling disruption to the comforting image of the child suckling at the breast, and continues:

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<sup>96</sup> See chapter 5 for a discussion of the 'insistent level' of trauma in Lacan.

[...] it is not the child who is the vampire. The image of the child at the mother's breast is not one that elicits anxiety. Vampirism is located beyond this point where the child maintains itself in relation to a partial object, an object of desire. It is only at the point where the fantasy enabling this relation to the partial object no longer holds that the anxiety-ridden phenomenon of vampirism takes over, signalling, then, *the drying up of the breast as object-cause of desire*, the disappearance of the fantasy support of desire. The drying up of desire is the danger against which vampirism warns us [...]

(*Read My Desire* 128)

The vampire thus confronts us, at a point of discomfiting overproximity, with the end of our fantasy relation to the partial object. It demonstrates the disappearance of that object in our approach toward it, and the consequence of the failure of its metonymical displacement onto another suitable object. If we are 'stuck' without *another* object of desire, in other words unable to transubstantiate the successive object of desire, what do we find when we confront that which appears to contain the object itself? In this case, the vampire demonstrates the consequence of the *possession* of the partial object: it contains the partial object 'within' itself, placing the object in a position whereby it retains 'access' to the object, *and* doubles the subject in desiring the object itself. The 'traditional' vampire therefore retains an oral *jouissance*; it alone experiences the possibility of a total relation to the breast (as it draws blood from the victim, as it sucks). It also, as Copjec says, noting the episode of *Dracula* in which Mina Harker drinks blood from Dracula's breast,

*offers the possibility* of a return to oral *jouissance* to the subject: 'Desire, society itself, is endangered by Mina's intimacy with this extimate object' (*Read My Desire* 129).

What I take Copjec to mean by this (that 'society itself is endangered by Mina's intimacy with *objet a*') is that, as I have suggested, the bonds of fantasy must be understood as the form of a superstructure within which the subject experiences 'reality'. Fantasy is unique for each subject, and yet the *experience* of fantasy is consensual. To be confronted with the overproximity of the object-cause of desire, *objet a*, can only produce a destabilising effect for the subject: we experience anxiety, suffer trauma, and, if we are unable to 'return' the object to its 'rightful' position,<sup>97</sup> we reach the point of subjective dissolution. The 'proper' function of society itself depends upon the locus of desire, because it is the locus of desire which determines the coordinates of our fantasy. To threaten the consistency of our desire is to threaten the consensual experience of fantasy; and, without the screen to function as a kind of master signifier of the negotiation between the social fantasy and the destitute subject, no consistency of social relation is possible.<sup>98</sup>

Thinking of *The Tain*, we can see why the 'revision' to the figure of the vampire in the text (that is, the reorientation of the vampire around scopic rather than oral relation and the consequent re-theorisation of the precise source of horror) is so important: it gestures toward the fact that the text is dealing with the manifold expression of the screen in culture, and the overwhelming experience of the screen as a visual

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<sup>97</sup> This 'rightful' position is, paradoxically, the position that is as far removed from ourselves as it takes to convince us that the object occupies, once again, the position towards which we must move.

<sup>98</sup> It must be noted that the organisational role of this master signifier is dependent upon the screen actually *existing* in the form which makes it possible to understand this negotiating role, which is why, I suggest, the screen precisely becomes more nakedly visible as an 'important' object *now*.

artefact or concern. In the same way that *Dracula* problematises the oral relation to the partial object in the figure of the vampire (and Copjec is very shrewd in her reading of *Dracula* in light of the eighteenth century debate over breast-feeding advocacy), *The Tain* problematises the scopical relation to the partial object in the guise of the same figure. Near the conclusion of the story, we encounter a twist: the imago narrator of the secondary narrative reveals himself as human. This twist at first appears to confuse certain sections of the story, rather than surprise the reader and clarify some preceding mystery of the text in the same measure, as a well-deployed twist should. It leaves us with questions rather than answers. How exactly can a human interact with the imagos? Why didn't the imagos murder him or her immediately? How can a human return 'through' the tain, as the imago narrator does in the conclusion of that section of the novella? There are no answers to these questions as such. In the narrative they remain unexplained: they constitute part of the *explanandum* of the text. Where this twist *does* lead us, however, is towards that *explanans* in which the question of the subjective experience of the screen really structures the text. The revelatory power of this twist lies in the fact that the *imago narrator murders his or her own reflection*:

The glass of the mirror ruptured, tearing apart my face, when the patchogue burst out of the tain, but I was very quick. I met it, my own snarling face. I wasn't subdued or driven out of my mind by it. *I had never trusted that image anyway.* That was why it found me where it did, in the toilet of a hospital, near my ward of melancholics and hysterics.



(*The Tain* 293)

This passage renders very clearly the difference between the vampire of Gothic and Romantic fiction discussed by Copjec, and the vampires depicted in *The Tain*; *this* vampire is figured as an object of horror because it retains a relationship with the object of the scopic drive, *the gaze*. In this way, however, it also indicates that the text is concerned with the cultural effects of the screen. The disclosure of the imago's location in a hospital ward for sufferers of mental illness, along with his or her confession of distrust in the image, suggests that the refusal to enter into the narcissistic fantasy places the subject at odds *both* with society and with him- or herself. The irony expressed in the text is that the subject's mistrust of image is justified, and that the social 'mechanism' which places the narrator into the hospital in the first place is flawed. A further layer of irony is evident, however, when we consider that the fellow patients in the ward are 'melancholics and hysterics'. In this case, the suggestion is that the narrator is subject to a misdiagnosis owing to a medical failure to understand his or her symptom, since these obsolete terms refer to a range of disorders which are now more precisely diagnosed otherwise.

The narrator notes that he or she has 'lived a long time':

Maybe it's our imagos that kill us. Even  
trapped in mimicry, maybe their hatred  
reached past the glass and slowly throttled us,  
after our scores of years and ten. Only I killed  
mine, so I kept not dying. I've lived a long  
time, alone. For years, and years, not knowing  
what I was, more afraid of you all than I'd ever  
been before [...]

(*The Tain* 293-4)

The mention of 'melancholics and hysterics', therefore, does not simply bolster the diegetic reality of the text, in which the narrator has supposedly lived beyond a normal human lifespan. It also signals that the narrator's psychotic disorder identifies, to modify Copjec's phrase, *a saturation of the gaze as the object-cause of desire*. Rather than the *disappearance* of the fantasy-support for desire, the vampire in *The Tain* materialises the *failure* of the fantasy-support for desire, by drawing the obvious parallel between the immaterial screen which structures this fantasy-support and the symbolic breaking or clouding of the mirror, a screen which fails to contain the irruption of the gaze. As Antonio Quintet says, 'The function of the screen is to erase the gaze from the world, from the world's show, from the Other as reality'<sup>99</sup>:

For neurotics the gaze as an object has no consistency, no substance. It does not appear; it cannot be seen. But for psychotics, the gaze can sometimes be felt and seen because the screen fails [...] In psychosis, there is something that shows the subject that the object is not lost.

('The Gaze as an Object' 145)

The narrator experiences a *saturation* of the gaze in the object itself: he or she recognises the failure of the screen, in which the gaze cannot be 'erased' from the world. The narrator finds in the image of the reflection that very excess

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<sup>99</sup> Antonio Quintet, 'The Gaze as an Object' in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Richard Feldstein et al (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1995), 139-147 [144].

marked by the presence of the object-cause of desire, and cannot escape its Symbolic appearance. It is for this reason that he or she says that 'I wasn't subdued or driven out of my mind by it'. The narrator *anticipates* the debilitating irruption of the gaze, and it is this very experience which is symbolised by the figure of the vampire in the text. The failure of the screen therefore results in what Quintet calls 'a disorganisation of the visual field' ('The Gaze as an Object' 145): *The Tain* presents the thesis that the locus of fantasy constructs a social relation involving the denial of a non-narcissistic mode of subjectivity. Only by obeying that narcissistic impulse, by *trusting that image anyway*, in contrast to the imago-narrator, can we hope to escape the irruption of the gaze, which is symbolised in the text by the literal *eruption* of the object marked by the excess contained *within itself more than itself*. In this sense the vampire embodies the peril of the 'decoupled' object with respect to the cultural proliferation of the screen. In other words, the more we encounter the screen, the more the object threatens to burst forth.

We must therefore conceive of the role of narcissism in a 'constructive' sense. This is in opposition to M. John Harrison's suggestion, however, that the shattered mirror in *The Tain* disrupts this experience of this constitutive narcissism:

The mirror has always been a maximum venue for artistic outrages, aimed like weapons at the everyday. Look at *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which is so clearly not a painting but the denied or unconsulted mirror (or at Will Self, his very name a component of the mirror duality, recycling Dorian in the contemporary attempt to squeeze out some

further uncanny truth). Look at Egon Schiele, chained to his own image, sly, gesturing, full of sex or something other than sex. Who's that glinting at the corner of his eye? Some twist of light, something that lives in the mirror? The act of electing something else to be opposite to you, so that you can claim to be self to its other, is central to the human way of doing business. What if, in its most familiar moment, this idea was shattered?

(*The Tain* (2002) 4)

Is it not the case that the text functions, in fact, in the opposite manner? In other words, by interrogating the apparent stability of the imaginary duality which sustains this fantasy of 'equal' opposition between self and other, does the text not alert us even further to the constitutive interplay between the levels of Imaginary ideality and Real irruption which forever intrude upon the subjective experience of the Symbolic realm? The text does not expose a disjunction between a 'pure' subject and a narcissistic, compromised one. Instead it situates the subject at the intersection of that narcissistic process of screen-relation — a relationship which already straddles the subject. As Mark Bould notes, the text implicitly draws a connection between the rise of a culture in which screen-engagement proliferates, and the production of that torturous fact of subjective disruption, the encounter with the stain of the Real:

[...] their tortured distortions have escalated with the rise of commerce and capitalism since the Renaissance as mirrors, and mirrored surfaces became increasingly common. [*The Tain* models] a world driven by

forces beyond control or comprehension, and figure[s] paranoia as the mode of subjectivity under capital.<sup>100</sup>

The question of control (or the lack of it) is, as Bould suggests, a major question posed by the text. The answer to this question is the possibility of *properly engaging with the screen*, or, in other words, the proper construction of the screen of fantasy. Fredric Jameson, in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, astutely defines the relationship between the subject, screen, and the cultural 'mode': 'The social totality can be sensed, as it were, from the outside, like a skin at which the Other somehow looks, but which we ourselves will never see.'<sup>101</sup> Jameson's invocation of the Other draws our attention to the impossibility of any attempt to reconstruct a liminal version of 'social totality'. The interesting thing, however, is the way in which Jameson's metaphor of organic interaction (literally: the processual and cognitive interaction between the organs of the skin and the eye) traces the action of the 'embodiment' of space in these screens. 'Interaction' is the correct way to characterise this relationship because the metaphor implicates the skin itself as an active participant in the process. The ability to 'sense' this skin of the social totality only becomes available, is only possible when it is viewed by the Other and thus, in Lacanian terms, is designated as an object, is itself 'objectivised'. The cognitive force binding these senses, of object and subject, constructs the relation without physical sensation. The subject experiences the social totality via the screen *at the level of the Real*.

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<sup>100</sup> Mark Bould, 'Mind the Gap: The Impertinent Predicates (and Subjects) of *King Rat* and *Looking for Jake and Other Stories*' *Extrapolation*, 50: 2 (2009), 307–25 (312).

<sup>101</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 1992) 114.

The work of idealisation is therefore to be conceived in strict relation to a narcissistic desire, and this relationship defines the position of the screen for the subject.<sup>102</sup> In Lacan, the thought of this process of narcissistic idealisation appears most famously in his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis, in which he discusses courtly love poetry. In the seminar, Lacan overturns the classical notion of the Lady as sublime object, emphasising that her character as depicted by the poet is the result of a narcissistic projection which is exactly intended to obscure her radical Otherness: 'In this poetic field the feminine object is emptied of all real substance' (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 184). This formulation goes some way towards enabling us to pick

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<sup>102</sup> What role does narcissism play in the formation of the screen of fantasy? Per Julia Kristeva: 'It might seem excessive to grant Narcissus such a crucial part in the history of western subjectivity, hypostatizing the function of reflection and, on the basis of its narcissistic failure, setting in motion the internalization of reflection in order to transform Platonic ideality into speculative internality. [...] Narcissus, however, appeals to us, and he is essential as a source of western subjectivism [...] In short, there is infantilism and perversion on the brim of western internality.' (Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love* trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), 115.) What Kristeva does here is not simply to hypostatise the function of reflection in the Narcissus myth, but indeed to hypostatise the Freudian model of narcissism in a historicist reading of Narcissus. The 'narcissistic failure' of reflection describes, in Freud, the end of the developmental state in which libido and ego exist before separation, interrupted by the onset of oedipal anxiety; in other words, it is the point at which the subject learns that the sense of ontogenetic wholeness which arises from the conjunction of the satisfaction of drives and the apparent satisfaction of the mother's desire (in the body of the infant, in the infant's needs) is only imaginary. The transformation of ideality into 'speculative internality' marks the repression of 'primary' narcissism, the very process by which narcissism can become divided into a 'primary' and therefore also 'secondary' mode in the first place, by the formation of an ego founded upon, as Kristeva says, the 'not I' (*Tales of Love* 41) of the Other: if I am not what the Other wants, then perhaps I may yet become so. It is this turn to the Other which allows 'infantilism and perversion' to persist at the outset of subjectivity. The point is clear, nevertheless: narcissism 'protects emptiness, causes it to exist, and thus, as a lining of that emptiness, insures an elementary separation' (*Tales of Love* 24); Kristeva calls narcissism 'a screen for emptiness' (*Tales of Love* 21) but warns against understanding it simply 'as undecomposable, unanalyzable screen', for this would crystallise narcissism as an explanatory pre-egotic stage, produce 'a narcissism that thus finds itself recognised and renewed' (*Tales of Love* 44) rather than reveal it to be a radical process which works to structure the ego ideal of the subject. What Kristeva contends, therefore, is that this narcissistic process initially *occludes* the formative subject's experience of emptiness, before it must *project* that emptiness as part of the movement towards an object-oriented desire. Narcissism, therefore, performs precisely the work of the screen, and this screen is far from 'undecomposable' as Kristeva warns against. For Kristeva, the 'positive' mark of the unary trait cannot account for the narcissistic 'process', stripping from it the field of desire. But in characterising the unary trait as a 'captifying and unifying feature' (*Tales of Love* 37), Kristeva appears to neglect the intrinsic division which marks it already in Lacan. For more, see *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (141).

through the threads which tie the subject to 'culture' and which we find at play in *The Tain*, especially when Lacan adds that, 'By means of a form of sublimation specific to art, poetic creation consists in positing an object I can only describe as terrifying, an inhuman partner.' (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 185). The terrifying, inhuman partner which we may call the Other (in the guise of *das Ding*) is terrifying precisely *because* we are tied to it, tethered by something which emphasises at every point our own estrangement from ourselves: language, which must always transform the need of the subject into need *addressed to another*. To be at the mercy of another (the Other) that I cannot know, whose requests are alien to me, whose demands appear cruel and unfathomable, I must always resort to the narcissistic screen which will protect me from the full disclosure *of that fact*. The traumatic dimension of the Lady here is the dimension of the Freudian 'Thing', *das Ding*. Žižek calls it 'the hard kernel that resists symbolization',<sup>103</sup> but such terms fail to emphasise the fact that the Real does not already exist in a form which prevents symbolisation, but rather is detectable only as we encounter the gaps in the Symbolic system which alert us to it. In this sense, the Thing appears in *The Tain* in each object which appears to demand something of Sholl in the act of viewing it; but the logic of the 'hard kernel of the real' is most clearly represented by the imago 'thing', the 'pure imago' which sheds the fetters of reflective logic:

Twice they saw imagos: once a thing that momentarily took a form reminiscent of a flock of birds; the other a glowering point of precision on the ground. The birds-thing watched them, unafraid but uninterested, from the end of a long crescent, before stalking

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<sup>103</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment* (London: Verso, 1994), 90.

away with childish, clumsy steps. The other circled them (they scouring the ground frantically to watch it, trying to track the spot where they could see too clearly), coming closer in a predatory motion.

(*The Tain* 278)

Here the imagos materialise, as patterns of light, the basic divide which marks subject and object, the divide which itself marks the barred subject; the Thing is traumatic precisely because, in its pure objectivity, it is *too* complete.<sup>104</sup> It is too much 'itself', completely self-present, and unknowable because of that. It is raised to a level of 'dignity' purely because it can never be 'touched'. The disinterest of the

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<sup>104</sup> According to Žižek there is a 'cold, neutral' screen which appears to precede the Thing at the level of any surface of narcissistic projection and subjective production: '[...] where does that empty surface come from, that cold, neutral screen which opens up the space for possible projections? That is to say, if men are to project on to the mirror their narcissistic ideal, the mute mirror surface must already be there. This surface functions as a kind of 'black hole' in reality, as a limit whose Beyond is inaccessible' (*The Metastases of Enjoyment* 152). Žižek's suggestion that the surface functions as a 'black hole' in reality indicates that what he is describing is the irruption of the Real: the Lady as Thing occupies the place of the impossible object of desire, the missing term which the symbolic system must produce in order to become organised for the subject. Therefore the screen which precedes her is produced by that same real space, and is only another point of deferral structuring the possibility of the subject's own constitution. In other words, by maintaining the delusion of the necessity of pursuing this object, we maintain our subjective stability. This does not answer Žižek's question, however, because it does not explain the *appearance* of the screen itself. As such, we can read the question in two ways: in one sense, the sense which Žižek answers, we can say that the 'empty surface' proceeds from the irruption of the Real, the experience of which is an irreducible fact of subjective constitution. In another sense, however, we can say that the 'empty surface', the form of the empty surface itself, as in its appearance as screen, appears only mysteriously. In other words, nothing suggests that the neutral screen need appear to us as such, and yet it does. Why? Because it is for that very reason that we reserve an understanding of the screen function. It is theorised in Lacan already as the 'limit' (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 186), as that which mobilises the experience of a limit against which the subject defines the very possibility of exclusion and representation of space. But it organises this experience by producing the space for, as Žižek says, a 'Beyond which is inaccessible'. This does not mean, of course, that there is no 'behind' the screen: just that there is nothing beyond it. After all, the process of exclusion is as intrinsic to this function of the 'cold, neutral screen' as the narcissistic projection which masks the inaccessible Beyond. Without both functions occurring simultaneously, there is no possible production of the subject, no orientation of desire towards the occluded space Beyond, no development of the ego-ideal, no process of sublimation which succeeds in orienting the subject in relation to *both* the ego-ideal and his or her shadowy desire itself — iterations of the Symbolic and the Real respectively, in other words.



imagos signals this detachment from the Symbolic law which fails to contain them anyway. The text represents this strange object in two ways. Firstly, the 'birds-thing' is signified by a conjunction of plural and singular noun. The horror of this jarring conjunction stems not from the fact that it signifies something unimaginable or excessive, but from the fact that it 'is' a complete object in spite of our inability to represent it as such in language. Its 'childish, clumsy steps' are not the fact of mere anthropomorphic horror, therefore, but instead the contingent, provisional 'translation' of the object's presence in the narcissistic screen of the subject. Because of this, the 'step' is only minimally comprehensible to us; we understand the act, but cannot comprehend the moment at which it occurs. In the second sense, the 'point of precision' depicts the point at which the screen breaks down. The Thing is so much itself, so totally complete at the point of its own irruption in the symbolic system, that to attempt to catch it is only an articulation of the failure to do so. It appears, not as a point of light, but as a point of 'glowering precision', 'predatory' in its movement, and yet unintuitable as an object. We understand that it is Scholl as the focalising character who is describing the object in these terms, that it is his desperate projection of an emotional or instinctual intent which 'animates' the point, rather than the narrator. The narrator cannot attribute this intent to the object without access to the narcissistic screen which determines the arbitrary 'reason' for the impossibility of interaction between subject and object; in other words, it is only once the traumatic character can be screened by the subject — in other words, collocated *with* the screen *by* the subject — that it can be presented as such.

Therefore, the 'decoupled' object, that which has 'gone missing' in our fantasy, the return of which will signal the closing of the 'gap' of subjectivity, is *screened by The Tain*. It

is for this reason that Sholl, in his trip through Hampstead Underground Station, encounters a new kind of vermin which has replaced rats and pigeons:

Through the shadows Sholl saw that the station itself thronged with them, and they split into the open air, foraging in the ruins.

