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DISCOURSE, AFFECT, JOUISSANCE:
Psychoanalysis, Political Theory and Artistic Practices

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Introduction

Intervening in the debate around the role of affectivity in politics, this paper will focus on the relation between discourse and affect in the construction and reproduction of political subjectivity and hegemony. In this context, recent criticisms of the Essex School of discourse theory (Laclau, Mouffe et al.) from a 'post-hegemonic' point of view, inspired by the so- called 'affective turn', will be first presented and evaluated. Since psychoanalytic theory is prioritized by Laclau as a crucial resource in addressing this crucial issue, Lacan's orientation in dealing with the relation between the symbolic and affect, language and *jouissance*, will then be discussed. Consequently, the two levels at which identification processes operate in social and political life – semiotic and affective, official and intimate – will be highlighted from an anthropological and psychoanalytic point of view. Here, relevant empirical examples, such as national identification and workplace practices, will be briefly mentioned to illustrate the arguments of the paper. Last but not least, if the dialectics of discourse and affect are crucial in understanding the construction and reproduction of (late capitalist, post-democratic) relations of domination, can they also help us in sketching the ethico-political conditions of possibility for envisaging and experimenting with (post-capitalist, radical democratic) alternatives? And what role can artistic practices play in such an enterprise? These questions will be discussed in the final section of the paper, initiating an exchange between contemporary creative practices and critical socio-political theory.

Hegemony or Post-Hegemony?: The Affective Critique of Discourse

On numerous occasions Ernesto Laclau has pointed out that what stands at the basis of a discourse theory orientation is a critique of *immediacy*. For example, in a short programmatic statement on the philosophical roots of discourse theory, Laclau argues that:

> [discourse theory] has its roots in the three main philosophical developments with which the XXth Century started. In the three cases there is an initial illusion of immediacy, of a direct access to the things as they are in themselves. These three illusions were the referent, the phenomenon and the sign, ... Now, at some point this initial illusion of immediacy dissolves in the three currents – from this point of view their history is remarkably parallel – and they have to open the way to one or other form of discourse theory. This means that discursive mediations cease to be merely derivative and become constitutive.

Such a shift from an illusion of immediacy to a stress on discursive mediation and its constitutive role in the formation of social and political reality is also visible with respect to the political traditions against which post-Marxism defines itself, namely the radical tradition in the West and its Marxist kernel. Indeed the deconstruction of the Marxist tradition in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is primarily a deconstruction of the claim to have direct access and control of the totality of the real and its predictable historical (eschatological) development (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Not surprisingly then, most critical resistance encountered by discourse theory has emanated from the defenders of such immediacy. Criticism of discourse theory has often taken the form of a *return* of immediacy – a *revenge* of the real. This critique can take a variety of different forms; in fact, it might be worth articulating a certain typology of these forms.

Some of the readers may be familiar with the traditional type of this critique, evident in the rejection of the discursive orientation by Norman Geras and his comrades. Speaking as the defender of a 'pre-discursive reality and an extra-theoretical objectivity', Geras had accused 'relativist' discourse theory of disputing the most 'elementary facts of existence', the material reality conditioning all discourse (Geras 1990: 99; also see Howarth 2000: 113). Today, a similar rejection is discernible in a completely different area of research. Biopolitics and affectivity are very much in vogue recently in critical social and political theory. The huge interest in the work of classical philosophers like Spinoza and contemporary theorists such as Giorgio Agamben amply demonstrates this point. Now, this orientation has often coincided with a rejection of hegemony as a suitable theoretical and analytical matrix for understanding contemporary politics; what is disputed here is, simply put, 'the hegemony of hegemony' (Day 2005). In a recent article in *Theory, Culture and Society*, Scott Lash has thus argued that we have entered an era of 'post-hegemony' (Lash 2007). We seem to have then a rejection of the relevance of discourse theory, as developed primarily by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in a world which is supposed to have entered a new period in power relations:

> From the beginnings of cultural studies in the 1970s, 'hegemony' has been perhaps *the* pivotal concept in this still emerging discipline. ... In what follows I do not want to argue that hegemony is a flawed concept. I do not want indeed to argue at all against the concept of hegemony... What I want to argue instead is that it has had great truth-value for a particular epoch. I want to argue that that epoch is now beginning to draw to a close. I want to suggest that power now, instead, is largely post- hegemonic (Lash 2007: 55).

