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**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Hook, Derek (2010) *The powers of emptiness*. [Theory & psychology](#), 20 (6). pp. 855-870. ISSN 0959-3543

DOI: [10.1177/0959354310383912](https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354310383912)

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Available in LSE Research Online: April 2012

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# The powers of emptiness

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ABSTRACT: Foucault is often considered to be the commensurate theorist of power. His late work provides an impressive array of concepts that enables a multi-dimensional analysis of the historical, material and discursive facets of power. What is missing from this approach is the factor of passionate attachments, or what we might term the sublime motivations that underlie any regime of control. Lacan's ethical thought prioritizes precisely the issue of the sublime, and, more to the point, the process of sublimation which establishes an effective 'short-circuit' between socially-valourised objects and direct drive satisfactions of individuals. Key here is the notion of *das Ding*, the place of the absent object of primordial satisfaction that generates libidinal enjoyment and draws the subject toward the pinnacle of social valorisation. Lacan thus shows us what Foucault cannot theorize. That is to say, if sublimation consists of a relation to the real of *das Ding*, then it cannot be limited in the terms of its activation to the powers of discursive domain alone; it remains a self-initiating and self-regulating form of power.

Key Words: Ethics, Lacan, Foucault, *das Ding*, sublimation, power

## Sublime motivations

The work of Michel Foucault has proved an important influence in the arena of the critical and theoretical psychology that *Theory and Psychology* has done so well to explore over the last 20 years. This has proved the case not only methodologically (Hook, 1999; Ibanez, 1991; Yates & Hiles, 2010), but also in terms of plotting the relation between power and subjectivity (Amigot & Pujal, 2009; Guilfoyle, 2007; Hook, 2002; Joy, 1993). While the

current paper wishes to make a contribution to this literature, it hopes to do so via means of an adjunct to Foucault's theorization of power provided by another French intellectual whose work has itself gained increasing prominence in *Theory and Psychology* over the last several years (Dunker, 2008; Malone, 2000, 2007, 2008; Parker, 2005, 2008; Shingu & Funaki, 2008; Vanheule & Verhaeghe, 2001; Webb & Sells, 1995): Jacques Lacan.

What is often elided in more polarizing comparisons of Foucault and Lacan's work (Copjec, 1994) is the fact of an important parallel: both, theorists, at particular moments in their work, turn their attention to the topic of ethics (Rajchman, 1991). Lacan's most developed engagement with this subject occurs in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Foucault's ethical turn forms part of his elaboration of the notion of technologies of subjectivity in the 1980's. This, as I will go on to argue, proves to be a telling comparison, one which shows up a potential weakness in Foucault's ethical thought. Although his late conceptualizations of power – his influential notions of governmentality, biopolitics, disciplinarity, and so on - prove indispensable to any contemporary analytics of power, this formidable array of concepts nonetheless fails to grasp a crucial element in the maintenance of power. It is precisely in view of the Foucauldian approach to *ethical* technologies of the self, I claim, that we can isolate a crucial failing: the sublime motivations or 'passionate attachments' underlying regimes of control.

My objective is not to dismiss the value and perspicacity of the above Foucauldian notions. To the contrary, one of my concerns lies with the question of how certain Foucauldian analytical devices might need to make reference to the unlikely ally of psychoanalysis so as to overcome blind-spots introduced by an unwavering methodological commitment to genealogical historicism. Put differently, one might – oddly enough -

express a fidelity to Foucault even by way of recourse to psychoanalysis. An original line of speculation might be opened up in this way, by asking what extra-discursive powers of ‘the real’ – as opposed to productive ensembles of discourse - might come to be enlisted in the establishment of workable apparatuses of control. We should thus ask: what modes of impossibility, that is to say, what impasses of desire, what forms of libidinal enjoyment (*jouissance*) are implied (if not in fact *presumed*) within the conjunctions of power-knowledge that Foucault understands within the logic of the *dispositif*?