[...] Like rats in trenches, they were overrunning. For centuries they had been spawned in thousands, little resonances of reflection, shed by passion in makeup compacts, dresser mirror triptychs, glazed gym walls. Imago spoor, they had lived fleetingly and been destroyed within moments, an endless pell-mell life cycle. But when reflection became a door they were set free; they could live. They could breed. They were the detritus of reflection. Vanity's castoffs, the snippets of human forms thrown up and ignored in the echoes between mirrors.

Human hands clutched and unclutched along the gutter. [...] Up the hill, Sholl saw a mouldering human corpse. Several of the hands picked their way across it with fingertip grace, and settled on its flesh, lowering themselves and gnawing at it with their nails.  
[...]

*(The Tain 254)*

The horrifying scene continues as we encounter 'little clouds of colour-smearred lips like plump butterflies, that ebbed through the air, each motion with the exaggerated kiss-pout

of someone applying lipstick. Eyes, human eyes, spasmed into existence [...] winking stupidly as they went. There were teeth in big horse-grins [...] a biceps clenched and unclenched through the centre of the junction [...] hair drooled from windowsills, billowing, against the wind' (*The Tain* 255). These disembodied products of narcissistic desire gradually consume the city, their 'presence' oddly disconnected from Sholl's own. The scene plays out in a manner reminiscent of a nature documentary, with Sholl in the position of detached observer of 'wildlife'. The power of the scene stems from the fact that it would be more proper to describe the teeming vermin as *wild life*, in other words, life revealed at its most 'wild', amorphous, unrepresentable point, in spite of the fact that it appears directly 'cast off' from the human form itself. It is this 'animating factor' which Lacan describes with the lamella, this 'pure life instinct', or 'libido as organ' which escapes us precisely because it is that part of ourselves which must be cast off when we become subject. Lacan's description of the 'myth' of the lamella is often quoted, but it bears repeating here:

The lamella is something extra-flat, which moves like the amoeba. It is just a little more complicated. But it goes everywhere. And as it is something [...] that is related to what the sexed being loses in sexuality, it is, like the amoeba in relation to sexed beings, immortal — because it survives any scissiparous intervention. And it can run around.

Well! That is not very reassuring. But suppose it comes and envelopes your face while you are quietly asleep...

(*The Four Fundamental Concepts of  
Psychoanalysis* 197)

The lamella is characterised as a 'myth' because it attempts to symbolically describe 'the cut of the Real': the asymmetry which results when we attempt to symbolise biological sexuality as human sexuality. The biological organism reproduces sexually, it is limited by the cycle in which death follows birth. Life begins and ends. The subject cannot escape this destiny; but there is something extra which is produced (and simultaneously lost) when we attempt to signify the life instinct in symbolic terms. That is the libido, an abstraction which denotes an indestructible form of life: life which can only be signified as life itself. Paradoxically, however, the Symbolic order can only become constituted by reference to death, to the death of the thing itself.

Representation implies the death of the thing because the thing can never approach that complete symbol; it is always lacking in comparison. 'It is the libido, *qua* pure life instinct, that is to say, immortal life, or irrepressible life. [...] And it is of this that all the forms of the *objet a* that can be enumerated are the representatives, the equivalents. The *objets a* are merely its representatives, its figures.' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 198).

Žižek and Marie-Hélène Brousse have both read the lamella in light of Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979),<sup>105</sup> thinking of the bizarre life-cycle of the eponymous creature, its metamorphic indestructibility, and the terrifying dimension of its 'presence' in the film. Perhaps it would be more useful to consider the lamella in terms of Miéville's depiction of 'the fauna of mirrors'

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<sup>105</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, 'A Hair of the Dog That Bit You' in *Lacan's Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure and Society*, ed. Mark Bracher et al (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), 46-73 (67), and Marie-Hélène Brousse, 'The Drive (II)' in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Richard Feldstein et al (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1995), 109-117 (113).

in *The Tain*, however, since the text directly engages with the problems of representing the partial object and the 'excess' which characterises the terrifying presence of the lamella without the need to introduce an extra layer of abstraction with the image of the alien creature itself. Here, instead, we see the partial object plainly rendered in spite of the 'scissiparous intervention', the cut, which in the desiring operation has separated it from the body of the subject, where it has become lost to image *in spite* of image: indeed, in spite of the subject. The brilliance of this passage is that it depicts these subjective 'features' at that point, the point of separation, where they become horrific. It renders the impossibility of the partial object precisely by demonstrating the beauty of the object as a 'human feature' and simultaneously as a terrifying 'extra' part once it becomes separated from the body.

In other words, the objects appear to exist at the limit, in Kantian terms, at which the beautiful becomes the sublime. The hands move with grace, they are depicted with delicacy even as they ravenously and impossibly strip a corpse; the eyes are unthreatening in their winking stupidity, like the teeth in their horse-grins, and yet both are essentially all the more disquieting because of that fact; the biceps clenching is an image of physical prowess, but the suggestion that this clenching motion propels the muscle independent of any body introduces an uncanny supernatural element to the description. Each object therefore materialises the terrifying excessive life-force of the lamella in the purely impossible representation of its partiality. The text depicts this excess precisely insofar as it *does not do so*; the excess irrupts in the scission which divides the subject at the level of the locus of desire. Sholl's 'encounter' with the fauna of mirrors, the 'vermin' which is ceaselessly produced by the narcissistic fantasy, demonstrates not simply the failure of the screen,

but point of its very cultural production. It depicts the ubiquity of the screen and the centrality of that space of negotiation in cultural and social life, and demonstrates the fact that the irruption of the Real is the very reason for the form of the object itself. It is pure necessity. The question remains: are we supposed to be more surprised by the incongruity of the presence of the partial objects *in this particular location* than we are by the incongruity, the utter impossibility of their presence *as* supernatural apparitions? The message of the text seems clear to me in this regard. Even in the Tube Station, a building of pure function, the empire of narcissistic fantasy reigns.

The novella concludes with Sholl's encounter with the Fish of the Mirror in the British Museum. Sholl's plan, it is revealed, has all along been to offer the unconditional surrender of the humans to the imagos, a neat reversal of the typical heroic 'final showdown' we might have expected to find. Why does the text conclude thus? Why does Miéville offer no final, unexpected victory from the jaws of defeat? As we have seen, the text engages with the question of the narcissistic constitution of the subject as a method of interrogating the cultural proliferation of the screen. The subjective experience of culture is mediated with a screen relation. By depicting the return of the 'bad' products of a disordered narcissism, the text demonstrates the necessity of the formation of socially-productive narcissistic fantasy. It also raises the possibility that the ubiquity of the screen gives rise to the transgression of the screen; that, by engaging more frequently with the material screen, the cultural condition itself invites those moments in which the screen reveals its own fantasy constitution, reveals its own limits to the subject. It is at this level that we might understand Sholl's final surrender to the Fish of the Mirror. The 'surprise' ending is really no surprise when we consider that the ultimate encounter with the

'screen as limit' is precisely to affirm the subject in relation to the Other. In transgressing the screen, the only possible resolution is its reconstitution. Otherwise, it would not be possible to continue the story; the subject would cease to exist. Society would have no meaning without the symbolic guarantee of the Other. Having travelled across London, through hordes of lethal mirror-creatures, Sholl's only intention is to surrender to the Fish of the Mirror. And what *is* that creature?

The massive room was lit by the moon through the skylight, but that was not how Sholl could see every edge of everything, every curlicue of detail in the chamber. It was all etched in shadow on shadow, and he could see it all, in the black sunlight that poured out of the presence hanging in the room's centre, like a darkling star, invisible but utterly compelling, evading deliberation, not quite seen, insinuating its own parameters, patrolling the moiling cylindrical space with feline, piscine ease. The Tiger. The Fish of the Mirror.

Its vast, unsympathetic attention turned slowly to Sholl. He felt himself becoming more precise as it considered him, more exact.

*(The Tain 290)*

Here we find materialised the inert, enigmatic presence of the Other itself, the Other assuming the transcendent guise as cause or deity, as that to which I literally address my speech and my actions. This is the Other in the heart of the Other London. In the face of the Other one can do nothing

other than ask the terrified question: what do you want from me? 'This is why the Other's question [*la question de l'Autre*] — that comes back to the subject from the place from which he expects an oracular reply— which takes some such form as "*Che vuoi?*", "What do you want?", is the question that best leads the subject to the path of his own desire' (*Écrits* 690). Sholl feels himself 'becoming more precise' as the Fish considers him. This crystallisation of subjectivity under the aegis of the Other is the only response to the chaos of the broken social order of the text. The question of what Sholl wants can only be asked once it is addressed to the Other, precisely because *it is what the Other wants*. What Sholl wants and what the Other wants are already the same thing, which is why Sholl has always known the outcome of his journey — and why it is only revealed to us *at the moment that it is revealed to the Fish*. The Fish cannot be seen and yet it allows 'everything' to be seen in its place. To submit to the impenetrable heart of our desire, we must situate the lack at its heart. This 'lack' characterises the unbearable intensity of the Thing. The appearance of the naked object of desire (the lack itself, the irruption of the Real; a 'darkling star', perhaps) hystericises the subject. Sholl must deliver the message to the Other, 'perform' this surrender for its sake in order to re-situate the heart of his desire; indeed, his desire is the desire of all others (is it any wonder? He is the 'shoal' itself. He manifests the desire of every subject). In this way, Sholl's self-admonition that 'he had decided that he was chosen for something. For this. He granted himself authority to speak for his people. To surrender. Judas-Messiah' (*The Tain* 298-9) is really the only proper response to that breathtaking 'excess' beyond subjectivity which is revealed in the experience of the Other-Thing. Sholl truly is the Judas-Messiah: he must 'betray' his own freedom, which can only exist 'beyond' the possibility of the desire of the Other, precisely in order to situate his own desire.



It is ironic, therefore, that the imago-narrator, speaking for the imagos, declares that the humans cannot experience the 'pain' of reflection:

It is a pain you cannot imagine — very literally, in the most precise way, you cannot know how it is to feel yourself shoved with a mighty and brutal cosmic hand into bloody muscle. The agony of our constrained thoughts, shoehorned into those skulls you carry, stringy tendons tethering our limbs. The excruciation. Shackled in your meat vulgarity.

(*The Tain* 240)

This passage, perhaps more than any other in the text, asserts that central problem of the intersection of the subject and culture which marks the position of the screen. Contrary to the imago-narrator's statement, it describes the very formation of the subject, the distortion which results from the transition of *need* into *demand*: from the drive into desire. In short, it describes the impossible torsion which the speaking subject must undergo in order to *become subject*, caught between *jouissance* of body and the structure of the law, splitting the subject at the 'moment' of conception. The Fish of the Mirror, shining the impossible, negative light of the Other upon the riven subject, is the 'lack' about to be situated once more behind the screen of fantasy. Sholl imagines a future where humanity will '*spread the word that we've lost, and we'll live*' (*The Tain* 299); by spreading the word, the proper circulation of fantasy can begin again. The screen can become reframed: the mirror reformed. So, actually, we *can* know this pain of which the imago speaks; we know it, insofar as we must each experience it as a condition of our

subjectivity. All that remains to be said is that, beyond the screen, this pain will threaten to irrupt once again. The message of *The Tain* is that our narcissism will only return to us if we do not return to it, and ensure that the mirror remains a screen.

## Screening the Void of History:

### Abyssal Experience and the Screen of Fantasy in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*

To him, the painter, this is creation,  
image of our insane presence  
on the surface of the earth [...] <sup>106</sup>

In *Austerlitz*, Jacques Austerlitz — the secret, forgotten, and recovered name of a boy known as Dafydd Elias — searches for the remains of his history and his self. Transported across Europe as very young child in order to escape the German invasion of Czechoslovakia, Austerlitz is raised in Wales by foster parents who erase any record of his identity. The novel follows the unnamed narrator's various meetings with Austerlitz across the span of nearly thirty years, as Austerlitz relates his experiences, in which he both avoids and pursues the marks of his ancestry. Austerlitz, as many critical analyses already demonstrate, is a subject grappling with 'the return of the repressed'. He embodies both a personal and public experience of the Holocaust; his is the traumatic response to the paradigmatic horror of the twentieth century. His subjectivity is shaped by both an existential and historical uncertainty, concerning both his lost origin and, in a representative manner 'the tragedy of the Jews in Europe, and the unending consequences of the Holocaust both for those who escaped death and for the generations after', <sup>107</sup> as Anne Whitehead notes. Many readings of the novel focus on this traumatic heritage as a cipher for a broader cultural

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<sup>106</sup> W.G. Sebald, *After Nature*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2002), 26.

<sup>107</sup> Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004), 118.

condition, whether that condition is located specifically in German or European post-war society, or indeed more broadly in 'modern' Western culture. As Whitehead also says, Sebald 'locates the Holocaust as a symptom of modernity, which is characterised for him by the traumas of exile and displacement. Even if we are not geographically displaced by the circumstances of history and politics, modernity nevertheless displaces our relation to time and to the spaces we inhabit.' (*Trauma Fiction* 138). Richard T. Gray describes Sebald as 'one of the most eloquent recent spokespeople of this modernist sensibility [...] His literary works are not simply seismographic records of these human-induced catastrophes, but also attempts to fashion new representational tools for the purpose of acknowledging and coming to terms with the realities of modern human history'<sup>108</sup>; finally, J.J. Long notes that 'Sebald is interested in the 'archival consciousness' of the modern subject, and he pursues this investigation to its probable extreme in *Austerlitz*'.<sup>109</sup>

It is the form of the archive which, in these readings, lends structure to the textual representation of the congenital cultural form of displacement of which Whitehead speaks. As Derrida says 'The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out of the future'<sup>110</sup>: the archive is marked by the structural displacement of knowledge, indefinitely postponing its own completion by proposing a goal which can never be attained. The archive itself guarantees this impossibility of completion, because as long as there remains an archive, there remains

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<sup>108</sup> Richard T. Gray, 'Writing at the Roche Limit: Order and Entropy in W. G. Sebald's *Die Ringe des Saturn*', *The German Quarterly*, 83: 1 (Winter 2010), 38-57 (38-9).

<sup>109</sup> J.J. Long, *W.G. Sebald - Image, Archive, Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007), 149.

<sup>110</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression', *Diacritics*, 25: 2 (Summer, 1995), 9-63 (45).

an addition to the store which can never be reattained: an 'original' moment which the archival impulse attempts to reconstruct. In this sense, the archive presents itself as a useful metaphor for the process of the (lack of) recovery of a total memory and a total knowledge which Austerlitz undertakes in the text. Austerlitz, as Long suggests, is a subject 'figured in the first instance as an archival lack' (*W.G. Sebald - Image, Archive, Modernity* 152), his origins lost among acts of archival destruction. While Austerlitz dedicates his life to the study of 'the history of architecture and civilization' (*Austerlitz* 170), his intention of producing a final work is repeatedly postponed as his inquiries broaden and he admits ever more material into his archive. There is a seductive reading to be located here, therefore, thinking of Austerlitz's admission that 'I had constantly been preoccupied by that accumulation of knowledge which I had pursued for decades, and which served as a substitute or compensatory memory' (*Austerlitz* 198), which would model Austerlitz's fruitless search for origin upon the form of the archive itself, as a means of acknowledging the text's elliptical encounter with the ultimately untotalisable event of the Holocaust, or even with the whole edifice of Western cultural Modernity. But this reading, in which Austerlitz is conceived as a subject produced at the point of an interleaving of memory and knowledge which occludes the site of an 'objective' history, risks overdetermining the text's figuration of history itself: rather than presenting a conception of history awaiting its own reformation in the archive, in other words a history which will justify the personal search for a term to replace the compensatory memory sought by Austerlitz, we might rather say that *Austerlitz* ultimately seeks to present the futility of this search.

Such a hypothesis appears justified when we consider the manner in which the text materialises what we will call the

abyssal experience of history. What *Austerlitz* does is present the very condition of desire, as figured by Lacan: desire as impossibility itself. What this means is that the only strategy available to Austerlitz in order to contend with the terrible 'vortex' of history is the one in which he might *screen* it from view: by doing so, however, he orients his desire obliquely, his aim 'askew' as such. As Žižek says,

The fundamental point of psychoanalysis is that desire is not something given in advance, but something that has to be constructed — and it is precisely the role of fantasy to give the coordinates of the subject's desire, to specify its object, to locate the position the subject assumes in it.

(*Looking Awry* 6)

Andreas Huyssen, who has remarked that, in Sebald, it is 'as if history itself had been bombed into oblivion',<sup>111</sup> notes in his analysis of *The Air War and Literature* that Sebald 'gives us not so much an analysis as a reinscription of the trauma by means of quotation' (*Present Pasts* 156): Huyssen's hypothesis 'is that at its deepest level the German discourse of turning points from 1945 on can be read as a symptom of [...] multilayered traumatic experiences, which always leave something unresolved and in need of further articulation' (*Present Pasts* 146). While Huyssen's argument might at first appear to simply reframe a quite standard postmodernist trope of irresolution and deferral of the 'structural encounter', his point about Sebald's treatment of history also demonstrates the possibility of reading Sebald as an experience of trauma which implicitly proposes the

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<sup>111</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), 155.

inability of a historical 'resolution' of the traumatic cause itself — a reading which seems to me particularly appropriate for *Austerlitz*. Moreover, it directs us towards a realisation that the traumatic *structure* itself is not based on an historical cause as such. This kind of analysis is not simply ahistorical. Amir Eshel hints at this kind of reading of Sebald, too:

In *Austerlitz*, Sebald's reflexive, rather than depressive, melancholy, as this is mirrored in his fascination with clocks, diaries, and ruins, results in a unique interweaving of time and narrative in three varied, yet intertwined ways: a multifocal evocation of the recent German past, an allegorical-critical account of modernity, and, finally, a latent order of signification in which not the historical or biographical, but the effects of figuration themselves constitute the referent.<sup>112</sup>

For Eshel, Sebald endeavours to produce 'a poetics that rather than depicting and commenting on the historical event in time, constitutes an event, becomes the writing of a different, a literary time' ('Against the Power of Time' 74), and while this may signal, once again, the trap of an inescapable postmodernist cycle of irresolution, it also points us towards the necessity of studying more intently the particular order of *signification* in which *Austerlitz* is constituted.

My claim, in this chapter, is that these readings misrepresent the very nature of trauma in *Austerlitz*, owing to a failure to understand its *structure* and its relation to desire. In Lacan we find this structure elucidated in the registers of the subjective experience: Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. The

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<sup>112</sup> Amir Eshel, 'Against the Power of Time: The Poetics of Suspension in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*', *New German Critique*, 88 — Contemporary German Literature (Winter, 2003), 71-96 (73).

subject's relation to these registers is constitutive, and their 'interplay' defines every point of human experience as such. Two basic principles of Lacan's teaching are necessary for us to understand in order to approach the reading of *Austerlitz* properly. Firstly, we must understand that the Real is not 'reality': instead, it is that which we must exclude in order to constitute ourselves as subjects. For Lacan, the encounter with the Real is the underlying basis for the experience of trauma, because it disrupts the Symbolic realm<sup>113</sup>; simultaneously, the Real is that which sets desire in motion, as that 'something beyond' our subjective experience. Secondly, it is important to understand that, in Lacan, fantasy is not simply to be understood in its most common sense, referring to 'a fantastic wish' to be granted something which is 'realistically' unattainable. Instead, fantasy is to be conceived as the very fabric of what we call 'reality'; our fantasy works to screen that black hole of the Real which forever threatens our subjective consistency. Considering *Austerlitz* in light of this knowledge will enable us to attempt to fill a certain gap present in critical literature surrounding the novel. By analysing the method by which the experience of trauma constitutes Austerlitz's subjectivity, we can demonstrate the fact that trauma in Lacan is an insistent dimension which both threatens to disrupt the subject's consistency (which we find represented in the novel in the many statements by Austerlitz that he cannot conceive of his own existence, that he understands no meaning in his behaviour) *and* orients the subject's desire. This orientation is possible because Lacan shows us how desire exists 'beyond' the subject and achieves consistency according to that fantasy which is constructed by each subject.

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<sup>113</sup> In other words: that realm which, it is supposed by the subject, will have eternally foreclosed access to the Real.



Reframing the terms of the critical literature concerning *Austerlitz* is not the goal of this chapter, however. Instead, this focus on desire demonstrates, first of all, the need to place the screen at the centre of any possible investigation of *Austerlitz*, because it is the screen as form which allows the subject's desire to appear. In Lacan, the screen is that which intervenes, as we have seen, before the subject's understanding; it is that which allows desire to take form in *objet a*. It is for this reason, I suggest, that the screen as an object fascinates Austerlitz, and why he pursues screen-objects (photographs, pictures, plans) throughout the text: it is precisely because these kinds of screens reproduce the work of the very screen of fantasy which allows our desire to become apparent. For Austerlitz, a subject almost constantly on the verge of becoming swallowed by the traumatic *jouissance* of the Real, the battle to maintain the screen of fantasy is his primary concern throughout the text. It is this screen which allows him to maintain subjective consistency in the face of the traumatic Real.