This is how Scott Lash starts his *obituary* of the discursive theory of hegemony, that is to say of theories focusing on domination partly through consent, achieved by ideological/discursive means (Lash 2007: 55). It is of course a friendly obituary. If it constitutes a rejection it is a respectful rejection, unlike the first wave of violent rejection of discourse theory by people like Norman Geras and others in the 1980s

and early 1990s. Indeed, Lash does pay tribute to the explanatory power of hegemony and to the central place of Laclau and Mouffe in the hegemonic paradigm studying power 'largely as operating semiotically, through discourse' (Lash 2007: 58, 68).

Even if, however, the rhetorical atmosphere is very different, the actual argument is not that distant from a Geras-type critique. In both cases, the central idea is that, by focusing on the level of representation, by seriously taking into account the 'linguistic turn', discourse theory misses a more important and foundational level, that of the *real*. This is one more form of the attempted *revenge of the real* mentioned earlier. Many years have passed, of course, which means that while for first wave critics, this real ignored by discourse theory was primarily understood in terms of social class and the primary role of the economy, for Lash this is no longer the case:

> The real, unlike the symbolic or the imaginary, escapes the order of representation altogether. We – i.e. those who think that power is largely post-hegemonic – agree with Zizek (see Butler, Laclau and Zizek, 2000). We agree part way. We think that both domination and resistance in the post-hegemonic order takes place through the real. ... The real ... is the unatterable. It is ontological. Power in the post-hegemonic order is becoming ontological. ... Post-hegemonic power and cultural studies is less a question of cognitive judgments and more a question of being (Lash 2007: 56).

In order to define this real, Lash leaves the Lacanian jargon initially utilized and turns first to Agamben and then, and more extensively, to Hardt and Negri's rendering and elaboration of Spinoza. As a result, the real of post-hegemonic power tends to overlap with Spinoza's *potentia*: 'force, energy, potential' (Lash 2007: 59). Post-hegemonic politics revolves around this primordial neo-vitalist real: 'the motive force, the unfolding, the becoming of the thing-itself' (Lash 2007: 59). What is at stake is not engineering consent or securing a consensus, not even normalization; now, 'power enters into us and constitutes us from the inside' (Lash 2007: 61), 'it grasps us in our very being' (Lash 2007: 75). We are thus firmly located within the terrain of *immanence* (Lash 2007: 66), of an all-encompassing 'virtual, generative force' (Lash 2007: 71).

To complexify our typology a bit, in the same issue of *Theory, Culture and Society*, Nicholas Thoburn advances an argument that seems to bridge the two waves of rejection. He performs that by reinterpreting the economy in terms borrowed by the study of biopolitics and affectivity. Thus, while discourse theory and post-Marxism are criticized – again, fortunately, without the invective of a Geras-like anathema – for not paying the required 'intimate attention to the way capitalist dynamics and imperatives infuse the social', these dynamics are visualized through 'an expanded understanding of production, a production considered as the patterning – or mobilization, arrangement, and distribution – of rich social, technical, economic and affective relations' (Thoburn 2007: 79-80). Central in this picture is the problematic of affect as a 'sub-signifying or pre-signifying mode of bodily activation', elaborated here through a reference to Brian Massumi's work: 'Affect is an experience of

intensity – of joy, fear, love, sorrow, pity, pride, anger – that changes the state of a body, that has concrete effects on individual and social practice. ... affect is a key dimension of experience ... and one that most clearly marks the movement of cultural studies away from a conception of culture as signifying practice' (Thoburn 2007: 84). Clearly, this direction is indicative of what Patricia Clough has called 'the affective turn', a reorientation of critical theory towards 'a dynamism immanent to bodily matter' (Clough 2008: 1).[1]

Some aspects of this new form of rejecting discourse theory and its conceptualization of hegemony betray a rather over-simplifying reasoning and can be criticized accordingly. In particular, as we have seen, Lash's schema seems to rest on a periodization which posits two distinct periods – one in which discursive mediation is constitutive of power relations and one in which focus is on the biopolitical real and post-hegemony – and the unilinear passage from the first to the second, as if the 'affective turn' erases all the implications of the 'linguistic turn'. At least two major problems arise here:

1. First of all, the structure of this narrative is a quasi-eschatological structure. Lash's passage from hegemony to post-hegemony can only be described as a new philosophy of history, which progresses in the direction of a lifting of symbolic mediation and a concomitant increase of immediacy. Perhaps it is not mere coincidence that Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* is also relying on a similar philosophy of history, on seeing the biopolitical paradigm as an irreversible stream that encompasses more and more aspects of social and political life (Agamben 1998). There is no room for contingency and the political in this picture and it is really puzzling why both Agamben and Lash have not utilized Foucault's genealogy in order to avoid this obsolete historical schema.