### **Ethical technologies of self**

Given that I have discussed Foucault’s notion of ethics in some detail elsewhere (2007), I will limit myself to providing only a minimal outline here. For Foucault, and scholars like Dean (1999) Rose (1991, 1996) inspired by this period of his work, ethics is comprised of the ‘conduct of self-conduct’, those techniques of self whereby individuals affect a variety of operations “on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being” (Foucault, 1988a, p. 18). Of great importance for Foucault (1988b) is the fact that a potential gap separates normalizing, regulative technologies of subjectivity from their individualized activation and rearrangement. In the case of the former we have a series of regulative discursive routines of self-knowledge and practice that are articulated in the norms of health and betterment. In the case of the latter we have the properly ethical domain of the personalized, indeed, *aesthetic* care of the self. This, in rudimentary terms, is the basic distinction between normative morality and ethical individuality.

One of the strengths of this account, certainly for scholars like Rose, is that it shows how the realm of ethical individuality is all too often overdetermined by the values and practices of prevailing normative (and normalizing) morality. That is, Foucault's account of technologies of subjectivity enables us to plot the downward saturation of power, to capture the interchange between structural apparatuses of influence and the micro-politics of self in such a way that we are able to understand how 'deeply' private and personalized practices of self are already political operations linked to the broader objectives of the governmentality of the state.

Now while it is important to note that the ethical technologies of self discussed by Foucault (1988c, 1988d) - unlike those analyzed by Rose (1991) - are drawn from a wide historical range, and are not always thus linked to explicitly normalizing expertise, or, indeed delimited by the protocols of disciplinary knowledge. Nonetheless, despite that for the later Foucault there is the possibility of ethical practices of freedom (1988c), this conceptualization nonetheless still runs up against a problem. Foucault's ethical technologies of self seem oddly bloodless, detached from any motivating passions, lacking in affective intensity. Such a depiction hardly accords with the raptures of practice presumably accompanying the vigour of the ascetic preoccupations that Foucault (1988c, 1988d) himself discusses, such as those of spiritual, dietary or sexual discipline. These are not practices without a libidinal dimension; they are often linked precisely to 'sublime' aims, to "the goals", to quote Foucault "of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection and immortality" (1988a, p. 18) that are, for many worth living and dieing for.

What is it then, we should ask, that drives and inspires such practices? Not surely simply the banal impetus of the "ideals of scientific, political and

philanthropic experts” (Rose, 1991, p. 213), the life-objectives prescribed by today’s generic norms of subjectivity? Surely these targets have to be understood against the context of a far more passionate set of attachments, especially so if we are to account for the subject-driven impetus that Foucault so often alludes to?

We are here approaching the realm of the sublime, of something not motivated merely by biopolitical regulation, disciplinary normalization or diffused technologies of subjectivity and governmentality, however dispersed or discontinuous, for indeed, it is often precisely *against* such forces of the sublime – as in the case of the racist “national Thing” invoked by Žižek (1993) - that the state is obliged to act. Switching to a psychoanalytic register, one would say we have arrived at the question of the drives and their social mediation, or, more particularly, at the challenging issue of the drives *in relation to sublimation*, to what is accorded the highest values in a culture.

### **The dilemmas of sublimation**

Lacan devotes the second section of Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, to the problem of sublimation, to revising this key notion of Freudian thought that by 1959 had become so riddled with contradictions that its ongoing viability as a clinical tool was under serious threat. He opens with a clarification, underlining the fact that in sublimation one is dealing with the positive side of ethical thought, not with prohibitions and moral conscience, but with “moral and spiritual elevation” (1992, p. 87). Many similar qualifications – such as the idea that there can be no complete sublimation - will follow in Lacan’s attempt to clear the way to a more workable understanding of the concept of sublimation.