How does this process play out in the text? What we witness in *Austerlitz* is nothing other than the desire of the subject. Austerlitz's desire, I contend, is to search for the remains of his past; but it is *not* to discover those remains. I suggest that 'history' is conceived in *Austerlitz* as an abyssal space of total *jouissance* — in other words a space of 'enjoyment' in which enjoyment is not simply something minimally pleasurable but instead is something overwhelming in its intensity. Austerlitz's ultimate drive (which is distinct from desire because it is an effect of the Real and not of the Symbolic system) is the total 'immersion' of his subject in the revelatory 'truth' of history; it is only this impossible demand which can reunite him with his lost past, not simply with his parents, but with everything which potentially belonged to him in a future where he grew up in Czechoslovakia as

'Jacques Austerlitz'. It therefore maps the space of a *potential* future, an unrealised life in which he must also remain deprived of his true history. But this total immersion can only come at the price of his subjective consistency. In other words, he will no longer enjoy access to the Symbolic terms of meaning which ground social experience. That is why it is Austerlitz's desire which allows us to understand the trauma of his loss. It is his desire which, rather than attempting to fulfil that loss, only screens the fact that it can never be satisfied. Austerlitz, therefore, is an exemplary subject of contemporary literature: one who understands the screen, and demonstrates exactly why, culturally, we pursue it in all forms.

This chapter is divided into five main sections. In the first section, I will investigate the manner in which Lacan conceives the workings of trauma and its effects upon the subject and desire ('the desire of the subject'). In these workings, we see that the subjective relationship with *objet a* is that which binds the 'proper' experience of the Real to the Symbolic and is constituted by (as it simultaneously constitutes) the screen of fantasy. A consequence of this reading is that we can locate the 'ethical imperative' of the text: understanding that trauma in Sebald is Real, and, consequently, symbolically unrepresentable, enables us to explain the 'non-appearance' of the Holocaust in the text itself, which is a point of criticism from writers such as Whitehead.

Following this, in the second part, I will read the appearance of *objet a* as gaze in *Austerlitz* by paying close attention to photographs which appear in the text. I will also demonstrate how Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, his work which is often mentioned in readings of photography in *Austerlitz*, coincides with Lacan's theory of the scopic drive in its reading of the

subjective effects of photography. The point here is not to produce a 'psychoanalytic interpretation of art' ('Grimaces of the Real' 51), as Žižek calls it, which overturns 'competing' analyses. By reading 'after the screen', so to speak (in other words, after we understand the 'position' of the screen at the heart of Austerlitz's desire and the workings of his desire) we can identify a gap within the present critical literature of the novel which invites this reappraisal.

The third section of the chapter continues this reading of the gaze in *Austerlitz*, and considers its place in Sebald's work more generally by reading Sebald's long prose poem *After Nature* alongside the main text. The focus here shifts from photographs alone, and begins to consider the generative and protective function of the continuum of screen-objects in Sebald's work.

The fourth and fifth sections of the chapter comprise an extended discussion of the manner in which the text presents the effects of Lacanian 'subjective destitution' in the episode of Austerlitz's nervous breakdown, which is embodied in an important scene set in Liverpool Street Station. I suggest that this episode demonstrates the conceptual distinction between the 'Real objects' which Lacan describes as materialising the modalities of desire. The experience of the abyss — that final void which threatens to reduce Austerlitz to a minimally consistent subject totally 'adrift' in society — in *Austerlitz* is mitigated by the object of exchange (*objet a*), the screen which materialises the fantasy for Austerlitz of an eternal search for meaning, and by contrast is materialised, made overbearingly 'present', by the Imaginary object (*phi*) which takes the form, for Austerlitz, of the building, the building-as-form itself.

The goal here is not simply to reappraise the novel in light of Lacan; nor indeed is it to illuminate Lacan by 'explaining' him with reference to the text; instead, the idea is that *both* the novel and Lacan can be productively read with each other because they enable us to engage in the 're-theorisation' of the subjective and cultural relationship to the screen. At each point in the chapter, we should understand the work of the screen for Austerlitz: a negotiation of space *before* any subjective negotiation takes place, it is an object which allows desire to circulate.

### I. 'Insistent' Trauma in the Archive

Approaching the text with an understanding of the production of desire according to Lacan, we can begin to rethink the 'scene of trauma' as it is figured by certain critical analyses. Long reads the passage in which Austerlitz refers to the 'agency greater than or superior to my own capacity for thought' (*Austerlitz* 60), as an example of the repression of trauma in its Freudian sense:

The passage asks to be read in terms of a Freudian pattern of repression and return [...] Furthermore, the notion of a power that functions inside Austerlitz's psyche without his participation or explicit allegiance bears more than a passing resemblance to the Freudian censor, which regulates the traffic of psychical content between the unconscious and conscious. [...] The suggestion that Austerlitz is a novel that dramatises the return of the repressed, however, implies that the past will be brought to light from Austerlitz's unconscious. In other words, traces of the

past have been deposited somewhere within the psyche and they can, under propitious circumstances, be recuperated.

(*W.G. Sebald* 156)

In Freud, the fantasy of the subject is an expression of a repressed wish, the imaginary staging of the fulfilment of an unconscious desire. What Long does not mention is that, in the case of traumatic neurosis, the return of this object does not fulfil the subject's desire, because the intent of that desire is instead to *repeat* the initial loss as the object is sent away, to be reclaimed once more. This repetition contravenes the pleasure principle. Freud exemplifies this model with his explanation of the *fort-da* game, in which he observed his grandson repeatedly throwing and reclaiming a spool attached to a string whenever the child's mother left her son alone for a time: the boy would exclaim *fort* ('gone') and *da* ('there') as the spool disappeared and returned. For Freud, this game signals the child's renunciation of the drive in order to endure the departure of the mother. What it also demonstrates is that the 'agency' which functions in Austerlitz's psyche, 'directing' his actions, is more accurately depicted as a 'desire', which the superego aims to satisfy in the appeal to what Lacan calls the Other, than it is in terms of the Freudian censor. Austerlitz explicitly states so in the text, in fact, when he calls this agency a 'compulsion':

I have always resisted the power of time out of some internal compulsion which I myself have never understood, keeping myself apart from so-called current events in the hope, as I now think, said Austerlitz, that time will not pass away, has not passed away, that I can turn back and go behind it [...]

(Austerlitz 144)

So, while Long suggests that:

The entire enterprise of interpreting dreams, Freudian slips, hysterical symptoms and so on, was to reconstruct the truth that was concealed by the insidious ruses of the censor and the conscious mind. [...] The conspicuous allusions to both writers [Freud and Proust] in Austerlitz, furthermore, seem governed by precisely the same desire for the retrieval of an authentic self.

(W.G. Sebald 157)

To this suggestion we might counter, thinking of Lacan, that *Austerlitz* seems to express, rather, the desire for the uncovering of an inauthentic self; or, in other words, the revelation that nothing compensates for the 'lack' which constitutes a subject, instead merely screening this lack for the subject via the production of fantasy, a fantasy which locates the desire of the subject outside of itself and towards which it ceaselessly proceeds. It is in this screening fantasy that we grasp the importance of the screen as a format, because it designates both the Imaginary object pursued by Austerlitz himself and the immaterial screen which 'screens the face of the Real' from the subject. For Austerlitz, it is the very possibility of 'uncovering' which prompts his repetitious behaviour. As Žižek notes, *objet a* is

[...] a quite ordinary, everyday object that, as soon as it is "elevated to the status of the Thing," starts to function as a kind of screen,

an empty space on which the subject projects the fantasies that support his desire, a surplus of the real that propels us to narrate again and again our first traumatic encounters with jouissance.

(*Looking Awry* 133)

In Lacan, anxiety is a constitutive dimension of the subject, the result of the infant's non-consensual acceptance of the Symbolic realm. The entry into the Symbolic realm produces a remainder, *objet a*, which is the very mark of an irreducible lack which cannot ever be filled since it is the mark, or rather, the stain, of the very process by which the subject becomes a subject. Anxiety, properly defined, is the result of the subject's overproximity to *objet a* because *objet a* is that which gestures towards the Real: 'a privileged object, which has emerged from some primal separation, from some self-mutilation induced by the very approach of the real' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 83), it is a remainder of the Real, insofar as it reminds us that the Real cannot ever be glimpsed, nor grasped, nor returned to. That which is lost by the subject is the very thing that was 'before' the subject: *objet a* is part of this, part of the Real, and therefore part of nothing which can be symbolised, other than as something which appears only at the moment in which it is lost.

It is the subjective relation to *objet a*, which provokes the experience of anxiety, which explains why the archive figures so prominently in the text. The only result of the subject's attempt to re-find *objet a* is to lose it a little more. In this way, the importance of the archive in *Austerlitz* is revealed: not as pertaining to memory, in relation to which the archive functions purely as a figure of loss, the loss of something

which was there and is now gone, like Austerlitz's Czech, which disappears when he leaves the country and reappears once he tracks down his childhood nanny, Vera; nor indeed pertaining to history, in relation to which the archive functions as a figure of another sort of loss, of something which was never there except as concept, in other words a lack, for example in the incomplete record which pointedly reappears in every archive in the text and is not necessarily a loss of information but a failure of the form of the archive as defined by Derrida. Instead, the importance of the archive is in the way that it provides the outlet by which Austerlitz might enact his own desire of re-finding that which he has lost *in the act of discovering its character of 'lostness'*. In other words, this is the loss which only appears as even more so every time that it is rediscovered. It is a loss of that which was never there, and never not there, and is figured in *objet a*. This is the reason that Austerlitz's admission of his desire to construct a substitutionary memory is so vitally important to our understanding of the text. It is because Austerlitz is attempting to track down a *screen* with which to negotiate his constant proximity to the object-cause of his desire: that very object, which he supposes has been separated from his self, *is* his own lostness, the very concept of such a thing as 'lostness' itself. He has lost that thing which allows him *to be lost*, which allows him to accept (via the screen) the scission which marks every subject's moment of constitution. Because of this, he cannot fail to experience the anxiety which is only induced by proximity to *objet a*.

Let us consider Lacan's thought on the 'insistent' nature of trauma and its connection to the Real:

The function of the *tuché*, of the real as encounter — the encounter in so far as it may be missed, in so far as it is essentially the



missed encounter — first presented itself in the history of psychoanalysis in a form that was in itself already enough to arouse our attention, that of the trauma.

Is it not remarkable that [...] the real should have presented itself in the form of that which is *unassimilable* in it — in the form of the trauma, determining all that follows, and imposing on it an apparently accidental origin? [...]

In effect, the trauma is conceived as having necessarily been marked by the subjectifying homeostasis that orientates the whole functioning defined by the pleasure principle. Our experience then presents us with a problem, which derives from the fact that, at the very heart of the primary processes, we see preserved the insistence of the trauma in making us aware of its existence. The trauma reappears, in effect, frequently unveiled. How can the dream, the bearer of the subject's desire, produce that which makes the trauma emerge repeatedly — if not its very face, at least the screen that shows us that it is still there behind?

*(The Four Fundamental Concepts of  
Psychoanalysis 55)*

The question which Lacan poses here is not simply 'how is it that the Real appears to enter our experience as trauma?' Instead what he really asks is 'why does our desire lead us to that which we experience as traumatic?' With this passage, I

claim that Lacan formulates for us exactly the dimension which is missing in other readings of *Austerlitz*: namely, the fact that that which Austerlitz encounters in the text is *not* simply 'the return of the repressed' but instead is nothing other than the fantasy constructed to *avoid* the Real character of the trauma itself. It also explains the importance of the figure of the screen in the novel, and why we should interrogate it: Austerlitz's dedication to archival research, in his professional and personal life and, indeed, as a model of compensatory memory which defines his self identity, is really an encounter with the structural screen of fantasy, that which, to paraphrase Lacan, 'screens the face of Real'. This, I suggest, leads Austerlitz to seek out and encounter screens throughout the text in a repetitious act which appears to attempt to fulfil his desire: the desire not simply for knowledge of his parents or history, but the desire to continue to search for a total personal 'history'.

What Austerlitz appears to contend with is the result of this desire: a subjectivity which is not 'whole', which in Lacanian terms is 'barred'. It is to this apparent 'lack' that Whitehead refers when she says that 'modernity displaces our relation to time and to the spaces we inhabit', and there is no clearer example of the fact that Austerlitz is aware of it than the moment in which he declares that 'As far back as I can remember [...] I have always felt as if I had no place in reality, as if I were not there at all' (*Austerlitz* 261). Therefore, while Long suggests that the conversation between Lemoine and Austerlitz 'about the dissolution, in line with the inexorable spread of processed data, of our capacity to remember' (*Austerlitz* 398) is 'merely a nostalgic postlude to what the text has already demonstrated: the subject of modernity is ineluctably dependent on external mnemotechnical prostheses' (*W.G. Sebald* 163), we can suggest the revision that the dysfunction of the subject of

modernity's memory is indeed, most properly, a function of the desire to make present a 'whole' self via the continuous negotiation of the material screen, the function of which recalls the screen of fantasy itself. As Žižek notes in his commentary of the above passage from Lacan (which includes a reading by Lacan of the episode of the man whose dream is interrupted by the smell of smoke and the vision of his recently deceased son, from Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*) 'it was not the intrusion from external reality that awakened the unfortunate father, but the unbearably traumatic character of what he encountered in the dream' (*How to Read Lacan* 58). This is why Lacan says that

The place of the real, which stretches from the trauma to the phantasy — in so far as the phantasy is never anything more than the screen that conceals something quite primary, something determinant in the function of repetition — this is what we must now examine. [...] The real may be represented by the accident, the noise, the small element of reality, which is evidence that we are not dreaming.

(*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 60)

In other words, there is no 'escape' from the fantasy which attempts to screen the face of the traumatic Real from our view. That which is properly traumatic, which issues forth from the Real, can never itself be 'made' Symbolic: it only disturbs the subjective experience of the Symbolic and Imaginary realms and 'insists' in them in a variety of ways. The total experience of the Real, which we witness in

Austerlitz's ordeal in Liverpool Street Station, precedes the dissolution of the subject, since the subject is constituted by the very act of excluding or 'leaving behind' what it was 'before' it became subject. What this demonstrates is that the notion of the return to the present of an unbearable trauma is overstated by many readings of *Austerlitz*. The corresponding outcome of this fact is that the notion of a subjective trajectory 'beyond' the traumatic experience towards an authentic expression of self is also overstated. The aim of psychoanalysis, to paraphrase Lacan, is to ensure that one does not give ground relative to one's desire: the psychoanalyst is the one 'to whom is entrusted the process of a radical ethical conversion, the one that introduces the subject to the order of desire' (*Lacan* 86). The notion of approaching a subjective 'truth' as a result of analysis is an outcome towards which even Freud remains sceptical, and a concept with which he wrestles in 'Analysis terminable and interminable'. Lacan is clearer on the subject: 'The mirage of truth, from which only lies can be expected [...], has no other term than the satisfaction that marks the end of the analysis. [...] the main aim of analysis is to give this urgently needed satisfaction' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* viii-ix). The point is that *Austerlitz* actually conducts a far more sophisticated exploration of the subject than that of simply the uncovering of, and reorientation of the subject towards, 'the authentic self'. According to Long,

The way in which the terms 'falsche Welt' and 'falsches Leben' are used in *Austerlitz* [...] ostensibly assumes that the one can find one's way back to a life and a world that are not 'falsch', that inauthenticity is produced by a specific historical or personal caesura

which, once identified, can be overcome in a return to the *status quo ante*.

(W.G. Sebald 158)

Whitehead suggests that Sebald does not even approach this return to an authentic, instead failing to offer any way for the subject to overcome his or her trauma. Both readings fail to account for the possibility of Austerlitz's implicit desire: what he wants is *not* to find his parents. Instead, Austerlitz's desire is to remain seeking them. It is only in this way that he can 'overcome' his trauma: in other words, by properly screening it, and orienting its object with the production of his fantasy.

This reading, it must be stated, does not minimise the 'ethical impact' of the text or indeed mask the severity of the Holocaust as event as presented by the text. And it should not be taken to suggest that the proper way to approach the event of the Holocaust itself is to obviate or occlude it. While Mark M. Anderson claims that the novel 'spends much of its energy in avoiding direct confrontation with the Holocaust by lingering on collateral instances of human folly and cruelty'<sup>114</sup>, it is rather the case that the direct confrontation with the Holocaust *is itself impossible*. The traces of the Real which insist in the subject's experience of the traumatic event can never be encountered by the subject as such; for Lacan the Real is no substantial thing in itself. Instead, the subject 'approaches' the Real but finds the traumatic event is subsumed by the Symbolic network and made 'comprehensible' through the disruption of the Symbolic mode. While Anderson refers to Richard Eder's phrase,

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<sup>114</sup> Mark M. Anderson, 'The Edge of Darkness: On W. G. Sebald', *October*, 106 (Autumn, 2003), 102-121 (105).

'Holocaust-in-absence'<sup>115</sup>, to suggest an event which is experienced analogically, it is rather that the episodes which recall the worst horrors of the Holocaust in the novel (the sediment of white powder settling around Gwendolyn's room, the 'arsenical horror' (*Austerlitz* 87) of the chimney in the manse, the image of the Israelites' camp in the desert of Sinai in which Austerlitz identifies his 'proper place [...] among the tiny figures populating the camp' (*Austerlitz* 77)) are themselves reminded to us, made significant and comprehensible, by the oversaturated presence of the Holocaust itself. It is not facetious to claim that it is the Holocaust itself which overbears upon these episodes, nor is it intended to minimise the event itself; it is instead crucial to our understanding of the anxiety which marks Austerlitz's response to his own trauma that we realise that, in the text, the Holocaust functions as an analogy for these events themselves, the significance of which demonstrates the torsive force enacted upon the Symbolic network through the trace of the Real. This is not to suggest that any single image of horror associated with the Holocaust, for example of smoke billowing from smokestacks of concentration camp crematoria, can be recalled in order to render the banal image of smoke emitting from the manse's chimney in Bala more comprehensible. Instead what it means is that the terrible power of that event is only able to be expressed by Austerlitz once he possesses the symbolic 'vocabulary' with which to do so. The chimney in the manse does not illuminate a hidden or avoided traumatic core; rather the insistent trauma itself invests the banal image with a symbolic meaning, indicating the threatened dissolution of the subject's consistency upon the approach towards the Real object of the event. That is why Austerlitz continually experiences reality as if he 'were not there at all' (*Austerlitz* 261): he

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<sup>115</sup> Richard Eder, 'Austerlitz': Excavating a Life', <<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/28/books/review/28EDERLT.html>> accessed 25/05/15.

repeatedly finds himself teetering on the edge of a Symbolic experience which is 'primed' to resuscitate and raise the insistent trauma to a level above his screen of fantasy. We should remind ourselves, as Žižek says, that 'anxiety in its strict Lacanian sense [is] the effect that registers the subject's panic reaction to the over proximity of the object-cause of desire' ('Grimaces of the Real' 52). This fact, therefore, strengthens the claim that the text maintains an ethical core, because it explains why the trauma itself *cannot be represented*. Furthermore, it answers Whitehead's broader criticism that Sebald's novels 'respond to trauma by evoking its disorientation and its symptomatic dimensions at a stylistic level, but they do not offer any way of coming to terms with the traumatic experiences which they represent' (*Trauma Fiction* 138). What the text really demonstrates is the desperate flight of the subject from one fantasy to the next, or rather, from the fantasy *back to that same fantasy*: to the fantasy which envelops, as screen, the Real which itself envelops the traumatic core of the event, and assumes the form of a different object once more. We might recall Bruce Fink here: 'Desire is an end in itself: it seeks only more desire.'<sup>116</sup> To paraphrase Žižek, Austerlitz, therefore, is the one who wakes up so that he might continue dreaming. Like the father dreaming of his lost son, Austerlitz awakens 'into reality in order to avoid the Real' (*How to Read Lacan* 58).

The reappearance of the 'small element of reality' in the dream, mentioned above by Lacan, emphasises the method by which *objet a* adjusts to the 'gap' of the subject. It also explains why Lacan describes the Real as presenting itself 'in the form of that which is *unassimilable* in it'. The 'form' of *objet a* is determined by the subject, by the gap between the

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<sup>116</sup> Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 26.