2. Second and most important, Lash's and Thoburn's argument presupposes a set of dichotomies which are conceptualized in binary, oppositional terms. Inside/outside, representation/ontology, meaning/being, discourse/affect. Obviously we need to be very skeptical against both this strategy of introducing such hierarchical dualisms – most of them already deconstructed within the Derridian and Lacanian milieu – and the conceptual and analytical implications of most of them. My view is that Lash and Thoburn fail to realize that dimensions, which can – and should – be conceptually distinguished, can simultaneously function within a dialectics of *mutual engagement* and *co-constitution*. For example, we can, of course, distinguish between the instinctual and representational/social aspect of the drive in psychoanalysis; however, the drive cannot be constituted without both these dimensions: the symbolic and the real.

Such co-constitution radically destabilizes their binarism. For example, given that the body is the site of a continuous dialectic between symbolic and real – there is

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[1] A similar (friendly) critique of Laclau based on a quite interesting hybrid linking the (affective) real with a new materialist understanding of the economy and class can be found in the work of Madra and Ozselcuk and others working around JK Gibson-Graham; see, for example, Madra and Ozselcuk 2005.

a real body and a body marked with signifiers – it is difficult to see how one can assign the body only to the real side of the equation. Indeed, recent research within the field of discourse theory and psychoanalysis has amply demonstrated that salient and long-term hegemonic identifications (nationalism, populism) require both a successful symbolic articulation and its affective, libidinal investment, the mobilization of *jouissance*. As a result, the issue is not to radically isolate the eras of hegemony and post-hegemony, to present discourse and affect, symbolic and real, as mutually exclusive dimensions; it is to explore, in every historical conjuncture, the different and multiple ways in which these interact to co-constitute subjects, objects and socio- political orders.

What is needed then is to combine conceptual distinction with analytical combination. And this, it has to be admitted, has often escaped the attention of discourse analysts. However, in order to capture what in practice operates as a dialectic of *co-constitution* and *mutual engagement* it is necessary to sharpen the conceptual tools able to account for the specificity of each dimension. It is in this light that one should read my criticism of Laclau's initial inability to distinguish discourse from affect and enjoyment (Stavrakakis 2007, ch. 2). Even for concepts whose conceptual specificity relies on such a union, a prior establishment of difference is necessary. For example, *jouissance* in Lacanian theory embodies the paradoxical union of pleasure and pain. We cannot speak about *jouissance* if one of these aspects is missing. Yet, can one capture the paradox entailed here without a distinct conceptual grasping of 'pleasure' and 'pain' as separate and even as antithetical? In fact, the force and originality of a concept highlighting their indissoluble union relies absolutely on this prior conceptual differentiation. And vice-versa of course. As Freud has shown, even in cases where conceptual opposition is radical (between Eros and Thanatos, for example) the interpenetration may, in practice, be unavoidable: 'Neither of these instincts is any less essential than the other; the phenomena of life arise from the concurrent or mutually opposing action of both ... In order to make an action possible there must be as a rule a combination of such compounded motives' (Freud 1991: 356). This focus on interpenetration is exactly what is missing from the argumentation advanced by Lash and Thoburn. And this is what a discursive orientation needs to cultivate.

So, what can we conclude on the basis of examining and (critically) evaluating this critical approach to discourse theory and Laclau and Mouffe's work on hegemony?

1. There is no doubt that this line of criticism testifies to the enormous appeal of the classical – let's say, 'heroic' – phase of discourse theory research. In the same issue of *Theory, Culture and Society* mentioned earlier, Richard Johnson, who is entrusted with the task of defending traditional theory of hegemony, perceptively points out that the hegemony Thoburn and Lash 'memorialize' is the hegemony of Laclau and Mouffe, where 'hegemony becomes in effect, a theory of discursive articulation, dis-articulation and re-articulation' (Johnson 2007: 100). And he concludes: 'Lash and Thoburn's take-up of this "philosophical" version of hegemony is further evidence of its influence' (Johnson 2007: 101).