A paramount concern in dealing with the confused state of the concept of sublimation lies with asserting the very plasticity of the drives. In opposition to the more gentrified view offered by ego psychology, Lacan affirms that there is no pre-accommodation of the drives animating the human organism to its world, no natural fit of objects to impulses, no ultimate resolution of the spectrum of drives into a unified genital form. "[T]he libido, with its paradoxical, archaic so-called pre-genital characteristics, with its eternal polymorphism, with its world of images...linked to different sets of drives associated with different stages...[evidences for us that] the whole microcosm has absolutely nothing to do with the macrocosm" (p. 92). What we are contending with in the drive is the *irreducible* character of archaic forms of libido; such 'aspirations' will never yield to full domestication: we are dealing with "a point of departure and a nucleus that is never completely resolved under... primacy of genitality or a pure and simple *Vorstellung* [idea]" (p. 93). In addition to the issue of the irreducible character of the archaic libido – i.e. the original recalcitrance of the drives, the fact that they never yield to full domestication - is the consideration that the drive has the resources of apparently limitless possibilities of substitution regards its ostensible goal.

Already then the convergence of drive attentions onto a prescribed set of socially-valORIZED goals seems unlikely, but the problem is more pronounced yet. We have also to take into account the fact that sublimation involves a change of objects, a change, as Lacan notes, chiming with Freud's demands in *Three Essays on Sexuality*, "that doesn't occur through the intermediary of a return of the repressed nor symptomatically...[but] in a way which satisfies directly" (p. 94). There is no apparent disjunction here, no redirection via the means of the symptom. (The methodological contrast

with Foucault's privileged methodological concept of discontinuity is already pronounced here). Furthermore, insists Lacan (1992), sublimation cannot be collapsed into reaction-formation; it is not a defensive reaction that takes the form of the opposite impulse to what is socially-prohibited. Nor crucially, for Freud (1966a), is sublimation to be understood via the mechanics of repression. Freud (1966a) asks us not only to believe that the polymorphous field of sexual libido settles on a rather limited set of objects – where, moreover, it is able to find direct satisfaction – he asks us also to accept that these are “socially valorized objects of which the group approves...objects of public utility” (Lacan, p. 94).

We need ask: given the amazing latitude within which libidinal gratifications may be achieved – not to mention the variety of substitutions afforded drive-impulses - then why the regularity and intensity of investment in objects of collective cultural value? Lacan immediately warns against what would appear an intuitive solution, the idea, in short, that we might resolve this difficulty by means of reference to “a simple opposition and a simple reconciliation between the individual and the collectivity” (p. 94). There is something too convenient about this move for Lacan, whereby the collective finds its satisfaction where the individual is already libidinally invested. Moreover, it poses not only a singular autonomy on the side of the subject's libido (the coherence of ‘individual satisfaction’ in and of itself), it also implies a pre-destined integration of drive and environment that cannot but strike one as anathema to Freudian theory. Besides, Lacan reminds us, there is a further complication to consider here: Freud's declaration that sublimation is a process of *object* rather than ego libido.

To say that sublimation represents a fortuitous outcome to a potentially endlessly convoluted trajectory is an understatement. One thing



seems clear after having surveyed the dilemmas of sublimation: Lacan's best explanatory hope lies not in the attempt to trace the endless complexity of a given libidinal genealogy, but rather in identifying the conditions of possibility underlying this field of permutations. The enigma of how a short-circuit is set up between *socially*-valorized objects and direct drive satisfactions of the *individual subject* is something previous psychoanalysts have attempted to resolve by looking at the attributes of the objects of sublimation themselves (at how they may function as 'stand-ins' for the mother, for instance), and at vicissitudes of the drive that may modulate its course without fundamentally compromising its directness. Lacan, predictably, follows a different course. He eschews the attempt to trace the road-map of libidinal interest and their transformations; he likewise avoids tracking the idiosyncratic developments in the subject which would explain the extraordinary contingency whereby the plasticity of the "*triebe*" (drives) happen to find direct expression in society's most prized activities and objects. He prefers instead to explore more carefully what underlies this knotted complex of factors, to examine the necessary *structural* conditions underlying such archaic libidinal activity. The same point can be made by citing Lacan: in the case of sublimation we should look predominantly "neither to the field of the intersubjective subject, [nor to] the subject subjected to the mediation of the signifier, but [rather to] what is behind this subject" (1992, p. 103).