'symbolic subject' — the subject of the signifier — and 'authentic core' of real existence (an authenticity which is only experienced as such *by* the subject, only after the fact of 'losing' that authenticity which allows subjectivity to appear: in other words, it is not 'authentic' at all). *Objet a* fits itself into this gap for a subject but tends between the Symbolic and the Real, vanishing once the subject approaches it. The curious fact of the 'appearance' of this object is that (in the case of the dream above) the small element of reality is also something alien, something alien to the fantasy itself; it 'stands out', is the thing which we suppose is alien to us, and towards which, for that very reason, we are drawn. It is important for this reason to remind ourselves that Derrida's investigation in 'Archive Fever' analyses Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva*, which so fascinated Freud in turn, because it demonstrates that the appearance of that 'something which stands out' is in fact a common feature of the screens which are collected within an archive. Noting the protagonist Hanold's desire, Derrida says:

He dreams of bringing back to life. He dreams rather of reliving. But of reliving the other. Of reliving the singular pressure or impression which Gradiva's step [pas], the step itself, the step of Gradiva herself, that very day, at that time, on that date, in what was inimitable about it, must have left in the ashes. He dreams this irreplaceable place, the very ashes, where the singular imprint, like a signature, barely distinguishes itself from the impression.

('Archive Fever' 61)



Hanold is a young archeologist whose desire is awoken by the bas-relief of a young woman which he encounters in a museum in Rome. He fixates upon what he imagines of her presence in the moment of a step, desiring her return, and eventually dreaming a meeting between the two of them in the ashes of Pompeii. For Derrida this demonstrates the archival desire to unite the event and the mark, to return to the singularity 'of the pressure and its trace in the unique instant where they are not yet distinguished the one from the other, forming in an instant a single body of Gradiva's step, of her gait, of her pace' ('Archive Fever' 62). We can see that there is a correspondence between Hanold and Austerlitz in their relationship to the archival object, the screen, and to that instigation of desire which is located for each upon (and beyond) that surface. (We must remember that desire in the scopopic field is the gaze, an object beyond the grasp of the subject which nonetheless appears to him or her, but mediated through the form of the screen.) For Hanold, the 'something' about Gradiva is found both upon the surface of the bas-relief (in the representation of her step) and beyond (in the presence which animates the 'original' step); for Austerlitz, however, the experience differs. If we take as an example the photograph which depicts a man and woman on a theatre stage complete with a painted wilderness backdrop, mistakenly identified by Vera as Austerlitz's parents, we can see that the point to which Austerlitz and Vera's eyes are drawn is not apparently located in either of the 'bodies' themselves but instead in the suggestion of a disastrous avalanche in the mountains 'above', the arrival of which threatens to consume those bodies: Vera says that

I sensed in me the moment of terror in which the narrow bridge gives way under the sleepwalker's foot, and imagined that, high in the rocks above, an avalanche was already

breaking loose, about to sweep the poor folk who had lost their way (for what else would have brought them to these desolate surroundings?) down into the depths the next moment.

(*Austerlitz* 257-8)

Then: 'Minutes went by, said Austerlitz, in which I too thought I saw the cloud of snow crashing into the valley, before I heard Vera again, speaking of the mysterious quality peculiar to such photographs when they surface from oblivion' (*Austerlitz* 258). For Austerlitz (and Vera), therefore, the alien thing in this photograph does, in fact, encompass the anonymous bodies of his parents' doubles. But it can only be glimpsed obliquely. It is the experience of oblivion, located beyond the subject but which nevertheless implicates the subject itself. Indeed, the terror is initially sensed by Vera within herself, even though she does not imagine herself succumbing to it at any moment. In other words, while Hanold is obsessed with Gradiva's step as desire for reunion of body and trace, Austerlitz is magnetically drawn to his false parents' 'possession' of that absence which is conveyed by their mute endurance of the unknown itself, in which they stand apparently engulfed (from the perspective of the photograph) by their fate in that terrible wilderness and simultaneously adrift on the mere corner of a stage. The parenthetical interjection ('for what else would have brought them to these desolate surroundings?') does not appear, therefore, to originate with Vera, but instead with Austerlitz himself, since the question actually invites an answer which is at odds with Vera's supposition that the two figures are simply lost. The question that he is asking, like Lacan, is 'what would bring them to this experience of oblivion in spite of themselves?' The answer, for Austerlitz, lies in the very

form of the object which 'surfaces' from oblivion itself. The photograph screens for him the traces of that Real oblivion which is too unbearable to contemplate, even at the moment that it appears to present the full traumatic impact of the event itself. The two figures, like Austerlitz himself, are *anything but* lost: rather, they remain caught in the full pursuit of desire.

## II. Nostalgic Gazes: Photographic and Archival Screens in *Austerlitz*

That avalanche, forming unseen, high in unreal mountains, and above false parents, anonymous subjects, in a sense exemplifies Sebald's much-discussed use of photographs in his novels, because it demonstrates the way which the eruptive gaze is repeatedly screened in the interaction between the text and the archival, photographic 'remnant'. Stefanie Harris says that Sebald invites us

to look beyond the simple reading of these photographs as merely enhancing the non-fictional elements of the text and to ask how they might function with and against the language of the text itself in order to communicate a particular relationship to the past.<sup>117</sup>

Harris, along with Caroline Duttlinger in 'Traumatic Photographs: Remembrance and the Technical Media in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*', suggests a Barthesian reading of these photographs, noting that their inclusion in the

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<sup>117</sup> Stefanie Harris, 'The Return of the Dead: Memory and Photography in W.G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten*', *The German Quarterly*, 74:4 — Sites of Memory (Autumn, 2001), 379-391 (380).

intermedial text of the novel enacts, precisely *because* of their particularity, the simultaneous absence and appearance of the subjects themselves; the photographs as visual texts therefore work alongside the written text in order to enact the traumatic loss of memory and history which inflicts the subject. Anne Fuchs follows Harris and Duttlinger in suggesting that more nuanced critical readings of Sebald's use of photography in his novels must demonstrate 'that Sebald employs the text-image relationship to disturb the binary opposition between life and death, remembering and forgetting, authenticity and fiction, or absence and presence',<sup>118</sup> but notes that the theorisation of photography and fine art in Sebald should not be conflated: for Fuchs, reproductions of fine art in Sebald's early work function in opposition to photographs in his later work. Nevertheless, in the case of *Austerlitz*, at least, Harris and Duttlinger's readings echo certain portions of Siegfried Kracauer and Roland Barthes' theories of photography, in the sense that they explore the relationship of the photographic object to its 'objective' and historical referent.

Kracauer notes in 'Photography' that

the photographic image [...] conjures up anew a disintegrated unity. This ghostlike reality is *unredeemed*. It consists of elements in space whose configuration is so far from necessary that one could just as well imagine a different organization of these elements. Those things once clung to us like our skin [...] We are

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<sup>118</sup> Anne Fuchs, 'W. G. Sebald's Painters: The Function of Fine Art in His Prose Works', *The Modern Language Review*, 101: 1 (Jan., 2006), 167-183 (168).

contained in nothing and photography  
assembles fragments around a nothing.<sup>119</sup>

For Kracauer, photography interrupts the experience of memory and history by presenting a 'spatial continuum' ('Photography' 425) with no substantive value. In other words, it makes apparent the image by extricating it from the event, preserving the spatial rendering of the moment itself. Barthes, meanwhile, appears to argue the opposite position. In *Camera Lucida*, the photograph makes present, for the subject, some portion of the referent itself: 'I perceive the referent (here, the photograph really transcends itself: is this not the sole proof of its art? To annihilate itself as *medium*, to be no longer a sign but the thing itself?)'.<sup>120</sup> As Jennifer Friedlander has noted, however, Barthes' goal is not simply 'to signal the "realist" concern with the possibility of a direct, unmediated relationship with things in the world'<sup>121</sup> but instead to contend with, in Freudian terms, the 'psychical reality' which issues from the image. Barthes, in his development of the concepts of the *studium* and *punctum*, actually seeks to explore something akin to the Lacanian gaze, in the sense that he introduces an element (*punctum*) which erupts from the unary field (*studium*) of the photograph, disrupting its consistency for the subject. Barthes, in fact, is very clear in linking his *punctum* with the external object of the Lacanian gaze:

In the Photograph, the event is never  
transcended for the sake of something else:  
the Photograph always leads the corpus I

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<sup>119</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, 'Photography', trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *Critical Inquiry*, 19: 3 (Spring, 1993), 421-436 (431).

<sup>120</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Fontana, 1984), 45.

<sup>121</sup> Jennifer Friedlander, *Feminine Look: Sexuation, Spectatorship, Subversion* (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), 11.

need back to the body I see; it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the *This* (this photograph, and not Photography), in short, what Lacan calls the *Tuchè*, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real, in its indefatigable expression.

(*Camera Lucida* 4)

The subject encounters that which it must, that which it *desires*, in the act of viewing the photograph. In this way, Barthes is very clearly linking the play of desire in the scopic field, which Lacan illustrates in his analysis of the painting, to the photograph. 'Very often the *Punctum* is a "detail," *i.e.*, a partial object. Hence, to give examples of *punctum* is, in a certain fashion, to *give myself up*' (*Camera Lucida* 43). In other words, Barthes understands that describing the *punctum* is to describe the approach towards (or more properly, the approach *of*) his very desire. This fact is illustrated quite clearly when we consider that *Camera Lucida's* purpose, for Barthes, is to both conceive 'a History of Looking' (*Camera Lucida* 12), and to contend with the trauma of his mother's death. '*Punctum*,' as Luiza Nader and others have noted, shares a common etymological root with 'trauma'.<sup>122</sup>

Both Kracauer and Barthes emphasise, in separate senses, the 'excess' experienced by the subject while viewing the photographic representation itself: in other words, the 'something which stands out' which marks the subjective engagement with the form of the screen. The problem for

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<sup>122</sup> Luiza Nader, 'Migratory subjects: Memory work in Krzysztof Wodiczko's projections and instruments' in *Memory and Migration: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Memory Studies*, eds. Julia Creet and Andreas Kitzmann (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 249-63 (254).

both is how to define an excess which appears to 'exist' in opposition to the 'moment' itself. Both settle upon highlighting the connection of the photograph to a 'pastness' or ghostliness which expresses something which is not simply referential. For Kracauer this ghostliness is the result of a disjunction of the forms of photography and memory: while photography presents the spatial continuum, it does not register the value of its 'contents'. As the spatial continuum described by the photograph becomes less contemporary, recedes further into the past from the point of view (and the point of apparent 'presence') of the subject, 'its semiotic value decreases'. This, of course, is a value which can only be determined subjectively, in terms of the photograph's relevance for any one subject, for any particular time. As Kracauer says

The old photograph has been emptied of the life whose physical presence overlay its merely spatial configuration. In inverse proportion to photographs, memory-images enlarge themselves into monograms of the remembered life. The photograph is the sediment that has settled from the monogram, and from year to year its semiotic value decreases. The truth content of the original is left behind in its history; the photograph captures only the residuum that history has discharged.

('Photography' 429)

Meanwhile, Barthes contends that

[...] the person or thing photographed is the target, the referent, a kind of little simulacrum,

any *eidolon* emitted by the object, which I should like to call the *Spectrum* of the Photograph, because the word retains, through its root, a relation to "spectacle" and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead.

(*Camera Lucida* 9)

The 'return of the dead' is literally 'played out' in the photograph, in the same way that, according to Barthes, the earliest forms of theatre represented otherness:

[...] the first actors separated themselves from the community by playing the role of the Dead: to make oneself up was to designate oneself as a body simultaneously living and dead [...] Now it is this same relation which I find in the Photograph; however "lifelike" we strive to make it [...], Photography is a kind of primitive theater, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead.

(*Camera Lucida* 32)

To render each of these in strictly Lacanian terms: Kracauer is describing the *Symbolic* field of the photograph, while what Barthes here contends with is the effect of the *Real*. While the photograph in Kracauer remains an enigmatic signifier deprived of meaningful content once it loses the power of contemporaneity, like the dead body which shrinks away and presents only a mark in comparison to the apparent



presence of the 'living figure',<sup>123</sup> Barthes conceives of a fissure in its symbolic field. In this case, there is no experience of death, as such, in the photograph: instead the very return of the dead is 'played out' in the identification of subject with the gaze itself. This why Friedlander defends Barthes from the criticism that *Camera Lucida* merely posits a regressive fantasy of photographic realism. Barthes is not suggesting that the dead cannot help but return to us as we view the photograph which makes them present (which would occur automatically as the photograph somehow 'removed itself' from the mediating position in between the subject and lost object); instead, as Friedlander suggests, Barthes expresses a Žižekian nostalgia which is not fascinated with 'the displayed scene but the gaze of the naive "other" absorbed, enchanted by it' (*Looking Awry* 114). What Friedlander fails to mention, however, is that Žižek conceives of this nostalgic element of the gaze in his reading of cinema, while, for Barthes, photography and cinema are theoretically distinct media, irreducible with one another. While there is undoubtedly (if we assume that Barthes is describing the effects of the gaze) a Real aspect of the cinema as there is of the photograph, it is not that the *punctum* 'appears' for the subject 'on' the cinema screen as it does on the photograph:

Last thing about the *punctum*: whether or not it is triggered, it is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*. [...] Do I add to the images in movies? I don't think so; I don't have time: in front of the screen, I am not free to shut my eyes; otherwise, opening them again, I would not discover the same image [...]

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<sup>123</sup> 'The body of a deceased person appears smaller than the living figure. An old photograph also presents itself as the reduction of a contemporaneous one' ('Photography' 429).

Yet the cinema has a power which at first glance the Photograph does not have: the screen (as Bazin has remarked) is not a frame but a hideout; the man or woman who emerges from it continues living: a "blind field" constantly doubles our partial vision. Now, confronting millions of photographs, including those which have a good *studium*, I sense no blind field: everything which happens within the frame dies absolutely once this frame is passed beyond. [...] Yet once there is a *punctum*, a blind field is created (is divined) [...]

(*Camera Lucida* 56-7)

Barthes, at first glance, appears to confuse the issue here. While the *punctum* is discernible only in the photograph, it is what is responsible for the appearance of the so-called 'blind field' for the subject viewing the photograph; meanwhile, the blind field exists for the subject viewing the cinema screen too, since the blind field is what appears for Barthes, in Lacanian terms, to 'hold the gaze', but the blind field is not an effect of the *punctum* in that case. What this demonstrates for us, in my opinion, is that Barthes understands the necessity of maintaining the irreducibility of the photograph and the cinema as forms of media, while also signalling the material form of the screen which is common to both. In other words, the *punctum* is the thing which precludes a reductive reading of the forms of visual art, while at the same time it is that which issues forth from the gaze, *objet a* in the scopic field, signalling the structure of the screen which performs this negotiation of the Real in order to maintain the subject's Symbolic consistency. So the work of the gaze which is described by Lacan as applicable to the analysis of the

painting is also applicable to the photograph, and to the cinema, *precisely because* these media are irreducible to one another and yet are also based, in the first instance, on the form of the screen, which *already* intervenes in the subject's perception of them. The implication of the screen in Lacan is therefore of paramount importance in a sense which has not yet been fully understood. Joan Copjec gestures towards this in *Read My Desire* when she says that film theory, 'believing itself to be following Lacan, conceives the screen as mirror; in doing so, however, it operates in ignorance of, and at the expense of, Lacan's more radical insight, whereby the mirror is conceived as screen' (*Read My Desire* 16). But even she does not acknowledge the dialectical function of the screen which allows us to understand Lacan's revelation in the context of the screen *as a format*; not as a synonym for the cinema, not just 'the big screen,' but instead the format which precedes the artistic forms structured around it. It is *this* screen which is collected in the archives of *Austerlitz* and, indeed, of Sebald.

No episode in *Austerlitz* better exemplifies this primacy of the screen, the sense of which has remained unaccounted for amongst all analyses of the text, than Austerlitz's arrival at Number Twelve Šporkova, the scene of his reunion with Vera:

Once I stood for a considerable time outside the vaulted entrance to a building, said Austerlitz, looking up at a half-relief set in the smooth plaster above the keystone of the arch. The cast was no more than a square foot in size, and showed, set against a spangled sea-green background, a blue dog carrying a small branch in its mouth, which I

could tell, by the prickling of my scalp, it had brought back out of my past.

(*Austerlitz* 213)

The relief, at first, appears important precisely because it is signalled 'affectively' as such. For Austerlitz, it is the 'prickling of the scalp', an autonomic reaction, which seems to alert him to the object's connection to his own past. But the production of affect here is immediately, already, invested with meaning: the prickling of the scalp merely confirms the fact that the object is *already* part of the ceaseless movement of Austerlitz's desire. In other words, it only produces this physical effect *because* it already accomplishes the *dompte-regarde* which marks out this pacification of the eye. It affects Austerlitz because it is a screen which leads him further away from the unstable vortex of history by appearing to bring him closer to it, like our original subject-in-negotiation with the sculptural relief, Hanold, in accordance with his desire. Therefore we can say that this 'prickling of the scalp' is not a true expression of affect. It is interesting to consider this sculptural form of the screen, which, even more than the painting or photograph, enacts the irruption of desire via the simultaneous eruption of the raised feature (upon and beyond the screen) which ensnares the subject in the act of looking.<sup>124</sup> The materiality of the object itself appears to enact the tension in which it is caught; the smoothness of the plaster of the relief combines with its form, which is caught between the more apparently sculptural form of the high relief and much shallower low relief. Out of the smooth surface bursts a dog carrying a

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<sup>124</sup> The relief effect (in a stone sculpture, not a plaster one like Austerlitz encounters) is created, of course, by an illusion of its production: the 'raised' portions of the sculpture are created by removing the surrounding material, so that figure which appears to burst forth from the sculpted scene is really only the remaining distraction atop a lowered plane. The parallels with both Lacan and Barthes' theories of looking at the art object seem numerous and useful.

branch, and it is straight out of Austerlitz' past. But it is also, this branch, an alien feature which is never 'past', and instead only finds a new object in the act of desiring. This explains why there is no madeleine moment for Austerlitz here: Austerlitz says that he 'could recognize nothing for certain' (*Austerlitz* 213). Instead he is enraptured by these 'signs and characters from the type-case of forgotten things' (*Austerlitz* 214) without being granted the referent of the sign itself, which exists, presumably, in his own past. The dog 'trots' forward, an effect produced by the form of the object, but it is the branch itself, that thing which is nothing in particular, carried along in the movement from one subjective position to the other, which embodies the 'return' of memory, trauma, and 'the repressed' in *Austerlitz*.

This is why it is necessary for us not to simply 'apply' Lacan to the text, to avoid the 'psychoanalytic interpretation of art', against which Žižek has been so careful to warn us, but to use this opportunity to read Lacan alongside *Austerlitz*, where each succeeds in illuminating the position and work of the screen in the other. We can witness the necessity of performing a reappraisal of Sebald's work from a critical standpoint with one final example, from Harris's reading of the conclusion of another of Sebald's novels, *The Emigrants*:

The end of Sebald's text describes three young women as they sit at a loom, and although their eyes are veiled to the viewer by the lighting in the room, the narrator senses that they gaze directly at the viewer, who now takes the place of the photographer. [...] They present a loss that cannot be transcended and thus put to rest, will not stay buried, but will remain a haunting that gazes relentlessly into the future, that returns again and again, that

can not be cleaned up or swept away. A past that must be passed on or else be consigned to oblivion, but that is threatened in the very act of its communication.

('The Return of the Dead: Memory and Photography in W.G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten*' 389-90)

The photograph that the narrator describes is one of a series which were discovered in a suitcase in a second-hand book store in Vienna — in other words, another archive — documenting the Litzmannstadt Ghetto, in Łódź. The discovery of the photographs was no work of fiction: they exist, the product of ghetto council member Walter Genewein's amateur love of photography, which he turned particularly towards the daily work of the ghetto. Genewein was the head accountant for the ghetto, a Nazi. So the narrator's conflation of himself with the photographer at first seems troubling in a sense which Harris ignores, even as it enacts a familiarly 'Sebaldian' interplay of memory and history, text and intertext, fiction and fact:

Behind the perpendicular frame of a loom sit three young women, perhaps aged twenty. [...] Who the young women are I do not know. The light falls on them from the window in the background, so I cannot make out their eyes clearly, but I sense that all three of them are looking across at me, since I am standing on the very spot where Genewein the accountant stood with his camera.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1997), 237.