2. At the same time it highlights the existence of an area of much needed further elaboration – a promising direction for future research crucial for the continuing appeal of the discourse theory paradigm. Every intellectual tradition needs to be in constant interaction with the wider theoretical scene. We have to pay tribute to Ernesto Laclau's ingenuity in formulating discourse theory in a way that can incorporate many new elements and expand in a variety of challenging directions. Laclau has indeed conceived of discourse in a way that does permit a grafting of the psychoanalytic problematic of the Lacanian real – of affect and *jouissance* – through the dialectics of investment. This grafting, however, is not a *fait accompli*. It requires substantial further theoretical effort and conceptual innovation – especially since, as he acknowledges himself, the problematic of affect and *jouissance* has hitherto been incorporated into discourse theory in a 'rather sketchy and inchoate way' (Laclau 2003: 278).

3. The challenge of affect and the real should be thus seen not as an external threat that falsifies discourse theory, but as an internal challenge. But it is a challenge that has to be accepted. Precisely because, as psychoanalytic theory suggests, analyses of the discursive, deconstructive, rhetorical or interpretative kind, though perhaps a necessary prerequisite, are often not sufficient to explain attachment to particular objects of identification, let alone to effect a displacement in the social subject's psychic economy. And here, once more, Laclau is showing the way:

> [...] what rhetoric can explain is the *form* that an overdetermining investment takes, but not the *force* that explains the investment as such and its perdurability. Here something else has to be brought into the picture. Any overdetermination requires not only metaphorical condensations but also cathectic investments. That is, something belonging to the order of *affect* has a primary role in discursively constructing the social. Freud already knew it: the social link is a libidinal link. And affect, as I have earlier pointed out in this essay, is not something *added* to signification, but something consubstantial with it. So if I see rhetoric as ontologically primary in explaining the operations inhering in and the forms taken by the hegemonic construction of society, I see psychoanalysis as the only valid road to explain the drives behind such construction – I see it, indeed, as the only fruitful approach to the understanding of human reality (Laclau 2004: 326).

Lacan on Affect: *Language and Jouissance*[2]

What type of intellectual ethos is required for such a productive embrace of affectivity on the part of discourse analysis and hegemony theory? Beyond any mechanistic imitations, it might be possible to learn something from the boldness characteristic of the theoretical trajectories of both Freud and Lacan. As for Freud, anyone with even a

[2] This section draws extensively on ch. 2 of Stavrakakis 2007.

limited familiarity with his writings cannot but be astonished by the numerous acknowledgements of failure of past theories and hypotheses – even of whole books, starting with his *Project for a Scientific Psychology*; by the open negotiation of shifts and the continuous experimentation with new insights; by his determination to overcome even his own resistances to the disturbing knowledge psychoanalysis unveils. Lacan's dealings with the issue of affect presents a similar picture. I am saying this because, to some, the choice of Lacanian theory as offering the proper direction in an exploration of the affective dimension in political life – a view clearly informing Laclau's argument – will undoubtedly sound bizarre. Is not Lacanian theory part of the original problem?

It is true that Lacan has been renowned for his dislike of 'affect' as a psychoanalytic category. In fact, this is one of the most commonplace criticisms directed against his work: 'his focus on linguistics and logic is thought to lessen the importance of the affective dimension and to lead to a sterile analysis from which anger, shame, pity, indignation, envy and jealousy have been banished' (Gallagher 1997: 111). Perhaps the most elaborate critique of Lacan along these lines can be found in André Green's *Le discours vivant*, where Lacan's work is presented as the paradigmatic case of a rejection of affect, not only because affect has no place in it, but because, in Green's view, it is explicitly banished from it (Green 1999: 99). Cornelius Castoriadis, a good friend of Green, was also of the view that Lacan reduced 'what can best be described as the energetics, the affectations of the subject to an (ultimately linguistically) representable form' (Williams 1999: 111).

This critique is not totally unfounded. In fact, already in his first seminar (1953–4), Lacan speaks of affects as 'imaginary references' (Seminar I: 107), before engaging in the following exchange with Serge Leclaire:

> Leclaire: . . . It is quite clear that the terms affective and intellectual are no longer common currency in the group we make up.
> Lacan: A good thing too. What can one do with them?
> Leclaire: But that's the point, that is one thing which has been left hanging a bit since Rome.
> Lacan: I believe I didn't make use of them in that famous Rome discourse, except to expunge the term *intellectualised*.
> Leclaire: Exactly, both this silence, and these direct attacks on the term affective did have an effect.
> Lacan: I believe this is a term which one must completely expunge from our papers. (Seminar I: 275)