### **The field of *das Ding***

Lacan's response to the dilemmas of sublimation is enabled via an ingenious piece of inter-textuality. He identifies what is ostensibly the same element in two otherwise chronologically and thematically-diverse aspects of Freud's

oeuvre. The “*ding*” of *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1966c) is, he claims, one and the same as the primordial ‘object’ of satisfaction, the “*Wieder zu finden*”, the will to find again, present in the late (1966b) paper on negation. The *Wieder zu finden* is what for Freud “establishes the orientation of the human subject to the object” (Lacan, 1992, p. 58). The whole progress of the subject takes its cue from *das Ding*, this mythical ‘proto-object’ which lies “[r]ight at the beginning of the organization of the world in the psyche, both logically and chronologically” and which provides the point “around which the whole adaptive development revolves” (p. 57).

In the *Project* Freud (1966c) makes a point about the subject’s constitutive mis-adaptation to reality, which he links to their inability to adequately apprehend the other, indeed, to a constitutive absence in psychic life. Freud’s assertion is troubling not only in view of a commitment we might have to any rudimentary psychological realism – an affront, in other words, to the view that the subject directly knows their empirical domain – it is troubling also in view of the limitations it places on inter-subjectivity, on our ability to ever truly to know one another. In a section of the *Project* much valued by Lacanians, Freud takes the example of an infant’s perceptual engagement with another person:

[T]he perceptual complexes proceeding from this fellow human-being will in part be new and non-comparable...but other visual perceptions...will coincide in the subject with memories of quite similar impressions of his own body... Thus the complex of the fellow human-being falls apart into two components, of which one makes an impression by its constant structure and stays together as a *thing*, while the other can be *understood* by the activity of

memory...traced back to information from [the subject's] own body (1966c, p. 331).

This is a crucial passage. For a start, it emphasizes that the child's initial interest in the other has much to do with the fact that "an object *like this* was simultaneously [their] first satisfying...and hostile object, as well as [their] sole helping power (Freud, 1966b, p. 331). There is thus a possibility of re-finding pleasure here, in this object that simultaneously invokes the mother and the care she represents, and the prospect of a primal aggressiveness. This is not the only psychical filter which characterizes the subject's relationship to their fellow being. The cognitive and perceptual information of this other is assimilated only via the subject's experiences of *their own* body, by the route of their own foregoing experience. Arresting as these two modes of estrangement might appear – the facts that the other is known via its potential for pleasure/hostility, or through the prism of the subject's image of his- or herself – neither is sufficient to explain what is most fundamentally alien in the other, this 'thingness' which defies recuperation into either inter-subjectivity or the terms of the reality principle. It is worth stressing here the factor of negativity. What knits psychological reality for the subject, what makes it cohesive, is not an attunement to reality and its objects, but rather a kind of subtraction. As Copjec (1994) avers, "it is only when our perceptions come to refer themselves to...[the] lost object of satisfaction that they can be deemed objective" (p. 233). This object is now excluded from our perceptions of mere worldly objects despite that "it now functions as that which is "in them more than them"" (Copjec, p. 233).

Given the dense series of formulations that Lacan will develop from his re-conceptualization of the Freudian *ding* – particular in relation to *pure desire* and the primacy of an unconscious Law that over-rides 'the good' - it

helps to focus on what, for psychoanalysis, is a familiar domain of exemplification: the primordial relation to the mother. One can speak of the mother as “the maternal thing” he claims, “insofar as she occupies the place of...*das Ding* (p. 67). Having said this, Lacan is immediately alive to the reductive capacity of such an equation, even as he is aware of the importance of the initial location of the mother within the co-ordinates of *das Ding*. (“Kleinian theory”, Lacan notes, in the ambivalent tone characteristic of his discussions of Klein, “depends on its having situated the mythic body of the mother at the central place of *das Ding*” (1992, p. 106)). Importantly then, while Lacan clearly *does* want to understand the relations of the subject to something primordial – indeed, in terms of “its attachment to the...most archaic of objects” (p. 106) - he nevertheless wishes to avoid the fixity of a singular, ‘nuclear’ object and its variants. He prefers instead to provide a operational definition of the field of *das Ding* which establishes the framework for such relations, for such *Things*.