The text reveals that the viewer of the photograph does not, in fact, as Harris suggests, 'take the place of the photographer'. The only reason that the narrator 'senses' the gaze of the three women is because he now occupies the spot where the photograph was originally taken. He thus experiences a kind of simultaneity which belies what Kracauer might describe as the recession of the spatial continuum of photograph itself: that estrangement which serves to render the symbolic field, if we put it in Lacanian terms, a little more 'formal', more purely Symbolic. We can understand this in the way that the narrator intuits his sense of the gazes of the women. This is not the gaze of the Other, it is not the *punctum* in Barthes, but the manifold action of the 'actors' of the photograph. As the narrator continues, we see how his relationship with the object itself begins to transcend this momentary simultaneity with the scene:

The young woman in the middle is blonde and has the air of a bride about her. The weaver to the left has inclined her head a little to one side, whilst the woman on the right is looking at me with so steady and relentless a gaze that I cannot meet it for long.

(*The Emigrants* 237)

Now the gaze erupts from the photograph, finally, the *punctum* piercing the narrator's field of vision by distinguishing itself from the *studium* for him in the act of viewing. What this demonstrates is that the women do not only present a figure of the 'traumatic past', as Harris contends; we must go further and understand that they form part of the screen which enables the negotiation itself *with* this traumatic past. That piercing gaze, that stain of the Real which is also that which institutes the Symbolic order for the

subject, is a point which both threatens to pierce the subject (witness the narrator's obeisant submission) and also forms the very point at which the subject itself is guaranteed. The narrator's subjectivity is guaranteed by his negotiation with the object, object-as-screen, which also performs a negotiation before any other. The horror of the scene will not be transcended, as Harris notes, but it is not because it *cannot* be 'cleaned up or swept away': it is because it *need not* be so, because that 'cleaning up' would miss the point. For the subject in Sebald, the screen invites — not a closure, but a negotiation.

### III. Searching For Screens: *After Nature* and *Austerlitz*

It seems clear that there is an element of Žižekian subjective-nostalgic identification with the gaze in the characterisation of Austerlitz; what is more, this element reappears throughout Sebald's work. I would like to investigate the appearance of the gaze in Sebald's work in order to think about the way in which we find desire functioning therein. Susan Sontag signals, in her essay 'A Mind in Mourning', the consistent reappearance of this subjective-nostalgic gaze in Sebald when she mentions the recurrent themes of Sebald's work:

In W. G. Sebald's books, a narrator who, as we are reminded occasionally, bears the name W. G. Sebald, travels about registering evidence of the mortality of nature, recoiling from the ravages of modernity, musing over the secrets of obscure lives.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Susan Sontag, *Where the Stress Falls* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 41.



This triumvirate, especially in *Austerlitz*, defines the relation of the narrator to the uncovering of an unapproachable and inhospitable world. An interesting comparison can be made between the first section of Sebald's 1988 debut, the long-form prose poem *After Nature*, and the episode of *Austerlitz* in which Austerlitz confronts a photograph, which his childhood nanny Vera discovers, of himself as a young boy; this comparison demonstrates the manner in which Sebald depicts the repeated evacuation of subjectivity experienced by the one who *views another in the act of viewing*.

In *After Nature*, we are introduced to a form of relationship structured around the obscure(d) subject and the biographical evidence of his life: Sebald focuses upon the uncannily doubled subjectivity of the Renaissance artist Mattheus Grünewald, the master who painted the Isenheim altarpiece, and the question of Grünewald's relationship with the hydraulic engineer Mathis Nithart. Were they the same person, were they lovers, were they collaborators, master and student, or was their relationship something else entirely? As Dorothea von Mücke has noted,

[...] the poem engages directly in the productive reception of Grünewald by meditating on the identity of the painter from the position of a late twentieth-century observer. [...] in doing so the poem re-writes or undoes the accepted art historical narrative and engages with the painter and his oeuvre in order to pursue questions about the relationship between artist and work of art and

about the relationship between the work of art and history.<sup>127</sup>

What is important to note, for our purposes, is the manner in which Sebald explicitly constructs the position of the narrator of the poem as a twentieth century observer of both the biographical figure of Grünewald and the altarpiece itself. The narrator cannot observe the historical traces of the work without first contending with the material object itself. As von Mücke notes, the poem opens by placing emphasis upon the materiality of the altarpiece:

Whoever closes the wings  
of the altar in the Lindenhart  
parish church and locks up  
the carved figures in their casing  
on the lefthand panel  
will be met by St. George.

(*After Nature* 5)

The painting is thus immediately rendered in the poem as a series of screens which must be understood in their material context. The observer of the work must confront this material, 'objective' dimension of the object before considering the figures depicted upon it:

This approach treats the altarpiece stripped of its religious and devotional function and thus entirely like a work of art. [...] By emphasizing the three dimensional nature of the altar that resembles the format of a bound volume, the

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<sup>127</sup> Dorothea von Mücke, 'History and the Work of Art in Sebald's *After Nature*', [nonsite.org](http://nonsite.org/issues/issue-1/sebalds-after-nature-authorship-at-the-threshold-of-representation) issue 1, <<http://nonsite.org/issues/issue-1/sebalds-after-nature-authorship-at-the-threshold-of-representation>>, accessed 8/6/15.

fact that its wings need to be closed and opened in order to be seen in its entirety, the poem begins with an emphasis on the unique physical object.

(*'History and the Work of Art in Sebald's After Nature'*)

In *Austerlitz*, Austerlitz experiences the photograph of himself as a young boy as a material artefact before he can derive anything other than a purely Symbolic sense from its representative field. Vera tells him that 'On the back it says *Jacquot Austerlitz, páže ružové královny*, in your grandfather's handwriting', a fact which initially occupies Austerlitz's attention far more than the photographic image itself:

The picture lay before me, said Austerlitz, but I dared not touch it. The words *páže ružové královny, páže ružové královny* went round and round in my head, until their meaning came to me from far away, and once again I saw the live tableau with the Rose Queen and the little boy carrying her train at her side. Yet hard as I tried both that evening and later, I could not recollect myself in the part.

(*Austerlitz* 259)

Austerlitz contemplates the form of the object itself, turning the words written on the reverse of the photograph around in his head. Vera explains the context of the photograph: young Austerlitz accompanied his mother, Agata, to a masquerade. The words on the reverse therefore merely describe the image depicted upon the face of the photograph: Jacques

Austerlitz, the Rose Queen's pageboy. The object itself, which it seems should produce a revelatory effect, does nothing other than *describe itself*. Like *After Nature*, the object is initially apprehended in its material form, resisting meaning other than as a self-referential point of signification. In other words, the picture of young Austerlitz, dressed in a snow white costume, not his own clothes, and standing in the middle of a 'bare, level field' with a 'blurred, dark area above the horizon' (*Austerlitz* 259) reveals nothing other than a shallow, insensible field. The object does not lead towards an authentic self presence: it leads away from it.

In *After Nature*, we realise that the narrator is viewing Grünewald in the act of viewing himself, or Nithart; or, indeed, both:

An x-ray photograph of the Sebastian panel  
 reveals beneath the elegiac  
 portrait of the saint  
 that same face again, the half-  
 profile only turned a tiny bit further  
 in the definitive over-painting.  
 Here two painters in one body,  
 whose hurt flesh belonged to both,  
 to the end pursued the study  
 of their own nature. At first  
 Nithart fashioned his self-portrait  
 from a mirror image, and Grünewald,  
 with great love, precision and patience  
 and an interest in the skin  
 and hair of his companion extending  
 to the blue shadow of the beard,  
 then over-painted it.

(*After Nature* 18-9)

Grünewald seems to be, in a sense, doubled, in layers of both paint and history. Though the model in the portrait, according to the narrator, is supposedly Nithart, the artist 'himself' is difficult to 'pin down': the Saint Sebastian panel of the Isenheim altarpiece is attributed to Grünewald, but, as the narrator notes, the historian W.K. Zülch theorised that Grünewald and Nithart were the same person; meanwhile, current historical opinion suggests that they were in fact lovers, with Nithart a 'contributor' to Grünewald's work. In the poem, both painters 'belong' to the same body, that of Saint Sebastian, as certain 'features' of Nithart become subject, indeed, to Grünewald's desire, which locates in Nithart only what Grünewald wishes to see. The intensity of Grünewald's dedication to the representation of Nithart's skin and hair enacts the eccentric moment of the gaze as we have already defined it. 'When, in love, I solicit a look, what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that — *You never look at me from the place from which I see you.* [...] Conversely, *what I look at is never what I wish to see*' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 103). Beneath the surface layer of the painting, Nithart's original self-portrait expresses the solicitation of the look: here is the place that I am looked at, here is what you may see but I may not. In the level of the overpainting, however, Grünewald adds this converse: what I am looking at is not what I wish to see, therefore I will show you what you are for me. Grünewald literally applies, as paint, the correlative of the screen of fantasy in the upper layer of this overpainting. As we can see, Grünewald is not only doubled in the image of his lover (and they may already be one and the same); he is, as Lacan makes clear, doubled already in the image of himself: doubled because of the very fact that the 'lover' whom he attempts to represent is only glimpsed through the screen of his own fantasy, is only that which he already locates,

supposes to exist, in the body of his partner. Approaching the double, in the case of *After Nature*, results in the revelation not of the imaginary mirror, but of that which is, as Lacan says, *in you more than you*: the sublime Thing which is not encapsulated in a mirror image but which exceeds the subject in the gaze. To approach a double, therefore, is to approach an object: *objet a*.

Can't we see that Sebald's representation of these artistic screens forms the basis for his technique of producing that which Sontag calls 'obscure life' of his subjects? Sebald shows us, in *After Nature* certainly, but most of all, especially, in *Austerlitz*, that the subject may forever be at the mercy of the *trompe-l'oeil*, subject to the trap for the eye which, finally, signals the incidence of desire. As we remember, the *trompe-l'oeil* traps the eye by forcing the subject to confront themselves *in the picture*, but this shift in perspective also prompts the encounter with the gaze itself. As Alain Vanier notes:

There is always a missing place, Lacan says, an absence in a picture, one that we may think of as a corollary of the blind spot in our vision. This spot "functions" as a hole. [...] From the place that the picture "assigns" you, the object appears confused, unrecognizable. In order to see it, you have to put yourself in the picture plane: it specifies you from the place where it is looking at you.<sup>128</sup>

The effect of the *trompe-l'oeil*, as Vanier says, is to ensure that the subject can never 'see' everything. By reorienting his- or herself along the lines of the picture, the subject must

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<sup>128</sup> Alain Vanier, *Lacan*, trans. Susan Fairfield (New York: Other Press, 2000), 28-9.

adopt a compromised position: 'compromised' in the sense that the position is a result of a negotiation with the screen, in other words, with the function of *dompte-regard*, and compromised also in the sense that it jeopardises the ability of the subject to continue this negotiation with the picture by revealing the appearance of the stain of the Real in the picture (the irruption of the gaze). It is not possible for the subject to view the painting in a way which will permit the painting to be seen in totality, in other words, in a manner which will reveal both the *dompte-regard* and *trompe-l'oeil* simultaneously. In *Austerlitz*, the discovery of the photograph of young Jacques Austerlitz prompts an example of the nostalgic identification of the subject with the gaze which reveals this very nature of 'incompleteness':

I examined every detail under a magnifying glass without once finding the slightest clue. And in doing so I always felt the piercing, inquiring gaze of the page boy who had come to demand his dues, who was waiting in the grey light of dawn on the empty field for me to accept the challenge and avert the misfortune lying ahead of him. That evening in the Šporkova, when Vera put the picture of the child cavalier in front of me, I was not, as you might suppose, moved or distressed, said Austerlitz, only speechless and uncomprehending, incapable of lucid thought. Even later nothing by blind panic filled me when I thought of the five-year-old page.

(*Austerlitz* 260)

We can see that the mere details of the picture convey nothing other than the marks of diegetic reality to Austerlitz.

Instead, it is through this pulsating, extraordinary object of the gaze that Austerlitz's 'incomprehension' becomes materialised. It seems strange to say that the picture conveys nothing other than the absence of comprehension, but it is this very absence which 'twists' Austerlitz's desire, which sets him towards that vacant position occupied by the figures of his parents. (It is interesting to note that, throughout this passage, Austerlitz refers to his mother as the 'Rose Queen': an empty Symbolic gesture if there ever was one.) Austerlitz's compromise is here made only when he accepts that he can find nothing in the photograph merely by *searching* for it. Only once he examines every particular detail of the photograph does the gaze pierce him and fill him with 'blind panic'. What Austerlitz experiences here is akin to the shame of the voyeur described by Lacan:

Although this analysis brings out the agency of the gaze, it is not at the level of the other whose gaze surprises the subject looking through the keyhole. It is that the other surprises him, the subject, as entirely hidden gaze.

[...] The gaze is this object lost and suddenly refound in the conflagration of shame, by the introduction of the other. Up to that point, what is the subject trying to see? What he is trying to see, make no mistake, is the object as absence.

*(The Four Fundamental Concepts of  
Psychoanalysis 182)*

For Lacan, the voyeur intends to surmount the gaze of the other by attaining it. It is not simply that the voyeur is



surprised to see someone looking at him, it is rather that the voyeur is surprised to find that the gaze exists where he did not suppose it should. Austerlitz rediscovers the gaze in the photograph of himself as a child. It bursts forth, disrupting the Symbolic and Imaginary consistency of the image itself, that which threatens to enlighten Austerlitz by furnishing him with previously unknown details of his past. The image disturbingly locates the gaze of the other in that estranged figure of the past. What Austerlitz experiences in his blind panic is a nostalgic desire to identify with the gaze of the other, to be granted access to the position from which he might experience that gaze and 'avert the misfortune lying ahead' of himself. This experience exemplifies Austerlitz's journey to reclaim his past. When faced with that stain of the Real which cannot be contained as symbolically consistent screen, he reacts with panic, reconfirming his own 'lostness':

As far back as I can remember, said Austerlitz, I have always felt as if I had no place in reality, as if I were not there at all, and I never had this impression more strongly than on that evening in the Šporkova when the eyes of the Rose Queen's page looked through me. Even the next day, on my way to Terezin, I could not imagine who or what I was.

(*Austerlitz* 261-2)

Upon confronting the image of himself as a child for the very first time in his life, Austerlitz feels no further forward on the journey to locate his 'authentic' self or his place in reality: in fact, he experiences the opposite sensation. It never strikes him more keenly than the precise moment in which he holds the record of that which he seeks. This is what Lacan means when he says that *objet a* 'only dissolves, in the final

analysis, owing to its failure, unable, as it is, to sustain itself in approaching the real' (*Encore* 95): the closer we get to the object of our desire, the less bearable our experience becomes, unless we first introduce another screen with which to shield ourselves; conversely, introducing this screen is only what makes the object 'reappear' in our view. For Austerlitz, finding the 'record' of his past is the fantasy that he uses to screen that unbearable desire to *keep searching*, a desire which can never be satisfied. It is that desire which transubstantiates the mere material screen into an object, for Austerlitz, which is worthy of obsessive pursuit and collection.

In Sebald's rendering of the Saint Sebastian panel of the Isenheim altarpiece, it is this very point, at which subjective experience becomes compromised in the face of the object-cause of desire, which animates the 'obscurity' of the life of Mattheus Grünewald:

Through the window on his left a  
 landscape with mountain and valley  
 and the curved line of a path is visible.  
 The last, Zülch philosophizes, is the way  
 into the world, and no one took it other  
 than the man, vanished without trace,  
 to whom his research is devoted and whose  
 art  
 he thinks he can recognize in the anonymous  
 picture.

(*After Nature* 17)

This 'curved line of a path' is that which invites the subject to reorient him- or herself in relation to the picture. It does not produce an example of anamorphosis from the point of view

of the viewer, as in the skull in *The Ambassadors*, but is nevertheless an example of *trompe-l'oeil*, at least for Zülch. While the body of Saint Sebastian, shot through with arrows — actually the body of Sebastian and more, the space of negotiation of Grünewald's desire, occluding and representing both Grünewald and Nithart's bodies — dominates the panel, it is to the curved path and beyond that Sebald directs us. This curved path holds the same power as the stain identified by Žižek in Munch's *The Scream*:

A cursory glance at Munch's *The Scream* reveals how its surface is "drawn": the right half is far more anamorphotically distorted than the left half; that is, the painting is "sucked" toward its center of gravity approximately two-thirds of the way up its right side, and the homunculus is seized with horror at being drawn into this whirlpool.

(‘Grimaces of the Real’ 52)

While the curved path in Grünewald's painting does not appear to anamorphotically distort in the eyes of the viewer, there can be no doubt that the landscape beyond the window exerts a pull upon the surface of the painting beyond that which we would expect purely from its mimetic logic. Sebald notes how

The panic-stricken  
kink in the neck to be seen  
in all of Grünewald's subjects,  
exposing the throat and often turning  
the face towards a blinding light,  
is the extreme repose of our bodies  
to the absence of balance in nature

*(After Nature 27)*

That 'panic-stricken kink in the neck' is produced in the painting of Saint Sebastian, too, producing an effect which appears to draw the Saint's (Grünewald's? Nithart's?) body towards the curved path, towards that 'way into the world' which serves only to lead towards a final 'vanishing without a trace'. Unlike the homunculus of *The Scream*, however, Saint Sebastian exhibits no appearance of horror as his body is drawn towards the world outside. Instead, his face is turned away from the window, apparently looking across the frame to the main panel of the painting, where Jesus is hung from the cross. We might also think of the world beyond the surface, where the 'other' figure of Nithart lurks. The overpainted figure literally looks beyond the confines of the panel itself, as if denying the presence of that uncomfortable vanishing figure which breaks the screen of fantasy: that 'absence of balance in nature' which produces a distortion for subject viewing it. In this way, Sebald sketches, at the outset of his earliest work, the relationship between the 'obscure life' with the 'mortality of nature' and the 'ravages of modernity'; in other words, the relationship between the subject who, faced with the moment of exposure to unutterable trauma in history, cannot maintain the screen of fantasy which prevents this moment from bursting forth.

In a very similar manner, we realise that Sebald signals to us the presence of the gaze in the photograph of the Rose Queen's page in the manner in which he subtly reconstructs the picture by reproducing the encounter with it from Austerlitz's 'point of view'. Our view of the photograph is irrevocably entwined with Austerlitz's own. Before he mentions anything of his experience of the gaze of the young

boy, Austerlitz describes the various points of staining and blurring which appear to be located around the boy's eyes:

[...] the bare level field where I am standing  
[...]; the blurred, dark area above the horizon,  
the boy's curly hair, spectrally light around the  
outline of his head, the cape over his arm  
which appears to be held at an angle, or as I  
once thought, said Austerlitz, might have been  
broken or in a splint [...]

*(Austerlitz 259-60)*

Each element invites us to reappraise the photograph, to accept this subtle rewriting of the visual text itself, preparing us to accept the gaze-for-Austerlitz of the young boy, before we even encounter it as such. The bare field constitutes an empty symbolic field, ripe for the irruption of the gaze from within: the blurred area and the 'spectral lightness' above the horizon now appears to form a kind of obscure halo around young Austerlitz's head, creating the impression that the entire figure is floating away or separate from the field of the picture; the unexpected angle of the cape appears to signal a distortion of the body itself, perhaps broken, perhaps twisted like the necks of Grünewald's figures, which signals the 'centre of gravity,' in Žižek's words, of the photograph, drawing our eyes to the young boy's head, the thing which appears to aetiologically orient all other aspects of the photograph. Like Austerlitz, we cannot help but be puzzled by any particular detail of the picture and instead become drawn inexorably towards the boy's gaze. That gaze leads, in a sense, to Austerlitz's 'way into the world': in piercing Austerlitz, the one who must look for/at himself, it signals the presence of an impossible desire to reoccupy the space from which the boy looks 'forward,' looks 'ahead' to his misfortune.

This moment surely repudiates critical charges of melodrama directed towards *Austerlitz* by John Zilcosky,<sup>129</sup> since it constitutes an ethical rather than a melodramatic act: Austerlitz is not expressing 'a melodramatic desire for "total expressivity"' related precisely to the "ineffability" of the subject matter' ('Lost and Found' 695), as Zilcosky argues, referencing Peter Brooks' *The Melodramatic Imagination*; rather than the Holocaust (as event which orients Austerlitz's personal trauma) forming a core which he then seeks to totally expose, to make naked in its expressivity, Austerlitz instead seeks to prop up the screen which makes his desire appear anew, even with the knowledge, as an experienced user of the archive, that the total expressivity of the event itself is not possible in the act of searching for its traces. In other words, Austerlitz here *rejects* the melodramatic desire for total expressivity. It is only at the moment of his breakdown that Austerlitz approaches the point of a totality of history 'made present', in which the traumatic memory of his arrival at Liverpool Street Station spectrally plays before him; but the very fact that he succumbs to this vision is evidence of the fact that this moment is the dimension of experience which is opposed to desire: instead it belongs to the *jouissance* of the drive.