This sounds pretty straightforward. Of course, it could be argued that Lacan's target is not the affective dimension per se. His target instead is a particular understanding of affect, an understanding conditioned by what he calls 'the notorious opposition between the intellectual and the affective', where the affective is taken as a kind of ineffable quality which has to be sought out in itself. For Lacan, by contrast, 'the affective is not like a special density which would escape an intellectual

accounting. It is not to be found in a mythical beyond of the production of the symbol which would precede the discursive formulation' (Seminar I: 57). Hence Lacan's final warning: 'I urge you, each of you, at the heart of your own search for the truth, to renounce quite radically . . . the use of an opposition like that of the affective and the intellectual . . . This opposition is one of the most contrary to analytic experience and most unenlightening when it comes to understanding it' (Seminar I: 274).

In this early phase of his teaching, Lacan's priority is to highlight the signifying mechanisms involved in Freud's account of the creation of human reality (such as condensation and displacement, etc.) and to reformulate them along the lines of linguistics and structuralism. His main effort is to stress the constitutivity of the symbolic in human life. It is during this period that he articulates his famous motto that 'the unconscious is structured as a language'. Most of his energy is directed in demonstrating the linguistic/semiotic aspects of the Freudian revolution. And what guides this whole enterprise is clearly the reduction of Freud's *Lust* to meaning (Miller 2002a: 41). This is also what, during the same phase, underlies the reduction of the terrain of affect and enjoyment to the problematic of a signifier, that of the phallus. Yet, for Lacan this is not the end of the story.

In fact, as Cormac Gallagher has argued (Gallagher 1997: 113), Lacan's renunciation of the term in some parts of the 1953–4 seminar is only 'a provisional and temporary one'. Gallagher points out that affect has been one of the main preoccupations of Lacan's theorisation both before and after his first seminar. Before, in his writings on the family complexes for the *Encyclopédie Française* (1938), and after, in the whole seminar he devoted to discussing anxiety (1962–3), what he called 'the only affect that does not deceive'. Indeed, if the accusation is that Lacan 'scotomised' the consideration of affect, then this seminar proves, beyond any doubt, that the accusation is unfair (Harari 2000: xvi).

But even before the *Anxiety* seminar we have the transitional one on the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959–60), where Lacan's discussion of 'the Thing', Freud's *das Ding,* will break the monopoly of signification: 'With this field that I called the field of das Ding, we are projected into . . . something moving, obscure and without reference points owing to the lack of a sufficient organization of its register, something much more primitive . . .' (Seminar VII: 103). This opaque field is associated with 'analytical metaphysics' notions concerning energy' (Seminar VII: 102). At this stage, however, Lacan refrains from linking affectivity with this field of the real beyond signification: 'now it is not a matter of denying the importance of affects. But it is important not to confuse them with the substance of that which we are seeking in the Real-Ich, beyond signifying articulations of the kind we artists of analytical speech are capable of handling' (Seminar VII: 102). Recourse to affectivity is thus, once more, deemed 'confused' and misleading. There is, however, an important differentiation to be made in terms of the exact grounds on which affectivity is rejected. This time it does not happen because stress on affects is distanced from a registering of the all-encompassing field of signification or denies its value – as his earlier rejection seemed to imply. Interestingly enough, affectivity is

rejected for precisely the opposite reasons, namely because it is not distanced enough, because of 'the conventional and artificial character' of affects (Seminar VII: 102).

With the introduction of a distinction between emotion and affect – a move that Massumi and others will repeat decades later – this picture will be further and decisively modified, leading to the final position to be found in the *Anxiety* seminar: 'What is anxiety? We have ruled out its being an emotion. And to introduce it, I would say: it is an affect' (seminar of 28 November 1962). The following year, in his interrupted seminar on *The Names-of-the-Father* (seminar of 20 November 1963), Lacan will re-state once more this new position, making clear the association between the affective and the field of libidinal energy at the frontiers of symbolic mediation:

> anxiety is an affect of the subject . . . In anxiety, the subject is affected by the desire of the Other. He is affected by it in a non-dialectizable manner, and it is for that reason that anxiety, within the affectivity of the subject, is what does not deceive . . . That characterization is in conformity with the first formulations Freud gave anxiety as a direct transformation of the libido. (Lacan 1990: 82, emphasis added)

Almost ten years after this formulation, in section IV of *Television*, Miller directly asks him about the place of affect within his theory in its relation to language: 'What is said in opposition to you, in various forms, is: "Those are merely words, words, words. And what do you do with anything that doesn't get mixed up with words? What of psychic energy, or affect, or the drives?" ' (Miller in Lacan 1990: 17). Lacan's answer is to stress that, contrary to what the position of the International Psychoanalytical Association reiterated here by Miller conveys, this accusation is false on account of his devoting a whole year's seminar to anxiety as an affect, which proves 'sufficiently that affect is not something I make light of' (Lacan 1990: 21; also see Seminar XVII: 168).