### **The force of subtraction**

When it comes to sublimation then, Lacan is less interested in the redirection of drives than with the opening up of a space, with a vacuum of *jouissance*. This voracious absence is strictly coterminous with that aspect of the other which evades human recognition, with that thing-like element which cannot be retrieved into symbolic or imaginary registers. In the case of *das Ding* we are dealing with the vanishing-point of humanity, with the radical alterity of the *Nebenmensch* (neighbour), with a blind-spot in psychical and moral apprehension that cannot be overcome, even by the most sincere attempts at empathy or inter-subjectivity. Such an unknowability cannot be reduced merely to ‘otherness’; it is tantamount instead to a cavity of desire, a

‘swallowing abyss’ that inculcates a response - indeed, an economy of attraction and avoidance - within the subject. Lacan has thus substituted for the lost primordial object of *jouissance*, a place, a *power of emptiness*, which makes such an object possible.

Like the hollowness of the vase which for Heidegger (1968) defines its function – “If the vase may be filled”, says Lacan, “it is because...in its essence it is empty” (p. 120) – this is a thoroughly paradoxical emptiness. Hence Lacan’s comments: “the Thing...is there in a beyond”, “...the Thing is not nothing, but literally is not” (1992, p. 63). This is a *nihil* – a nothingness turned inside out, as one might put it - which engenders a kind of being; a nothing with a generative capacity. It is a fully *positivized* absence, an ‘extracted’ structural space for which there is no pre-ordained object, and for which there can be no perfect fit. Nonetheless, like the black-hole to which it is often compared, *das Ding* exerts a potent gravitational field, and in so doing it elicits sublime passions – and, wagers Lacan, effects of creation - *ex nihilo*, out of a void. This then is the productive force of subtraction which is able to bring *Things* into existence on the basis of its sheer emptiness. So although no single object can occupy this space indefinitely, an ongoing succession of ‘sacred’ cultural objects and practices will be resident here, assuming, at particular historical junctures, the sublime status according such a position.

What Lacan achieves with this conceptualization is to connect more explicitly the inassimilable foreignness that is *das Ding* to the impossible object of the *Wieder zu finden*. More than this, he pinpoints *the place* of the primal object of desire, isolating thus the pull of a radical form of desire which must remain empty, never finally embodied in any one object. He thus sets us on the track of a psychoanalytic ethics, which is an ethics of the

fidelity to the *empty form of desire itself* (Neill, 2007, Zupančič, 2000) over and above the particularity of any of its instantiations.

The extraordinary object status of *das Ding* helps Lacan resolve - or at least clarify - certain of the paradoxes of Freud's object of 'primordial satisfaction'. We are presented here with an ostensibly negative ontology. This is an object, thought to embody a type of full *jouissance*, which the subject never possessed but that remains nevertheless more real – certainly in its ability to inculcate desire - than anything that they do; an object that is strictly irretrievable despite our incessant attempts at its (impossible) re-finding. This is an object, moreover, that puts into play a fantasmatic prehistory: what we never had is now the 'what came before', and that which is fundamentally inaccessible is that which we believe we can enjoy once again.

There is a further complication involved in Lacan's re-conceptualization of the primordial object of desire. This 'proto-object' of *das Ding* is both that which inaugurates an original division in the experience of reality – the division which sets desire in motion – and that "from *within* the subject which finds itself led to a first outside" (Lacan, 1992, p. 52). How then are we to resolve this contradiction in which *das Ding*, the 'first outside', correlates to something *within* the subject, without deferring to a naïve account of projection, something which Lacan clearly wishes to avoid? It helps to reiterate again here that we are not speaking simply of an object of perceptual reality, an object in the phenomenological field which corresponds to a representation the subject has in mind, but of the *Wieder zu finden* to which the perceptual work of finding 'real objects' is subordinated. This is not as such an issue of 'reality correspondences', but of an abyss that opens up amongst the objects of the everyday world, a vacuum