#### IV. The Abyss and Superposed Time

It is from that point of the mysterious young boy in the photograph that Austerlitz's story begins, that the name 'Austerlitz' assumes its full power for him only once it is also stripped from and forgotten by him. When his foster mother dies, Austerlitz's foster father suffers a breakdown, leaving

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<sup>129</sup> See Zilcosky, 'Lost and Found: Disorientation, Nostalgia, and Holocaust Melodrama in Sebald's *Austerlitz*', *MLN*, 121: 3 — German Issue (Apr., 2006), 679-698.

only the headmaster of his boarding school to reveal to the boy this name and nothing more:

First, however, it was his duty to tell me that I must put not Dafydd Elias but Jacques Austerlitz on my exam papers. It appears, said Penrith-Smith, that this is your real name. My foster parents, with whom he had discussed the matter at length when I entered school, had meant to tell me about my origins in good time [...] As far as the other boys are concerned, said Penryth-Smith, you remain Dafydd Elias for the time being. There's no need to let anyone know. It's just that you will have to put Jacques Austerlitz on your examination papers [...] Penrith-Smith had written the name on a piece of paper, and when he handed it to me I could think of nothing to say [...] At first, what disconcerted me most was that I could connect no ideas at all with the word Austerlitz. If my new name had been Morgan or Jones, I could have related it to reality. I even knew the name Jacques from a French nursery rhyme. But I had never heard of an Austerlitz before, and from the first I was convinced that no one else bore that name, no one in Wales, or in the Isles, or anywhere else in the world.

*(Austerlitz 93-5)*

There is no better example than this of the Lacanian discourse of the master, which is summed up by the dictum that a signifier represents a subject only for another signifier. The signifier (the proper noun) produces the subject in the

act of nomination, while at the same time functioning only because of what it is *not* (which is the set of all other signifiers): here Austerlitz experiences what Lacan would call a 'subjective destitution'. Caught in between two signifiers, Austerlitz feels that there is no signifier of his subjectivity; for the first time he experiences himself, not as 'Austerlitz', but as the 'barred subject', \$, only the reference of a name for another name. That to which Austerlitz relates is only that which is also outside himself. His subjectivity is revealed as radically eccentric at this moment because he discovers that 'Dafydd Elias' is no more himself than 'Jacques Austerlitz', and what is more that neither name is produced as more or less essentially 'true' by the piece of paper which he now holds in his hand. When he says that he 'could connect no ideas' with the word itself, Austerlitz comes to face the realisation that his subjectivity is only represented outside of 'himself', in the battery of signifiers which are the domain of the Other. That which Austerlitz here experiences as the word itself connects to nothing other than another signifier. At this moment, Austerlitz is suddenly evacuated from the fantasy of his self, his subjectivity revealed as fractured all along. What is produced for the subject in this movement of the signifying chain is a remainder, a surplus designated by Lacan by a small 'a': *objet a*. Austerlitz, upon seeing this piece of paper for the first time, is really confronted by another screen: a piece of paper which simultaneously reveals an emptied self and the promise of its rehabilitation in another object, a prop for the continuation of fantasy, which can only be produced by a ceaseless search for *another, bearing the name Austerlitz*.

This reading, however, demonstrates the problems of reducing the subject purely to the Symbolic dimension of experience. In order to illustrate this, we might borrow Žižek's example and think of the way in which the game of chess is



defined in its Symbolic sense by the moves which the pieces are permitted to make:

[...] from the purely formal symbolic standpoint, 'knight' is defined only by the moves this figure can make. This level is clearly different from the imaginary one, namely the way in which different pieces are shaped and characterized by their names [...] Finally, real is the entire complex set of contingent circumstances that affect the course of the game [...]

*(How to Read Lacan 8-9)*

In the same way, while we in no way reduce him to the status of a pawn, it is clear that Austerlitz *is* 'shaped and characterised' by the names 'Dafydd Elias' and 'Jacques Austerlitz', and is permitted to 'move', in other words to act according to that signifier which represents his subjectivity, by the revelation of that 'original' name. But, by neglecting the effects of the Real, this reading fails to account for the very fact that Austerlitz himself *does not* immediately pursue that knowledge of his parents. In other words, he *is not* simply subject to an unconscious external 'mechanical' regulation of the Other, which is often incorrectly assumed to be the meaning or outcome of Lacan's 'decentered' or barred subject. Instead Austerlitz demonstrates the manner in which the real comes to be made 'identifiable': not as simply the 'unsymbolisable', as in a kernel of experience resisting or eluding symbolisation, but as the very gap or fissure in the Symbolic network which is the result of the subject's assumption of that realm in the first place. In this sense, it becomes apparent that Austerlitz is suffering from the effects of a traumatic Real which irrupts when he encounters an

impasse to which there is no answer to be found in his own experience:

From where I stand now, of course, I can see that my name alone, and the fact that it was kept from me until my fifteenth year, ought to have put me on the track of my origins, but it has also become clear to me of late why an agency greater than or superior to my own capacity for thought, which circumspectly directs operations somewhere in my brain, has always preserved me from my own secret, systematically preventing me from drawing the obvious conclusions and embarking on the inquiries they would have suggested to me. It hasn't been easy to make my way out of my own inhibitions, and it will not be easy now to put the story into anything like proper order.

(*Austerlitz*, 60-1)

The fact that this symbolic difficulty persists, in attempting to 'put the story into proper order', is an example, not of the Real as an external traumatic core, but of Real as that which is insinuated *within* our experience of reality. Whitehead's argument, that 'Sebald's characters are traumatised individuals, living in the shadow of the Holocaust and subject to the contingencies of exile and displacement' (*Trauma Fiction* 119), does not therefore fully convey the mechanism by which this traumatic experience comes to bear upon the individual in Sebald. It conceives of the Holocaust as a monolithic traumatic experience which removes the dimension of subjective *insistence*. Trauma in *Austerlitz* does not exist; it *insists*. In other words, it only assumes its full dimension when it is properly de-substantialised and

understood to be the expression of an irruptive process which, rather than simply intruding upon the psychic life of the subject, is only retroactively raised to the level of traumatic Real. As Žižek says, 'the original fact here is the symbolic deadlock, and the traumatic event is resuscitated to fill in the gaps in the universe of meaning' (*How to Read Lacan* 74).

This level of subjective insistence extends to the experience of time in *Austerlitz*, which is integrally associated with the 'level' of trauma itself. Austerlitz's uncanny experience of the image of the camp in the wilderness demonstrates this relationship:

[...] my mind dwelt chiefly on the fenced square in the middle and the tent-like building at the far end, with a cloud of white smoke above it. Whatever may have been going on inside me at the time, the children of Israel's camp in the wilderness was closer to me than life in Bala, which I found more incomprehensible every day, or at least, said Austerlitz, that is how it strikes me now.

(*Austerlitz* 80)

This passage exemplifies the method by which the novel constructs the representation of time: trapped, as we are, as Austerlitz is, in the stricture of memory, time itself assumes a superposed form. As Austerlitz recalls the memory, he simultaneously reinterprets it according to 'how it strikes [him] now': the memory is rendered as an explicitly subjective form which is already altered by the fact of its own observation. As Carole Angier suggests, '*Austerlitz* explores in detail the theme of the unreality of time. We know from the study of

history that the layers of time co-exist [...] but Austerlitz longs to experience it'.<sup>130</sup> The text continually invites the traces of the physical past 'into' the experience of the present, not metaphorically woven into the present as much as they literally form its substratum, a sedimentation, the subjective effects of which appear to be a resuscitation provoked only once the impasse in experience is encountered. Perhaps the most notable example of this is the case of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, to which Austerlitz travels at the end of the novel in order to track down the record of his father, and which is constructed, in fact, upon the grounds of the Austerlitz-Tolbiac depot which housed the seized possessions of Jewish families in Paris following the German occupation of the city. Austerlitz's father fled Czechoslovakia to live in Paris at the outbreak of the war, and while Austerlitz searches for traces of the man within in the administrative records of the library, he learns from a member of the library staff that some of his father's possessions may have been buried in the foundations of the building itself:

The most valuable items, of course, were not sent off wholesale to the bombed cities, and no one will now admit to knowing where they went, for the fact is that the whole affair is buried in the most literal sense beneath the foundations of our pharaonic President's Grande Bibliothèque, said Lemoine.

(*Austerlitz* 403)

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<sup>130</sup> Carole Angier, "And so they are ever returning to us, the dead!": The Presence of the Dead in W.G. Sebald', *Melilah: Manchester Journal of Jewish Studies*, Supplementary Vol. 2 — Memory, Traces and the Holocaust in the Writings of W.G. Sebald (2012), 5-12 (8-9).

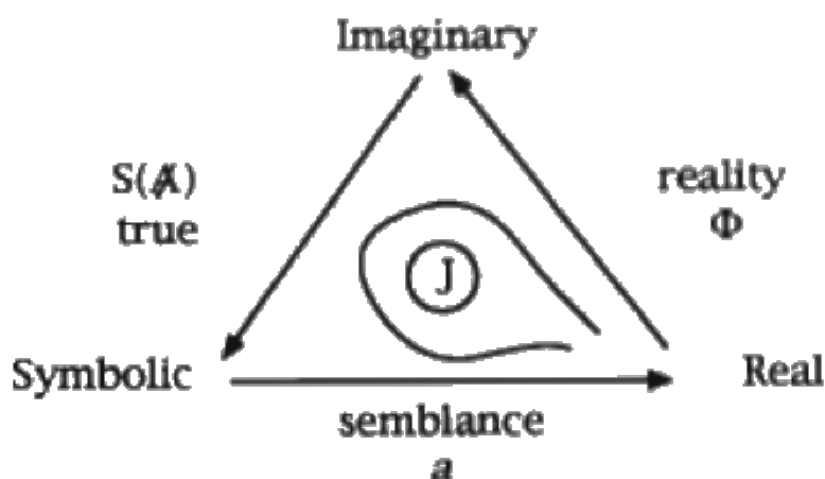
The effect of this sedimentation of history as metaphor for superposed time is a complex one of personal attraction and repulsion:

We were standing only a foot behind the glass panels which reach all the way to the ground. As soon as you looked down at the light-coloured promenade deck and the darker crowns of the trees emerging from it, the pull exerted by the abyss below took hold of you, forcing you to step back. Sometimes, so Lemoine told me, said Austerlitz, he felt the current of time streaming round his temples and brow when he was up here, but perhaps, he added, that is only a reflex of the awareness formed in my mind over the years of the various layers which have been superimposed on each other to form the carapace of the city.

(*Austerlitz* 400-1)

The 'abyss below', beneath the newly constructed library, is the very sedimentation of layer which provokes 'the current of time' issuing from it, but also seems to embody something more than this. The subjective reaction to this abyss, in which the pull exerted by it is the very thing which forces Austerlitz to step back from it, is not simply the reaction to the approach towards the object-cause of desire described in Lacan. The abyss itself is clearly something separate from the screen: while, as we have seen, Austerlitz locates in these everyday objects of the archive that small gap in the Symbolic from which the Real threatens to erupt, *objet a* which transubstantiates its bearer into the object-cause of desire, the abyss reappears in *Austerlitz* as a very different

feature. It is, rather, the very experience of the magnetic and yet traumatic flow of *jouissance*, what Žižek calls 'the whirlpool of enjoyment threatening to swallow us all' (*Looking Awry* 135). Žižek here refers to the schema produced by Lacan at the beginning of the chapter 'Knowledge and Truth' in *Encore*, which is worth reproducing:



(*Encore* 90)

This schema indicates the process by which each of the three registers are 'constituted' as such. The vectors do not indicate causality; instead each indicates the process by which that register intervenes in the other: the Symbolic is determined as the result of the symbolisation of the Imaginary, the Real introduces the point at which the Symbolic fails, the Imaginary is the process by which it is imagined that the Real is grasped by the subject and made whole. Alongside each vector is the particular object which intervenes in order to prop up the subject as he or she is constituted by these registers: from Symbolic to Real is *objet a*, from Real to Imaginary is phi, and from Imaginary to Symbolic is the signifier of the lack in the Other. And, as Žižek says:

The abyss in the middle (the balloon encircling the letter J — *jouissance*) is of course the whirlpool of enjoyment threatening to swallow us all, [...] exerting its fatal attraction. The three objects on the sides of the triangle are perhaps nothing but the three ways to maintain a kind of distance toward this traumatic central abyss [...]

(*Looking Awry* 135)

Each object is therefore a small remainder of the Real; they are 'excrescences of the real sticking out from common reality' (*Looking Awry* 136), but they should not be conflated with one another. It is no coincidence that in the two moments in which Austerlitz experiences the very ground opening up beneath his feet, and where he must confront this terrible abyssal space of pure *jouissance*, he also encounters the Imaginary object signalled on the schema by phi. In both the aforementioned moment at the Bibliothèque Nationale, and at Liverpool Street Station, where Austerlitz finds that he has unknowingly arrived at the very waiting room to which 'I had come on my arrival in England over half a century ago' (*Austerlitz* 193), a moment which initiates his nervous breakdown, the sense of a churning, gaping, unknowable space below is accompanied by a towering, monumental protuberance — the presence of the building itself. As Žižek says, phi is 'the impassive, imaginary objectification of the Real — an image which gives body to the impossible *jouissance*' (*Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)* 8); rather than the process of desire, which aims at an object (*objet a*) which is never present and can always be located 'elsewhere' (which for Austerlitz is always *another screen object*), phi

materialises, instead, the *overpresence* of the Imaginary object, stuck, immovable as an object which signals the swirling whirlpool of a traumatic *jouissance* 'below' it. It is a phallic protuberance which becomes *too* present for the subject, 'a certain image that materializes the nauseous enjoyment' (*Looking Awry* 135).

At both Liverpool Street Station and the Bibliothèque Nationale, Austerlitz appears to come perilously close to drowning in the 'whirlpool of *jouissance*', to plummeting into the abyss of history and oblivion.<sup>131</sup> This abyss 'contains'

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<sup>131</sup> *Jouissance* is a kind of enjoyment which exists beyond the satisfaction of a mere drive; to be swept up by *jouissance* is to encounter the traumatic Real itself. Can it be any clearer that that which Austerlitz describes as the 'agency greater than or superior' to his own ability to approach the object itself is an expression of the vicissitudes of *jouissance*, that radical enjoyment which, for Lacan, is beyond enjoyment and is the barrier to knowing as such, and that this object is the object of the Real, which takes those forms we have mentioned? This *jouissance* does not obey the pleasure principle, does not seek homeostatic discharge and is not related to the *plaisir* of the subject. It is a level of enjoyment which functions in excess of the subject's satisfaction, just as the 'agency' which controls Austerlitz does not necessarily 'intend' for him to seek a cathartic resolution of his secretive past by pursuing the knowledge of his heritage. The story of Lacan's rejection of the word 'enjoyment' as a translation of *jouissance* bears repeating here as a demonstration of this function. On a trip to America, Lacan saw an advertisement for Coca-Cola: the slogan 'Enjoy Coke' signalled to him that the injunction 'enjoy' in English did not convey the level of subjective destabilisation associated with *jouissance* in French, where it enfolds a number of meanings including an inherently sexual connotation. (See Žižek *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York; London: Routledge, 2001), xvii and Craig J. Saper, *Artificial Mythologies: A Guide to Cultural Invention* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 107, for more.) To 'enjoy' Coke, for Lacan, is to seek a reliable, dependable satisfaction; to do nothing more than have a nice day. *Jouir* is to pursue satisfaction beyond the satisfaction of any drive, to enjoy both what is yours and what is not yours, what it is not possible to 'encounter' as subject, and without consideration of 'cost'. Žižek, in a typical reversal, has demonstrated how Coke as a product succeeds in a manner which precisely repudiates the essential message of this marketing strategy, in other words as an exact embodiment of the surplus of enjoyment which Lacan describes with the function of *jouissance*: 'its strange taste does not seem to provide any satisfaction; it is not directly pleasing or endearing; however, it is precisely as such, as transcending any immediate use-value [...] that Coke functions as the direct embodiment of "it!"; of the pure surplus of enjoyment over standard satisfactions, of the mysterious and elusive X we are all after in our compulsive consumption. The unexpected result of this is not that, since Coke doesn't satisfy any concrete need we drink it only as supplement, after some other drink has satisfied our substantial need — rather, it is this very superfluous character that makes our thirst for Coke all the more insatiable [...]' (Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2009), 22.). In other words, the thing that the subject desires is in fact the very thing which cannot satisfy desire: not simply because it is impossible to satisfy desire as such, but because that desire is not our own, does not 'belong' to us, is located outside of ourselves. *Jouissance* cannot be experienced 'within' the symbolic system in which the subject is constituted as such; therefore it is only 'beyond' desire, in the experience of the Real, in which we can locate it.



history, is constituted *by* oblivion itself, literally: these abyssal spaces are filled by the dead, have consumed history as the city renews itself, superposing itself upon the very moment of the past. Austerlitz's responses to this whirlpool, marked by the impassive, hulking outgrowths of the new, modernised buildings of the station and the library, are rather opposed to one another, however. Liverpool Street Station, as Austerlitz notes, is undergoing reconstruction, 'the new station [...] literally rising from the ruins of the old' (*Austerlitz* 191); Austerlitz also visits the neighbouring Broad Street Station during its demolition, years prior to his visit to Liverpool Street and his nervous breakdown, and photographs the remains of the dead. Broad Street (and Liverpool Street) are constructed 'on the site of former burial grounds and bleachfields' and, Austerlitz continues,

[...] excavations during the demolition work of 1984 brought to light over four hundred skeletons underneath a taxi rank. I went there quite often at the time, said Austerlitz, partly because of my interest in architectural history and partly for other reasons which I could not explain even to myself [...]

(*Austerlitz* 184)

The discovery of the skeletons prefigures the later revelation, high up in the Bibliothèque Nationale, of the lost, uncategorised objects of history buried in the ground below. The apparently 'inexplicable' reason for visiting the demolition site of Broad Street Station is actually already signalled by Austerlitz when he describes his habit of waiting in Liverpool Street Station:

I would stay there at least a couple of hours, sitting on a bench with other passengers who were already tired in the early morning, or standing somewhere, leaning on a handrail and feeling that constant wrenching inside me, a kind of heartache which, as I was beginning to sense, was caused by the vortex of past time.

*(Austerlitz 182)*

Austerlitz explains the history of the site of these stations: the marshy meadows which froze in the Little Ice Age, and were drained and became the site of market gardens and parks; the priory of the order of St Mary of Bethlehem; the Bedlam Asylum; the burial grounds; each layer of the substratum of history, it seems, threatens to overburden Austerlitz, to upset his stability, and the superposition of the historical artefacts themselves produces, for Austerlitz, a corresponding experience of the superposition of time. Whenever he visits the station, Austerlitz is seized by a type of mania in which he must attempt to recall the possible history of the space itself:

I kept almost obsessively trying to imagine [...] the location in that huge space of the rooms where the asylum inmates were confined, and I often wondered whether the pain and suffering accumulated on this site over the centuries had ever really ebbed away, or whether they might not still, as I sometimes thought when I felt a cold breath of air on my forehead, be sensed as we pass through them on our way through the station halls and up and down the flights of steps.

(*Austerlitz* 183)

The 'vortex of past time' is that which draws Austerlitz to the abyssal spaces of Liverpool Street and the Bibliothèque Nationale, because the vortex *is* that very abyssal space itself; what is more, that abyssal space can, conversely, only be materialised by the architectural protrusion which bursts forth from it, signalling the circulation of the Real around the 'anchoring' point of the object itself. The station is figured in the text as a contradictory space: this experience of superposed time is reflected in the station's simultaneous depiction in the text as a building before and during its reconstruction. 'Before work began to rebuild it at the end of the 1980s this station, with its main concourse fifteen to twenty feet below street level, was one of the darkest and most sinister places in London, a kind of entrance to the underworld' (*Austerlitz* 180), Austerlitz says; but this cavernous subterranean space, complete with 'towering cast-iron columns [...] covered in a greasy black layer formed, over the course of a century, by coke dust and soot, steam, sulphur and diesel oil' (*Austerlitz* 181), is also part of a protrusion 'literally rising from the ruins' of the old station, the space appearing to impossibly and uncontrollably expand:

Minutes or even hours may have passed while I stood in that empty space beneath a ceiling which seemed to float at a vertiginous height, unable to move from the spot, my face raised to the icy grey light [...] Other beams of light followed curious trajectories which violated the laws of physics, departing from the rectilinear and twisting in spirals and eddies [...] From time to time, and just for a split second, I saw huge halls open up, with rows of pillars and colonnades leading far into the distance, with

vaults and brickwork arches bearing on them many-storeyed structures, with flights of stone steps, wooden stairways and ladders, all leading the eye on and on. [...] the longer I stared upwards with my head wrenched painfully back, the more I felt as if the room where I stood were expanding, going on for ever and ever in an impossibly foreshortened perspective, at the same time turning back into itself in a way possible only in such a deranged universe.