How should one interpret this radical shift in Lacan's evaluation of affect? I think its cause should be located in the failure of the signifying reduction implicit in Lacan's initial strategy of a predominantly structuralist *Return to Freud*. It is fair to say that, although central to his teaching in the 1950s and 1960s, the priority of meaning over enjoyment and affect never stopped troubling Lacan. But why? Obviously not because of some bizarre fixation on affectivity, since, as we have seen, he did nearly everything he could to downplay and even eliminate it as a separate register. Why then? Precisely because this priority of meaning does not stop producing a certain remainder, something which reveals its partial character and also indicates the need – both theoretical and clinical – to reflect seriously on enjoyment as something distinct, irreducible to meaning, to the symbolic. It is here that Lacan returns to reflect on the central idea of Freudian metapsychology, that of a disjunction between the level of somatic excitations and that of their representation in the psyche: 'There is always a remainder, an irrecoverable left-over, a portion of the body's energies that fail to receive adequate registration in the battery of *Triebrepraesentanzen*. The processes of psychical binding never succeed in

exhausting the somatic reservoir of unbound energies' (Boothby 2001: 286–7). Replacing the phallus with the *objet petit a* – one of the names given to this remainder – is only one of the ways in which Lacan initiated this quest in the latter part of his teaching.

Undoubtedly this quest takes place on a very tricky terrain. For a start, there is the ever-present danger of dualism – both Lacan and Laclau are justified in their determination to avoid that. In Lacan's case, however, this does not presuppose discarding the (relational) duality in question but operating a shift in its conceptual parameters. This is, simply put, the reason behind Lacan's conceptual transition from the somatic to the real (Grigg 1994: 161). This transition also suggests a way of overcoming the problems of Freudian metapsychology. For the relation between libidinal energy, the somatic frontier of the drive, and representation, as well as the *modus operandi* between them, is not always clear-cut in Freud. One can notice, for example, the differences in his account from *Instincts and their Vicissitudes* to his study on *Repression* (Freud 1991a and Freud 1991b; also see Shepherdson 1997: 142). What is crucially at stake here is the relation between the two registers, the extent to which energy/libido is co-extensive with, or antithetical to, representation. While the account presented in the prior text – and in others – tends to emphasize their constitutive interrelation (Shepherdson 1997: 143) or, at any rate, refrains from drawing a clear distinction between drive's somatic force and its psychic representative (Strachey 1991: 108), in *Repression* – as well as in *The Unconscious* and other texts – a much sharper distinction between the two is elaborated. Even though the second approach had the predominant influence – and rightly so – one has to agree with Shepherdson's conclusion: what we have is not any kind of simple division, a dualism, but a more complex and tangled relation, 'one in which it is still possible and necessary to differentiate', to follow up separately both sides (affective energy and representation) but only in their extimate relation (Shepherdson 1997: 143).

At this point one is bound to encounter another difficulty, what could be called the (epistemological) problem of the *before*. How is it possible to talk about the before of representation? Certainly there is such a pre-symbolic, extra-discursive before. Lacan is absolutely clear on that: 'I am not at all trying to deny here that there is something which is before, that, for example, before I become a self or an It, there is something which the It was. It is simply a matter of knowing what this It is' (Lacan in Boothby 1991: 62). And, of course, we can only get an idea of what it is through representation, by losing this before in its unmediated primacy. Lacan introduces here the analogy between pre-symbolic real energy and the operation of a hydroelectric dam. As Richard Boothby observes, it is impossible to specify and calculate the energy of the river without referring to the structure of the dam that will obstruct and redirect its flow. We can and should presuppose the force of the river, but that force is not accessible to us in any meaningful way without the mechanism of the dam, without, that is, erecting an obstacle with relation to which force will be felt. This is Lacan's point:

> To say that the energy was in some way already there in a virtual state in the current of the river is properly speaking to say something that has no meaning, for the energy begins to be of interest to us in this instance only beginning with the moment in which it is accumulated, and it is accumulated only beginning with the moment when machines are put to work in a certain way, without doubt animated by something of a sort of definite propulsion which comes from the river current. (Lacan in Boothby 1991: 62)