that is the unavoidable structural counterpart of *the pull to re-find the object of satisfaction*. The recalcitrance of this lost satisfaction and the void it leaves in the subject is strictly coterminous with the unsatisfactory nature of worldly objects, with the drive to re-find the impossible object of *jouissance*. It is for this reason that Lacan (1992) remarks that “*das Ding* is at the centre only in the sense that it is excluded”, advancing furthermore “[t]hat...in reality *das Ding* has to be posited as exterior...[as] something strange to me, although...at the heart of me” (p. 71). Hence Lacan’s subsequent formulations in the same seminar concerning the notion of the ‘excluded inside’ or “extimacy”, that is, the intimate exteriority of the Thing. It is for the same reason that Žižek offers a description of *das Ding* as the Thing from inner space (2000a).

### **Law *ex nihilo***

The above suffices as a summary of what is set in play by the force of *das Ding* as a ‘proto-object’, or more accurately, as the evacuated object of desire that is co-extensive with the radically vacated place occupied by the sublime. Not only then are we confronted in *das Ding* with the founding of desire: this absence evokes for us, in its empty abyssal aspect, the possibility of a primordial enjoyment that has long since been voided, and whose replacement remains an impossible imperative. We are destined as such to confront a succession of secondary objects that pale in comparison to a former satisfaction, to something bigger, more gigantic in libidinal value. What results is precisely a kind of massification whereby *das Ding* – despite that its presumed satisfactions cannot be accessed, despite that it has no object-existence – looms larger than the perceptual reality of everyday objects.

We must not neglect the fact that *das Ding* is for Lacan the epicentre of *jouissance*, it is “enjoyment incarnated”, a vortex that exerts upon us the fascination of a consuming enjoyment that we desperately hold at bay even as it draws us ever closer in. Lacan evokes in this respect the etymological link in French between ‘to search’ and ‘detour’ to ground his description of this, the magnetic field of attractions and repulsions implied by the presence of *das Ding*. There is thus a push-pull relation, a type of suspension in operation which necessitates that we don’t come too close, that we keep our distance. This is how Lacan understands the regulations of the pleasure principle in *Seminar VII*, as that which governs the search for the object in such a way that detours and avoidances play an integral role, and that result in an orbiting motion, a monitored distance “from that which it gravitates around”, such that “[t]he object to be found confers on the search its invisible law” (Lacan, 1992, p. 58).

The automatic regulation of an orbiting distance to a “full” *jouissance* that would consume us, this asymptotic line of approach is what for Lacan underlies the persistence and the apparent universality of the incest taboo. We are dealing here with the instantaneous generation of an unconscious law, a law of distance, of prohibition – and here we find a longstanding anthropological conundrum - not simply generated within or by culture but which is, by contrast, sometimes treated as the basis for culture itself. It is a law for which we are able to find innumerable justifications and reasons – a law which culture no doubt institutionalizes and obeys – despite that it predates such proscriptions. We have thus the odd convergence that Lacan points to, of that which is prohibited and that which is anyway impossible.



### **The position of the Thing**

This is what a Foucauldian analytics fails to grasp in its insistence on grounding the complex historical and discursive causes underwriting various developments of power: the spontaneous emergence – and, indeed, the great tenacity - of an unconscious law that regulates the relation to the Thing. This is a law before culture, certainly before discursive constructions, that various cultural and symbolic institutions are able to use as their affective base. The “grey, meticulous and patiently documentary” (Foucault, 1984, p. 76) work of detailed genealogical analysis will register the effects of such nodal points of libidinal investment without being able to adequately explain them. The apparent *ex nihilo* emergence of such a law, and its structural necessity within the field of *jouissance* and desire, means that it is not easily rooted in the genealogical field of contingent material forces and discursive power-relations.