(*Austerlitz* 189-91)

This contradictory space of expansion and contraction thus materialises the odd relationship of the traumatic vortex of *jouissance* and the 'overpresent' Imaginary object which anchors it: the 'underworld' of the station (and the substratum below) is a void, a dark absent space of 'eternal dusk' (*Austerlitz* 181), while the towering columns, tumescent beams of light, and the suddenly engorged spaces opening up beyond the waiting room are *overmarked* by excess detail (for example the 'greasy black layer' covering the columns, which makes history repulsively present, or the impossible beams of light which mark the uncanniness of the space itself); they appear *too present* in comparison to the 'faint greyness' which dimly illuminates the remainder of the station. These monumental features appear to dwarf Austerlitz; more than this, they appear to ensnare him by virtue of their size, to exert a gravitational force which draws him further into the vortex of past time and forces him to contend with a flood of memory which threatens to overwhelm him. This moment demonstrates the effectuation of the drive, and the distinction between the drive and desire: while desire always searches for another object, the drive

remains inertly anchored; 'it resists being enmeshed in a dialectical movement, it circulates around its object, fixed upon the point around which it pulsates' (*Looking Awry* 134). The satisfaction of the drive, here, is the total experience of forbidden memory; in other words, it is satisfaction of the very thing which Austerlitz's desire protects him against, the symptom which he must enjoy: the revelation of the traumatic memory, which only appears as the fantasy screen of his desire in order to prevent the disclosure of that Real trauma and the revelation that that disclosure leads to *nothing at all*.

## V. 'Subjective Destitution' and the 'Form-of-the-Building'

As Austerlitz encounters the 'scraps of memory beginning to drift through the outlying regions' (*Austerlitz* 191-2) of his mind, a final image recalls itself to him before he witnesses the phantasmic vision of his first meeting with the Eliases, the vision which instigates his nervous breakdown. Austerlitz recalls himself and Marie de Verneuil, his lost love, standing

[...] in the nave of the wonderful church of Salle in Norfolk, which towers in isolation above the wide fields [...] White mist had risen from the meadows outside, and we watched in silence as it crept slowly into the church porch, a rippling vapour rolling forward at ground level and gradually spreading over the entire stone floor, becoming denser and denser and rising visibly higher, until we ourselves emerged from it only above the waist and it seemed about to stifle us.

(*Austerlitz* 192)

There is no clearer demonstration than this of the fact that, at this moment in the text, Austerlitz is suffering from the failure to integrate this psychotic kernel of *jouissance* into consistent symbolic order. The church juts obscenely from the formless landscape, and Austerlitz and Marie are stranded within, high above the flat fields, silent as the mist encroaches upon them. They appear to be swallowed up in an abyss, within which they remain together but are unutterably separated by that voice stuck in Austerlitz's throat, the *voix acousmatique*, which 'could not bring out the words I should have spoken then' (*Austerlitz* 192). The framing of this memory demonstrates the manner in which Sebald constructs a textual representation of superposed time: Austerlitz, of course, is relaying this section of his story to the narrator in the Great Eastern Hotel in London in 1996; the story itself, of his visit to Liverpool Street Station, takes place in 1992; meanwhile, his recollection of Marie de Verneuil dates further back, to 1968. The effect is not one of time dilation, however: the narrative field does not appear to 'expand' with these repeated digressions; instead, the effect is one of superposition, of a radical sort of layering. The narrator notes that 'for Austerlitz certain moments had no beginning or end, while on the other hand his whole life had sometimes seemed to him a blank point without duration' (*Austerlitz* 165): the text makes this sense of 'life without duration' apparent in the way that Austerlitz experiences memory anachronistically. Memory is not rendered as an objective artefact in the text; rather, it is superposed in the sense that the 'viewing' of it alters its state, and since this altered state cannot constitute an 'original' purely 'objective' memory, the text is *not* constituted by 'fragments' as such, but instead by a single reading of many possible states, each encapsulated by a particular memory. In this way, the text seems to condense Austerlitz's experience without reducing any single aspect of it. As such, his memory of Marie in the church

(undoubtedly another traumatic moment itself, where that vortex of past time threatens to swallow Austerlitz's present once more), is only raised to a Symbolic level at this point, in the action of articulating *another* traumatic experience. That is why the memory 'ends' with the mist poised to engulf Marie and Austerlitz completely: the 'meaning' of the rising mist only becomes apparent to Austerlitz in his disquisition on the process of his breakdown; but, conversely, the moment in which Austerlitz *is* finally stifled by the vortex of the past, by this traumatic whirlpool of pure *jouissance*, is a moment which cannot be symbolically articulated, and therefore the mist can never fully engulf him in a sense which can be made symbolically present. This 'chain' of memory functions, like the chain of signification, until a certain point is reached where the Real trauma simply cannot be articulated and escapes its grasp.

It is for this very reason Austerlitz cannot 'name' his nervous breakdown as such; it is something *more than* inexpressible:

[...] for the first time in as far back as I can remember I recollected myself as a small child, at the moment when I realized that it must have been to this same waiting-room I had come on my arrival in England over half a century ago. As so often, said Austerlitz, I cannot give any precise description of the state of mind this realization induced; I felt something rending within me, and a sense of shame and sorrow, or perhaps something quite different, something inexpressible because we have no words for it [...]

(Austerlitz 193-4)

The problem for Austerlitz is not that there are no words to describe his feeling; it is, instead, that the breakdown itself is only experienced at the point where the symbolic process fails. The moment is not simply inexpressible: it is non-expression itself. As Lacan says, 'what I say is what there isn't' (*Encore* 118): we speak to make ourselves subject. The Real, therefore, is not simply that which cannot be spoken. If by speaking I say what is not there, I accomplish nothing by simply not speaking. The Real, instead, cannot be spoken *because it will not be spoken*. In other words, it is because it is the very thing which initiates the Symbolic order that it remains unspoken by the subject. That is why it is important to understand what 'type' of object Austerlitz encounters at this point. This is not *objet a*, which, as such, is never plainly revealed and is only glimpsed when the subject views it through the functional screen of his or her fantasy. This is the Imaginary object phi, which is experienced nakedly in the absence of a screen because it does not 'take' the form of another object for the subject, in other words cannot be viewed through a fantasy screen. We understand, therefore, why Austerlitz spends his time after his breakdown increasingly pursuing screens, and, indeed, why his career as an architectural historian formally ends at around this point. The mania experienced by Austerlitz in the waiting room of Liverpool Street Station is marked by an escalating tension in which

I felt, said Austerlitz, that the waiting-room where I stood as if dazzled contained all the hours of my past life, all the suppressed and extinguished fears and wishes I had ever entertained, as if the black and white diamond pattern of the stone slabs beneath my feet were the board on which the endgame would



be played, and it covered the entire plane of time.

(*Austerlitz* 193)

It is the building — the building-as-form — which materialises for Austerlitz the terrifying 'mass' of history, and which acts as an anchor for the unbidden experience of that traumatic vortex. Standing in the waiting room, Austerlitz is finally present at the very 'open wound' of history which both attracts and repulses him. This simultaneous attraction and repulsion is exemplified in the realisation of 'how little practice I had in using my memory, and conversely how hard I must always have tried to recollect as little as possible' (*Austerlitz* 197). The experience of the vortex itself is therefore an experience of an overabundance of memory rather than its failure as such. It is the point at which Austerlitz must 'break' and give in to the impassive and traumatic *jouissance* of a 'total history'. The text represents the subjective experience of this 'break' as exactly that: as a break in the text, a gap explicitly signalled by the sudden paucity of language.

Yet this self-censorship of my mind, the constant suppression of the memories surfacing in me, Austerlitz continued, demanded ever greater efforts and finally, and unavoidably, led to the almost total paralysis of my linguistic faculties, the destruction of all my notes and sketches, my endless nocturnal peregrinations through London, and the hallucinations which plagued me with increasing frequency up to the point of my nervous breakdown in the summer of 1992. I cannot say exactly how I spent the rest of that

year, said Austerlitz; all I know is that next spring, when there was improvement in my state of health, on one of my first ventures into the city I visited an antiquarian bookshop near the British Museum [...]

(Austerlitz 199)

The 'paralysis' of Austerlitz's 'linguistic faculties', we must note, does not apply to his admission that he 'cannot say exactly' how he spent his time in the period following his breakdown, because his inability to account for that time, in language, is not a result of the linguistic paralysis which had affected him. Austerlitz, in 1996, suffers from no linguistic paralysis: instead, he simply cannot make that break in his subject present in language. The interesting thing is that this moment of the break is made present precisely because it appears in the midst of two opposed examples of what Lacan calls the *tuché*, the encounter with the Real.<sup>132</sup> In Liverpool Street Station, the traumatic Real erupts and Austerlitz cannot contain it, it cannot be made consistent with his own desire because it materialises the Thing, the overwhelming vortex that obviates the revelation that mnemonic access to his 'total history' will not supply the deficient 'lack' in his subjectivity; his subjectivity breaks down because he has no fantasy screen with which to appease his desire and he is subsumed by something greater than his desire. On the other 'side' of the break, Austerlitz visits the book shop in which he again encounters the *voix acousmatique*, the voice without object issuing forth from the radio which is safely integrated into the screen of fantasy; in other words, it is the moment which 'reorients' his desire and finally sends him on the quest for an access to memory which is negotiated by *the*

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<sup>132</sup> See 'Tuché and Automaton' in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.

*screen*. Between these two moments where the Real threatens to burst forth into 'reality' (in Liverpool Street and the antique bookshop) is the actual point at which it makes an appearance: and this is the very moment that cannot be depicted in the text, just as it cannot be made consistent with Austerlitz's subject, because it will not be spoken by him.

The question which remains to be answered is precisely why Austerlitz's response to the abyss below the Bibliothèque Nationale is so radically opposed to his experience of the abyss at Liverpool Street Station. Following his unexpected meeting with Lemoine in the Bibliothèque Nationale, having just discovered the truth of the Austerlitz-Tolbiac depot and the abyss of Paris below his feet, a sanguine Austerlitz stands gazing out at the city from his high vantage point: 'For a while, said Austerlitz, we stood together in silence on the library belvedere, looking out over the city where it lay now sparkling in the light of its lamps' (*Austerlitz* 403); a short time after his visit to the library, Austerlitz leaves the narrator for the final time, explaining that he has heard

[...] from one of the staff at the records centre in the rue Geoffroy-l'Asnier, that Maximilian Aychenwald had been interned during the latter part of 1942 in the camp at Gurs, a place in the Pyrenean foothills which he, Austerlitz, must seek out. Curiously enough, said Austerlitz, a few hours after last meeting, when he had come back from the Bibliothèque Nationale and changed trains at the Gare d'Austerlitz, he had felt a premonition that he was coming closer to his father.

(*Austerlitz* 404-5)

How do we explain this shift in Austerlitz's behaviour? The novel concludes by offering no resolution to his quest: he and the narrator part company before Austerlitz leaves for the Pyrenees, the result of his pursuit of Maximilian never disclosed. In spite of its apparent form, this conclusion is not at all signalled by the text as a 'cliffhanger'. No tension is created by this apparent mystery. In fact it is quite banal: before it ends, the text follows the narrator's journey to Antwerp, to visit the fortress at Breendonk, for another five pages beyond Austerlitz's final 'appearance'. At the same time, it is also clear that this ending does not simply signal a textual admission that there is no 'point' to the conclusion of the journey, that it is 'the journey itself' which is worthwhile, nor indeed that the mystery of Austerlitz's origin can never be satisfied, in other words that there is no simple truth of his origins to be located (which, itself, is plainly false: there is a history to be 'found'). Instead, this final section signals Austerlitz's 'recovery', his return to the state of identification with his symptom rather than the identification with what Lacan calls the *sinthome*. As Žižek explains, the *sinthome* is 'a fragment of the signifier, inescapably permeated with mindless enjoyment':

[...] 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'.<sup>133</sup>

The *sinthome* is thus the kernel of *jouissance* which finally eludes interpretation, the point at which the subject can only identify with the Thing which embodies *jouissance* in order to

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<sup>133</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'The Undergrowth of Enjoyment: How Popular Culture can Serve as an Introduction to Lacan', *New Formations*, 9 (1989), 7-29 (10).

establish an internal consistency which does not rely on the 'truth' of the Symbolic order. This point marks the end of the subject's 'relationship' with the Other; in other words, the subject can no longer function 'socially', having based his or her internal consistency solely on the identification with that psychotic kernel of the Real which obeys no truth other than enjoyment — the enjoyment of 'nothing', as such. We can see exactly how this 'identification' proceeds in *Austerlitz*: it finally occurs at the point in the text at which Austerlitz suffers his breakdown in Liverpool Street, the point at which his 'linguistic faculties' have already become paralysed. When Austerlitz says that he felt in his head 'the dreadful torpor that heralds disintegration of personality' (*Austerlitz* 174), the ominous warning is accompanied by the realisation that the 'entire structure of language, the syntactical arrangement of parts of speech, punctuation, conjunctions, and finally even the nouns denoting ordinary objects were all enveloped in impenetrable fog' (*Austerlitz* 175) while the 'very thing which may usually convey a sense of purposeful intelligence — the exposition of an idea by means of a certain stylistic facility — now seemed to me nothing but an entirely arbitrary or deluded enterprise' (*Austerlitz* 175). The 'thing itself', for Austerlitz, has always been architecture:

[...] I found Austerlitz the first teacher I could listen to since my time in primary school. I remember to this day how easily I could grasp what he called his tentative ideas when he talked about the architectural style of the capitalist era, a subject which he said had fascinated him since his own student days, speaking in particular of the compulsive sense of order and the tendency towards monumentalism evident in lawcourts and penal institutions, railways stations and stock

exchanges, opera houses and lunatic asylums, and the dwellings built to rectangular grid patterns for the labour force. His investigations, so Austerlitz once told me, had long outstripped their original purpose as a project for a dissertation, proliferating in his hands into endless preliminary sketches for a study, based entirely on his own views, of the family likeness between all these buildings. Why he had embarked on such a wide field, said Austerlitz, he did not know [...] But then again, it was also true that he was still obeying an impulse which he himself, to this day, did not really understand, but which was somehow linked to his early fascination with the idea of a network such as that of the entire railway system.

(*Austerlitz* 43-5)

It is the form-of-the-building as materialisation of history which obsesses Austerlitz. For him, buildings accrete meaning, signifying the teleological process of cultural growth which subsumes the material history of the site itself and increasingly, as his mental health becomes more fragile, signals the 'return' of that buried history. The building is an object which appears to Austerlitz, therefore, to house an undisclosed truth which will explain something akin to a 'network' of history. Although he does not realise it, what Austerlitz appears to be describing is, as Long has also noted, the terrible trajectory of Western culture which appears to lead inexorably toward the event of the Holocaust. But what Austerlitz *also* describes is the very structure of the Symbolic realm, that part of reality which, for Lacan, grants access to meaning while it forecloses the

impossible Real of 'ex-istence', the 'authentic core' of existence which is denied to the subject in the entry to the realm of meaning. The impulse which Austerlitz obeys, as he accumulates those screens which form his archive, is the response to the big Other, to the coded message which we receive from the Other and obey without knowing that it is our *own message* returned in a form which we cannot recognise, owing to the screen of our own fantasy.

Austerlitz's experience of the waiting room in Liverpool Street Station, however, demonstrates the point at which his fantasy screen breaks down and he experiences total identification with the vortex of history *beyond* sense. The site becomes a materialisation of pure *jouissance* which cannot be represented as meaning in any sense other than as a *jouis-sense*: the 'meaning-in-enjoyment', as Žižek says, which is nothing other than the subject's disengagement with the Symbolic realm, the failure to identify with the symptom and traverse the fantasy screen. It is interesting, too, that Austerlitz conceives of language, at this moment, on the precipice of his breakdown, as 'a kind of unhealthy growth issuing from our ignorance' (*Austerlitz* 175). The unhealthy growth — repulsive in its *overpresence* — is, as we have seen, the form that finally signals Austerlitz's capture in the whirlpool of *jouissance* in the station, which is preceded by his total destruction of his entire archive in the back garden, accomplished by burial. Austerlitz literally buries his screen of fantasy in the ground, surrenders his very access to meaning 'under layers of rotted leaves and spadefuls of earth' (*Austerlitz* 176), primed and ready to become engulfed by the abyss.

The 'minimal consistency' of subjectivity which marks Austerlitz at this point is represented by the dream that he experiences after he blindly makes his way home from the ordeal in the station. Austerlitz lies down in 'drenched

clothes', falling into 'a deep, uneasy sleep' from which he 'did not wake until the middle of the night after the next day' (*Austerlitz* 195-6):

In that sleep, when my body feigned death while feverish thoughts whirled through my head, I was at the innermost heart of a star-shaped fortress, a dungeon cut off from the outside world [...]

(*Austerlitz* 196)

That 'dungeon cut off from the outside world' explains the consistency of the subject caught completely in identification with the *sinthome*: the *sinthome* is the fragment of the signifier which is not caught in the chain of signification, which does not relate to the system of meaning because it is permeated with *jouis-sense* as an 'outcrop' of the Real. Austerlitz is 'stuck' in this dungeon throughout his breakdown, throughout that point in the text where no symbolic representation is possible, the point that we have already identified by its absence in the text. In this sense, the experience in the bookshop following Austerlitz's own symbolic absence is the beginning of a renewed identification with the *symptom*. The moment in the bookshop, surrounded by screens which negotiate for Austerlitz the possibility of a fulfilment of desire, represents the point beyond which Austerlitz can, in fact, travel no further, because it represents the point at which he must remain caught in his own particular fantasy, the fantasy of a continual search for the knowledge of his past. That is why, at the top of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Austerlitz looks down upon Paris and represents it thus:



[...] one can look down from the so-called belvedere at the entire urban agglomeration which has risen over the millennia from the land beneath its foundations, which is now entirely hollowed out: a pale limestone range, a kind of excrescence extending the concentric spread of its incrustations far beyond the boulevards [...] and on into the outermost periphery beyond the suburbs [...]

(*Austerlitz* 399)

At first glance it seems that the abyss is more potent than ever, with Austerlitz perceiving it as encircling and engulfing the city completely. But the revelation of the buried objects of history below Austerlitz's feet, of the terrible fact of his stolen heritage, does not prompt a new 'break' in his subjectivity. There is a renewed sense that a 'proper weaving' of history once again occupies him — this proper weaving being the symbolic action conducted in the name of the Other. The abyss is now subtly 'ordered', the land around the city, rather than the city itself, becoming the 'excrescence'. Indeed, at the very moment following Lemoine's revelation that the library was built upon the buried remains of the Parisian Jews' possessions, Austerlitz looks down to the pine grove which appears to 'sink' into the building itself but is really an architectural feature, a 'nature reserve cut, so to speak, from the surface of the promenade deck and sunk two or three storeys deep' (*Austerlitz* 391), and sees only order: 'The tree-tops of the pine grove, which from this high vantage point had resembled moss-covered ground, now formed a regular black rectangle' (*Austerlitz* 403). That 'regularity' signals the gap in the Symbolic network by which a tiny feature is raised to the level of object-cause of desire: *objet a* which signals the subjective access to the Other by way of our acceptance

of the Symbolic realm. *Objet a* is the remainder which guarantees our Symbolic stability, as opposed to the protrusive outgrowths which threaten us with the fall towards an overwhelming identification only with the *jouissance* of the Real. Contemplating 'the Cartesian overall plan of the Bibliothèque Nationale' (*Austerlitz* 392), Austerlitz demonstrates that he now realises the nature of this fragment of the Real, by way of its necessary incorporation into the system of meaning:

I came to the conclusion that in any project we design and develop, the size and degree of complexity of the information and control systems inscribed in it are the crucial factors, so that the all-embracing and absolute perfection of the concept can in practice coincide, indeed ultimately must coincide, with its chronic dysfunction and constitutional instability.