The paradox here is related to the necessity of presupposing a pre-symbolic energetic substratum, a before of representation and symbolization, which, however, cannot be articulated in meaning without reference to the matrix within which it is invested or which represses it. In other words, to presuppose psychic energy is unavoidable, but also by necessity indeterminate (Boothby 1991: 62–3; also see Boothby 2001: 147). In Lacan's own terms, the metapsychological presupposition 'is in truth completely impossible . . . But one cannot practice psychoanalysis, not even for one second, without thinking in metapsychological terms' (Lacan in Boothby 1991: 62–3).

Lacan offers a two-pronged solution to this paradox. Surely, insofar as we are destined to access the limits of discourse (affect and *jouissance*) through the traces they leave within discourse and representation, our focus is necessarily limited to an exploration of their constitutive relation. However, and this is the crucial point, the irreducible impossibility of a castrated pre-symbolic positivity, the X of the real, also has to be registered and encircled, even if this entails the risk of introducing a certain metaphysical element. The fiction, the hypothesis, of the pre-symbolic, extra-discursive real – as well as Freud's *das Ding* and the Lacanian myth of the *lamella* – is necessary if we want to make sense of all the phenomena in which discourse interacts with what exceeds its terrain: from identification to *lalangue*, from fantasy to *sinthome*. Otherwise the (often indeterminate) specificity of the two interconnected dimensions is bound to be lost and the conditions of possibility for their interpenetration greatly obscured.

Lacan's radical gesture here is to traverse the fantasy of an all-encompassing symbolic. He knows that, in order to make sense of what escapes symbolization, in order to account for the remainders of this process, he has to entertain, conceptually, the possibility of an almost complete reversal; he has to traverse his own universe of discourse, to turn his teaching upside down. This is a risk Lacan is perfectly willing to take. He also knows that this remainder can be effectively produced and accounted for only after we have explored and traversed the linguistic field itself. This reversal requires an exhaustion of language: we need to immerse ourselves in the most extensive conceptualization of language, to take into account the multitude of ways in which it determines/produces our reality in order to be able to envisage what is beyond language but – still – in relation to language. If in animals no distance between *jouissance* and the biological/instinctual body can be observed, in humans, language, the signifier, changes the picture completely. *Jouissance* cannot be reduced to natural processes and, thus, only after exhausting the linguistic field can one

properly speak of *jouissance* (Seminar XVII: 37). There is no paradox here: we can only move beyond language insofar as we have reduced everything to language; if this signifying reduction leaves real remainders, then these need to be accounted for in the most thorough way, even if this involves a radical reversal.

What are the terms of this reversal with reference to Lacan's account of language? Miller has put it in the most vivid terms: 'Lacan, who anointed language, qualified it in his later teaching as chatter, blahblah, and even as a parasite of human beings . . . he downgraded his concept of language, and also that of structure, now not carried to the level of the real' (Miller 2002c: 23). Indeed the real, especially through the Lacanian typologies of *jouissance*, becomes 'the Lacanian analog of the raw force or Drang of the Freudian drive' (Boothby 2001: 287). Together with, but also beyond, the signifying level, it is now important 'to look for the real [*jouissance*]. Look for the real, try to bypass under meaning, to bypass constructions, even the elegant ones, even the probing ones, especially if they are elegant. It is what Lacan assumed and demonstrated in his later teaching' (Miller 2002c: 42). Now it is *jouissance* which acquires a certain conceptual and causal priority over the signifier; not only are the two planes distinct and even antithetical, but *jouissance* is also theorized as what relegates the symbolic to the status of an imaginary *semblant* (p. 47).