We are in a better position now to appreciate the well-known Lacanian definition of sublimation as “the object elevated to the dignity of the Thing” and how it might apply to a critique of Foucault. As noted above, Lacan bypasses a particular route of analytical engagement in his account of sublimation, a route which, interestingly enough, might be said to correspond to aspects of Foucault’s genealogical tracking of the formative powers of technologies of subjectivity. Rather than relying on the steady accumulation of layer upon layer of historical data, embarking on a search that tackles “a field of entangled and confused parchments....documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times” (Foucault, 1984, p. 76), Lacan opts instead to isolate the necessary conditions of possibility underlying sublimation. He thus avoids what a Foucauldian framework of

technologies of self implies it can provide: an itinerary connecting a given subject's practices and objects of sublimation – that is, the privatized or individualized domain of ideals (in Foucault's terms, *ethics*) – to what is sacred to or valued by a culture – that is, the vaunted ideals of a particular culture and its technologies of subjectivity (for Foucault, the realm of morals).

Lacan's approach, by contrast, is to point to a necessary structural place around which a culture's select objects and practices come to coalesce. Rather than painstakingly tracing all of the multiple permutations whereby the influence of sublime cultural objects come to be effectively individualized, he opts to look to what functions as a precondition of such varied lines of articulation and influence. By focussing on *das Ding* as the proto-object, or, more accurately, as *the object-place*, he avoids the detoured circuit of a modulated drive across the varying and changing terrain of a culture's most valued objects: *das Ding* is always, as it were, the direct 'unmediated' drive target. The methodological privileging of discontinuity here is to miss the point.

In more straightforward terms, it is *the structural place* which is primary, not the objects or practices which come to occupy this place, which are of course subject to considerable socio-historical variation. Moreover, it is not the direction of the drive that is changed, diverted – as in other psychoanalytic theorizations - what is changed is *the status of the object*, its position in the structure of fantasy. This object, which under different conditions may be pathetic, deplorable, wholly undesirable, is, to borrow Kay's wonderful phrase, "thoroughly irradiated by the drive, bathed in *jouissance*, transfigured, spiritualized and resplendent" (2003, pp. 54-55) once it is elevated to this position. One needs emphasize here the radically

*inter-subjective* status of fantasy in Lacanian theory, the fact that fantasmatic objects are always the response given to the vexing question of what the ‘big Other’ – the amassed embodiment of a given social-historical-cultural network of values - is imputed to want. Never merely private then (or, indeed intra-subjective), a fantasy is always a negotiated outcome, a hypothesis generated by an individual’s or a society’s best guess at what its Other most desires. Importantly then, the concept of the Other operates at both the level of the individual subject and at that of the imaginary of a given society. As De Kesel (2009) makes clear, the same holds for the notion of sublimation. To this we should add the immediate qualification that these two registers of sublimation are intimately connected. Indeed, in light of the trans-individual nature of unconscious subjectivity – which for Lacan is constantly generating answers to the enigma of what the Other wants – these orders of fantasy can never be fully separable: subjective fantasy occurs within the parameters of the Other, within the realm of the signifier.

This then is where we find the short-circuit between the recalcitrance of archaic libido – primal drive aspirations – and socially-valORIZED objects. And to be sure, this is a short-circuit not only between drive and culture, but between the subjective and the collective. Inasmuch as the drive reaches towards the objectives provided by the co-ordinates of (radically inter-subjective) fantasy, this drive will directly and ‘automatically’ be put on course towards the cultural Thing.

Why then does this notion of the Thing make for such a crucial contribution to the theorization of psychical power? Why, furthermore, does it deliver such a telling blow to the empirico-historicist Foucauldian enterprise of tracing multiple (if discontinuous) lines of causality within the

over-arching schema of disciplinary-bio-power? It is crucial because it makes clear that you do not have to be *acted upon* to sublimate, to produce versions of *das Ding* that both tie you into a culture and that lock you into a regimes of adherence, reverence and distance relative to it. Just as *das Ding* is not the result of repression, so it is equally not the result of even a positive or proactive coercion, of Foucault's productive powers of technologies of subjectivity. *Das Ding* is not to be located within the rationality of effects; it is not a produced effect but is instead a precondition of a variety of effects. One must here agree with Dolar (1999): many of the disciplinary/governmental outcomes that Foucault seizes upon in his later genealogical works may thus be explained, at least partially, without reference to the complicated apparatuses and attenuated rationalities of governmentality. Indeed, the latter may be said to presuppose a variety of psychological mechanisms, of which the orchestrations of sublimation would seem crucial.