(*Austerlitz* 392-3)

There is no clearer elucidation of the process by which that fragment of the Real is incorporated into the system of meaning, and by which the subject is ultimately constituted, than this. The outcome for Austerlitz is that he is now 'permitted' to enter this eternal search for the past, to ground his subjectivity upon the very concept of the search, the impossible 'completion' of his self. Standing in Gare d'Austerlitz, 'the most mysterious of all the railway terminals of Paris' (*Austerlitz* 406), according to Austerlitz, he is struck by the idea 'of his father's leaving Paris from this very station': 'I imagined, said Austerlitz, that I saw him leaning out of the window of his compartment as the train left' (*Austerlitz* 405-6). This image is one of a series in which screens in the

station are suddenly and unsettlingly traversed: 'the Metro trains coming from the Bastille, having crossed the Seine, roll over the iron viaduct into the station's upper story, quite as if the facade were swallowing them up' (*Austerlitz* 406); meanwhile, as Austerlitz 'stood on the scaffolding that Sunday afternoon looking up through the dim light at the ornate ironwork of the north facade, two tiny figures which I had noticed only after some time were moving about on ropes, carrying out repair work, like black spiders in their web' (*Austerlitz* 407-8). Austerlitz is disturbed by nothing other than the piercing gaze of the other when he recognises the figures upon the screen of the station facade. In both cases, his contention with the material screen signals a proper negotiation with the form itself: with the form which proposes to negotiate the space, before any other mediation, which guarantees the subjective negotiation *with* the Other. In other words, negotiation with the very possibility of an uncovering of knowledge, of a meaning which presently eludes the subject but which, the subject supposes, can become present in the ceaseless movement towards it.

This is, finally, the reason that the veil which hangs in Evan the cobbler's workshop in Bala seems to produce an effect upon the very text itself, why a constant opacity seems to affect Austerlitz's vision and light is never effervescent but always dull. Evan, with whom Austerlitz spends 'every free moment' as a child in Bala, 'had a reputation for seeing ghosts' (*Austerlitz* 74):

Evan told tales of the dead who had been struck down by fate untimely, who knew they had been cheated of what was due to them and tried to return to life. If you had an eye for them they were to be seen quite often, said Evan. At first glance they seemed to be

normal people, but when you looked more closely their faces would blur or flicker slightly at the edges.

*(Austerlitz 74-5)*

This 'blurring', we know, is the appearance of the stain of the Real in the subject's field of vision. But that which allows this blurring to appear, which bestows 'the eye for them' upon the subject, is the screen. It is that screen which is 'draped upon' Austerlitz's life, which makes apparent for him the very notion of a presence which can be uncovered beyond that veil which demarcates, for the subject, two opposed states:

Hanging from a hook on the wall above Evan's low workbench, said Austerlitz, was the black veil that his grandfather had taken from the bier when the small figures muffled in their cloaks carried it past him, and it was certainly Evan, said Austerlitz, who once told me that nothing but a piece of silk like that separates us from the next world.

*(Austerlitz 75-6)*

That bier is part of the procession of the dead which Evan's grandfather claims to have encountered, a small troop 'marching up the hill above the town to the soft beat of a drum, and only a little taller than the walls round the fields through which they went' (*Austerlitz 75*). Austerlitz witnesses a similar sight when he visits Marienbad with Marie in 1972, though it is not at all clear that he himself recognises the fact:

We were almost back in the town, said Austerlitz, when a little company of some ten

or a dozen small people emerged from the dark as if out of nowhere, at a place where white mist was already rising from the ground, and crossed our path. [...] They were strikingly short, almost dwarfish figures, slightly bent, moving along in single file [...]

(*Austerlitz* 305)

What Austerlitz does not realise, at this stage of his life, is that he looks *through* the veil at every moment, like his friend Gerald's Great-Uncle Alphonso, who wears glasses 'with grey silk tissue instead of lenses in the frames, so that the landscape appeared through a fine veil that muted its colours, and the weight of the world dissolved before your eyes' (*Austerlitz* 124-126). It is precisely because Austerlitz does not understand the frame of his own fantasy that he cannot recollect Evan's grandfather's tale at this point, in spite of the striking similarities between the two scenes. These similarities alert us as readers to the realisation that Austerlitz must make if ever he is to escape the vortex of history which constantly threatens to pull him downwards: his realisation, in the Bibliothèque Nationale, of the suspicion Austerlitz 'had always entertained that the border between life and death is less impermeable than we commonly think' (*Austerlitz* 395). Now, finally, he understands that the veil which hangs upon his life is the screen which must be traversed in the act of the pursuit of desire: it is the act in which, searching for meaning — 'I don't know, said Austerlitz, what all this means, and so I am going to continue looking for my father, and for Marie de Verneuil as well' (*Austerlitz* 408) — we must agree to foreclose our experience of that perilous *jouissance* of 'totality', the stupid, dumb form of meaning which threatens to swallow us whole, the price of which is our very desire.

We might recall Žižek's thoughts on the historical character of memory, in this light:

[...] in Classicism, memory recalls past happiness (the innocence of our youth, etc.), while the Romantic memory recalls not a direct past happiness but a past period in which future happiness still seemed possible, a time when hopes were not yet frustrated — memories here are 'those of absence, of that which never was'.<sup>134</sup>

Thinking of Austerlitz, holding a photograph in which he contemplates the 'future gaze' of his younger self, we see a suggestion that, though he is a subject of modernity, his memory in fact remains caught in a staunchly Romantic mode of negotiation with the past. In his search for a screen, he looks back to a time — *for* a time — when he looked forward. That is why, as Barthes says, the screen is a 'hideout'. But it is not just a refuge for that apparent presence which is animated within the frame and appears to find life beyond the screen. In fact, it is the *subject* who exists in this hideout, who finds a place of refuge when the exigencies of the Real threaten to return anew all over again. In which case, it would seem that Barthes misunderstood that for whom the screen really 'works': it was, actually, the subject all along. To address his success in this endeavour, we should give proper credit and say — *it was only played out upon a screen*.

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<sup>134</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 2008), 249.

## Conclusion:

### Desire of the Screen/ The Society of Perverts

In 2013, Franco Berardi posted a short essay in two parts on the website Through Europe. Within, he reflects upon his first visit to Seoul in South Korea: part-travelogue, part-socio-historical analysis, it analyses the conditions under which South Korean society transformed at 'the hand of the highest form of contemporary nihilism'.<sup>135</sup> There is no equivocation over the result of this metamorphosis. The capitalist embrace has, for Berardi, transformed Seoul into 'the end of line of the contemporary hell' ('Journey to Seoul (1)'). Žižek's analysis of Berardi's essay provides, as usual, a trenchant investigation of its broader context:

Berardi's portrait of South Korea seems to follow the unsurpassed model of such portraits in the last decades, Baudrillard's famous portrait of Los Angeles (in his *America*) as a hyperreal Hell. It is all too easy to dismiss this genre of portraits as the pretentious pseudo-intellectual exercise of European postmodernists who use a foreign land or city as a screen onto which to project their morbid dystopias. In spite of all exaggerations, there is a grain of truth in them; or, more precisely, to paraphrase Adorno's well-known dictum about psychoanalysis, in Baudrillard's portrait of LA nothing is true except its exaggerations. And the same goes for Berardi's impressions of

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<sup>135</sup> Franco Berardi Bifo, 'Journey to Seoul (1)'. <<http://th-rough.eu/writers/bifo-eng/journey-seoul-1>> accessed 10/04/15.

Seoul: what they provide is the image of a place deprived of its history, a *worldless* place.<sup>136</sup>

If the portrait painted by 'Journey to Seoul' is accurate precisely because of its exaggerations, then what Berrardi has to say about the role of the screen in twenty-first century Korean culture should be read not simply as rebuke, but as prophecy:

The majority of people are constantly looking at their small cell-phone screens. In the land of Samsung, girls and boys are permanently connected, whenever they walk or sit or stand waiting for the subway train to approach. Their hands are busy carrying iPads, their fingertips run ceaselessly along digital screens.

One day, in a park, I sat on a bench and I looked for fifteen minutes at a group of three young girls. They were standing under a tree, each of them looking at her phone, smiling at the camera, taking pictures around, taking pictures of herself, and showing each new picture to the others. All of them were standing silently.

Screens are everywhere: big screens on the walls of skyscrapers, middle-sized screens in the station's halls. But the small private screens of the smart-phones take over most of the attention of the crowd, calmly and silently shuffling without looking around.

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<sup>136</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), 7.



[...] In the emptied cultural space, the Korean experience is marked by an extreme degree of individualization and simultaneously it is headed towards the ultimate cabling of the collective mind.

These lonely monad walks in the urban space in tender continuous interaction with the pictures, tweets, games coming out of their small screens, perfectly insulated and perfectly wired into the smooth interface of the flow.

('Journey to Seoul (1)')

Can't we see that this portrait of a strategy of social integration with the screen, even as it is here explored in relation to a set of specific cultural conditions, demonstrates something very similar to that which we have witnessed in our analysis of these texts? The screens in Berardi's portrait are actually following the kind of fault line of the central tension which is transcribed by the dialectic of the screen. What the preceding analysis allows us to propose is that this fault line is indeed the dialectical outcome itself: the production of the subject. Berardi deploys the screen as emblem in his analysis, but it is clear that the screen is also *more* than an emblem. It is implicitly involved in the complex process in which the subject attempts to 'connect' to his or her exteriority. It structures the ability to perform this connective act, producing a mediated intimacy. The mediation of intimacy, the 'construction' of the locus of desire: these are the processes which are interrogated repeatedly in the texts which we have analysed. Peter and Bea's relationship, conducted and mediated via the Shoot in *The*

*Book of Strange New Things*; Jimmy's experience of fantasy and desire as the possibility for disclosure of a hidden kernel of 'human meaning' in *Oryx and Crake*; the society deprived of narcissism of *The Tain*; Austerlitz's search for the screen of fantasy: each text, I suggest, is involved in a work which dramatises — for the purpose of interrogation — the kind of interactions we see Berardi documenting in his South Korean portrait. It is this kind of cultural condition with which Paul Virillio contends when he writes of 'the incontinent TELEVISUALISM of a world buckled in on itself, in this "real-time perspective" of ubiquity'.<sup>137</sup> The screen begins to follow us everywhere; or rather, we now notice that *we* are following *the screen* everywhere. In Berardi's words, the lonely monad is 'perfectly insulated' 'in tender continuous interaction' with the screen. Is this exaggeration? And, as Žižek proposes, does this exaggeration draw us closer to the heart of the matter?

The example of the girls silently and eerily captivated by their smartphones (the small private screens that Berardi mentions in the following paragraph) demonstrates the manner in which one type of screen is performing the functions of many. On one level it is true that the girls are enraptured by image itself, but on another it seems clear that there is also a correspondence between the fascination of the girls with the function of the screen and the (un-)responsiveness of that image to their present. The projection of this apparently 'present' moment upon the screen, and the occlusive function that seems to result from this, invites the consideration of the spatial perceptions experienced by the girls as they consider the screens. The 'present' (both 'contemporary' and 'at hand') moment of the screen never 'catches up' with their phantasmatic reality. This

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<sup>137</sup> Paul Virillio, *Art as Far as the Eye Can See*, trans. Julie Rose (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007), 37.

is the 'incontinent televisualism' of real-time, and the screen is implicated in that function. But is this not simply a reformulation of one of Austerlitz's central dilemmas? The projective face of the screen never catches up with the present moment of the subject. It is always involved in a reality-producing process. This is to be distinguished from simple 'mediation', because the 'real' that the screen mediates is the Real. As with Austerlitz's attempt to screen the traces of a traumatic history, the girls chase screens: screens which are produced at every moment of every new image which is captured by their devices. Berardi suggests that their silence is an effect of a culture adrift in simulation. To advance his thesis, I suggest that we consider the manner in which this screen-object itself could be considered not only as an emblem of this 'pure solitude' but as an agent in its very possibility.

Something about this seems 'perverse'. If the screen functions as a guarantor of subjectivity, maintains the gap which provides the space *for* the negotiation of space on behalf of the subject, how can it also produce a 'worldless' society? In other words, how can it alienate the subject *from* the Symbolic superstructure itself? Of course, we understand that the subject is founded upon the alienation of being *in the Real*. But what, if anything, in relation to the screen, causes this experience to become repeated at a social level? To answer these questions, we should attempt to understand the experience of the pervert as described by Lacan. In Lacan, perversion describes the inversion of the fantasy of the subject:

In the phantasy, the subject is frequently unperceived, but he is always there, whether in the dream or in any of the more or less

developed forms of day-dreaming. The subject situates himself as determined by phantasy.

[...] the structure of perversion [...] is an inverted effect of the phantasy. It is the subject who determines himself as object, in his encounter with the division of subjectivity.

*(The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis 185)*

The fantasy relation is described by Lacan as the relationship between the 'split' or barred subject (\$) and the object of desire (*a*); for the pervert, however, identification in the fantasy occurs not with his or her own subjectivity but with the 'place' of the *object*. In the constitution of the subject, we will remember, the subject establishes a fantasy relation with *objet a* in order to objectivise their own loss; in other words, the fantasy situates the lack around which the subject coalesces, offering a 'route' towards the compensation of this loss through *objet a*. The pervert, in contrast, imagines that no compensation for this originary loss is necessary, as Joan Copjec explains:

The pervert [...] refuses all recognition of his own lack, even in external form. The pervert places himself in the position of "never being deprived with regard to knowledge, and most particularly knowledge concerning love and eroticism." Or, as Freud says of one variety of pervert, "What other men have to woo and make exertions for can be had by the fetishist with no trouble at all," for he is certain about love, about what the Other wants. The pervert, then, places himself in the real, the only place

where nothing is lacking, where knowledge is certain. That is, rather than position himself in relation to the imaginary form of the object *a*, he positions himself *as* the object *a*, in its real form.

(*Read My Desire* 109)

Does Berardi's portrait not present an example of a perverted relation to the screen? The subjective 'interaction' with the screen produces a stable subject, of course; this we have learned. But how might the pervert position him- or herself in the relationship with the screen-object? If one imagines oneself as the object of the Other's desire, in other words, as in possession of the knowledge, *in the Real*, of *objet a* for the Other, how might one approach the screen? One might surround oneself with screens, 'big screens on the walls of skyscrapers, middle-sized screens in the station's halls [...] small private screens', and this might become reflected in a milieu in which the opportunities for screen interaction proliferate. It is this avenue of inquiry that we should add to a 'standard' Lacanian reading of the scene in which Berardi describes the young girls interacting via their smartphones. In a standard reading, we might suggest that the girls make themselves 'present' for the Other in their strange, silent ritual. They each circulate the images amongst the others of the group, but it is clear that the 'content' of these images is unimportant in the context; the images are quickly replaced by successors, and this circulation does not cease. It is not, therefore, the image which substantiates the desire of the Other; the girls do not attempt to draw closer to the object of desire by identifying with the fantasy of the image. Instead, it is in the continuous production of a screen relationship, in the act of silently displaying the screen to the other, that the fantasy becomes manifest. The girls already propose

themselves as the object of desire. They presuppose a knowledge in the Real which based upon a perverted fantasy of knowledge derived from the screen — not *information* displayed by the screen, but a direct connection to the Other which follows an acknowledgement of the role of the screen in negotiating the space of subjectivity. In other words, the screen object makes present, 'objectivises', the work of the immaterial screen. By engaging directly with the form of the screen, the girls posit themselves as the object-cause of the Other's desire, enacting a symbolic cut which produces only silence. Each subject circumvents the 'exertions', to quote Freud, which accompany the pursuit of desire — the exertions which each subject undergoes in order to attempt to make present the lure of their own fantasy.

Each 'tender continuous interaction' with the screen follows this model of perversion. The subject becomes, for the Other and in the eyes of the Other, an object, assuming the knowledge which accompanies the 'station' of *objet a*. The subject attains a shortcut to *jouissance* at the expense of the other. The fantasy relation is manifest in terms of Imaginary belief, where the knowledge of the Real cannot exist. The subject is thus involved in an infantile relationship with the Other. (Freud, of course, calls the infant polymorphously perverse.) Is it surprising that we might read the inhabitants of this 'worldless place' as a *society of perverts*?

But this is not to say that it is the dramatisation of the subjective interaction with the screen which 'produces', socially, this perverted relationship. In fact, I would suggest that we do not encounter the depiction of a perverted relation with the screen-object in any of the novels we have analysed; which is to say that neither Peter, nor Jimmy, nor Sholl, nor Austerlitz identify with themselves in the objective position which might grant knowledge in the Real. The role of

the screen in these texts is ultimately a *stabilising* one. While the constitution of the subject inevitably invites the irruption of the Real, an irruption which is experienced as breach of the screen which guarantees the subject, it is also true that the screen-objects we have read here are what makes it possible to attain the *Symbolic* knowledge which makes subjective experience representable within these texts. This reading is contrary to Fred Botting's analysis of William Gibson's *Idoru*, in which he posits the screen (crucially, in Botting's analysis, a mere component of a machine-Thing) as a consumptive object, guzzling up the subject and leaving only a husk in the Real:

In the latter half of the twentieth century, when romance is relayed across western globalised culture by so many vision machines and terminal screens to assume a dominant position in the lives of consuming and desiring subjects, the function of the Thing changes: when the unrepresentable void underlying cultural screens is hollowed out by technological rewritings of reality, digital desiring expands to literalise *jouissance* (virtually, at least) as a general condition. [...] The remainder of the real defining the minimal in-human difference is obliterated in corporeal form.<sup>138</sup>

The difference between the screen in the texts we have analysed, and the screen in *Idoru* which violently strips away subjectivity, leaving 'Passive, formless and stupefied before the screen, [only] a trace of the passion that defines the human subject' (*Sex, Machines and Navels* 211), is that *Idoru*

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<sup>138</sup> Fred Botting, *Sex, Machines and Navels: Fiction, Fantasy and History in the Future Present* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1999), 210.

figures the screen (as Botting suggests) as an aspect of the machine as inhuman Thing. In this respect, I would suggest that *Idoru* belongs to an older mode of subject-screen-interaction, a resolutely *non*-twenty-first century mode of the kind that Nicholas Daly discusses in *Literature, Technology, and Modernity*, where the troubled intersection of technology and subjectivity is expressed in the figure of the ecstatic collision between both.<sup>139</sup> In *Idoru*, the machine perhaps grants the ultimate wish of James in Ballard's *Crash*, in the form of the old aphorism 'be careful what you wish for: you just might get it!' The screen in *Idoru* transubstantiates the subject into an object in the Real, stripping it of subjectivity and reducing it to a base form of organic matter ruled by primal instinct: 'It's covered with eyes and it sweats constantly. The sweat runs into those eyes and makes them sting. It has no mouth, Laney, no genitals, and can only express the mute extremes of murderous rage and infantile desire by changing channels on a universal remote.'<sup>140</sup> This is the true, Lacanian destiny of the Ballard character in *Crash* who wishes to become sublimated by the encounter with the machine. The final result is not a 'vanished identity abstracted in terms of the geometry of this vehicle'<sup>141</sup>: that vanished body impermeably marked upon the shell of the automobile prompts the question 'How much more mysterious would be our own deaths, and those of the famous and powerful?' The answer to be found in *Idoru* is that the death is no more powerful at all. The subject's destiny in the Real will grant access only to the being beyond subjectivity, the horrifyingly amorphous fleshy mass which is neutered and dazed by the screen-face of the terrifying machine-Thing.

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<sup>139</sup> See, especially, the chapter 'Sensation drama, the railway, and modernity'.

<sup>140</sup> William Gibson, *Idoru* (London: Penguin, 1996), 29.

<sup>141</sup> J.G. Ballard, *Crash* (London: Vintage, 1995), 13.



This kind of relationship is not depicted in the texts we have analysed over the preceding pages, of course. What might be responsible for the development of the subject-screen-interaction in twenty-first century literature? I would suggest that Marc Augé's description of the 'decentering' of contemporary life in *Non-Places* provides a clue: 'In the dwellings themselves, houses or apartments, the television and computer now stand in for the hearth of antiquity'.<sup>142</sup> The conclusion we can draw from Augé work, and our own analysis of these texts, is that *the screen is no longer figured as an exteriority of subject*. The bar of subjectivity which forecloses the experience of 'being' from the subject forms a model which resounds in the screen. The particular form of 'twenty-first century representation' for the subject, therefore, might be defined as one in which our distant intimacy, driven by the shocks of the worldless place, is formalised as interaction with the screen in order to represent ourselves, our own subjectivity, in the place where we might gain recognition, in order to *remain* constructing ourselves, and to make present that absent desire which strides further and further into the distance.

In other words, we should *watch* this society of perverts, and respond to the call for the screen which is depicted by twenty-first century texts. This screen does not foreclose an authentic mode of experience. Nor does it offer a final escape into a purely 'authentic' mode of being. We must remember that, each in our own way, we are engaged in the production of fantasy. Perhaps it would be useful to bear this fact in mind while we are so often entreated to renounce our screen-objects, to stop 'looking through a lens' and re-

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<sup>142</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London and New York: Verso, 2002), vii.

engage in the practice of an 'authentic life'. The screen, after all, is part of us.

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