Via his re-conceptualization of the Freudian problematic of sublimation, Lacan shows us what Foucault cannot theorize, namely the fact of a self-instantiating form of productive power that does not require a direct causative connection to a heterogeneous ensemble of material forces and discursive practices. If sublimation consists of a relation to the real of *das Ding*, then it cannot be limited in the terms of its activation and ongoing insistence to the powers of the discursive domain alone; it remains rather a self-initiating and self-regulating form of power. In *das Ding* then we have then a prospective answer to the question with which we opened concerning a particular 'mode of impossibility' – that is, an impasse of desire linked to a mobilization of *jouissance* - that enables power, that so extends the reach of

the ensembles of power-knowledge, the technologies of subjectivity, studied by Foucault.

### **Paradigms of sublimation**

Let me close with a series of questions. What might be the *dispositif* of a particular order of sublimation? Differently put: could sublimation itself function as a category of historical analysis? Given the intersection of conceptual frameworks implied by such a question - the conjunction in other words, of Foucauldian and Lacanian approaches, whose incompatibility is typically presumed – many would query whether this is even a viable research question. Perhaps it is. Take for example Lacan's (1992) description of the emergence of the courtly love tradition, which he views as the “appearance, articulation, establishment, of a whole moral code...a whole ethic, a whole way of life” (p. 125). Clearly then, courtly love is more than a mode of writing, a discursive style: it entails a series of prescribed norms of interaction and behaviour, and more than this, specific codes that function to regulate the relations between man and woman. In this brief discussion of historicized (‘ethical’) codes of behaviour there is greater proximity between Foucault and Lacan than we may have expected.

This discussion of the courtly love tradition cannot be ignored on the basis that it lacks sufficient historical contextualization. Moreover, the addition of further layers of empirical analysis will not necessarily deepen our understanding of the longstanding cultural importance of such phenomena. Lacan's point is precisely that once one has examined the requisite social, political and economic evidence, “applied all the available modes of interpretation of the superstructure”, historians are still at a loss to account for the endurance “success of this extraordinary fashion” (p. 125).

What this opens up is a distinctive and promising analytical perspective, one that welcomes the precision of socio-historical contextualization as part of its attempt to apprehend what Leader (2002) refers to as ‘paradigms of sublimation’, in other words, those frames of ethical sensibility and practice that have gained hegemonic ascendance at particular historical junctures. Courtly love would seem a perfectly viable subject of consideration for a Foucauldian analytics able to plot the lateral spread of such codes, values and behaviours across a variety of particularized institutional settings and discursive practices. One could argue that this is the limitation of Žižek’s (1993) recourse to one particular paradigm of sublimation, that is, his frequent use of explanations of the national Thing: they are not adequately informed of the texture of a variety of multiple institutionalized realizations, of the modulations underlying the gradual transformation of one version of the Thing into another. To be perfectly clear then: my suggestion here is by no means that a Lacanian perspective on impasses of desire simply negates a Foucauldian project. By contrast, the Lacanian notion of paradigms of sublimation offers the prospect of a novel, additional category for a Foucauldian analysis of historically-specific variants of power.

There is a related consideration. We have established that *das Ding* evades retrieval into symbolic or imaginary registers. The fact of this place, the fact of its operation, and the unconscious law it entails, cannot thus be said to be constructed, they are not subject to deconstruction. Having said that, Lacan is aware that the field of *das Ding*, let us say the various objects that come to occupy this position, become the focus of imaginary, cultural and indeed manipulative political elaborations. There is in this sense, a continual attempt to colonize the field of *das Ding*, this, after all is for Lacan

“how collective, socially acceptable sublimations operate” (p. 99). This opens up an important question: how might it be possible to de-sublimate certain cultural Things, to use de-sublimation as a political strategy?

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