Only now, having passed through a first major stage, at which the symbolic is primary, and through a second stage, at which this fantasy is traversed and the real restored in its equally causal powers, is it possible to reach an adequate understanding of the interpenetration of the two domains. Only now does it become possible to re-conceptualize signification along the lines of *signifiance*, *jouis-sens* and *lalangue*. These are three of the many Lacanian neologisms which aim to convey paradoxical fields in which the limits between language and *jouissance* become blurred, with meaning and affect, symbolic structure and *jouissance*, contaminating each other at the most profound level (Miller 2000b). The status of the Lacanian category of *lalangue* is indicative in this respect. It indicates, it encircles, the force of a non-linguistic language, a language before and after language. In its pre-symbolic form this relates to the babbling of the infant, a phenomenon situated at the frontier between language and *jouissance*, need and demand (Christidis 2002: 107). In the first instance, *lalangue* designates the 'primary chaotic substrate of polysemy out of which language is constructed' (Evans 1996: 97): language is without doubt made of *lalangue* (Seminar XX: 139). Furthermore, symbolic castration, accepting the laws of the symbolic, never manages fully to process and symbolize this real dimension of *lalangue*. Something persists within our socio-symbolic world, a remainder that resurfaces in a variety of formations at the borders of acceptable discourse: in the private language of lovers, in some versions of poetic and prophetic discourse, in the paroxysmal language of magic (What does 'abracadabra' mean?) (Christidis 2002: 101–15, 134). In that sense, *lalangue* refers to the non-communicative, affective aspects persisting within language which, by using ambiguity and homophony, produce a certain *jouissance* beyond meaning (Evans 1996: 97): it 'affects us first of all by everything it brings with it by way of effects that are affects' (Seminar XX: 139, emphasis added).

Discourse and Affect in Social and Political Life: Dialectics of Mutual Engagement

Our discussion is now entering a delicate phase, because we have started sketching in some detail the different levels at which identification matters. Any analysis that purports to capture the complex nature of social identity and political struggle, of how political subjectivity is constructed and hegemony achieved, reproduced and/or questioned/limited, cannot remain at the level of signification, although the role of the symbolic and language remains extremely important. This is the orientation opened to us both from Lacan and from Laclau's recent work. For example, psychoanalysis alerts us to the fact that attachment to the nation cannot be reduced to rational self-interested motivations, economic conditions, and institutional dynamics. As important as the aforementioned factors may be, the play of identifications should be at the heart of any effort to study group actions and human agency in nationalist movements. However, highlighting the semiotic aspect of identification processes is also not enough. No matter how much a national identification is deconstructed there is still something that resists and this is why shifting such attachments is so difficult. Above all else, the ecumenical appeal of discourses like nationalism rests on their ability to mobilize human desire for identity and to promise an encounter with our lost/ sacrificed (national) enjoyment. The study of nationalism should therefore emphasize the workings of the processes of identification and the way dialectics of discourse and affect/enjoyment are played out in different national contexts. Undoubtedly, the nation is a symbolic construction internalized through socialization, but what gives (imaginary) consistency to this discursive construction of the nation is a fantasy promising our encounter with the fullness of enjoyment supposedly located at the roots of national history. This fantasy often permeates official channels and narratives: education, national myths, ritualized practices like army parades, etc. However, such imaginarized promises acquire the gloss of the real – enhancing their depth and salience – through the partial enjoyment obtained from mostly unofficial, and often secretive, ob/scene practices: an enjoyment reproduced through characteristic everyday rituals, customs, culinary preferences and traditions (especially in cases where what is consumed is considered unedible or even disgusting in other cultures and what is practiced is not usually shared with non- members of the community), etc.[3]

Given the theoretical analysis presented in the previous sections, a plurality of distinct but inter-implicated levels is always involved in a successful socio-political identification.[4] But this is not the end of the story. A series of questions are bound to follow from such a conclusion. What are the precise forms this synergy between the various levels involved in this process can take? In particular, how can we account for the far from uncommon fact that such symbiosis can appear as antithesis and can even

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[3] For a detailed analysis of national identification along these lines, see Stavrakakis & Chrysoloras 2006. Also see Stavrakakis 2007, ch. 5

[4] For an analysis of European identity and consumerism along these lines, see Stavrakakis 2007, chs 6 and 7.

metamorphose into transgression and/or resistance?

My main hypothesis here is that, apart from the simple case of straightforward synergy between the different dimensions on which identifications operate, the reproduction of an established order can often take the extremely sophisticated form of complex form/force articulations which then undergo a certain process of distribution along a set of different axes (public/private, scene/obscene, visible/ invisible, explicit/implicit etc.). This (uneven) distribution very often conceals the symbiotic relation between the two – or more – poles produced in the process. The emergence of an oppositional polarity conceals, disavows, a synergy reproducing the hegemonic structure/order.

The reproduction of workplace identifications offers a revealing example in this respect. Here, one can again notice the play between symbolic attachment, fantasy and enjoyment, which often appear as seemingly unconnected or even antithetical dimensions, while in effect they symbiotically sustain relations of power and attachment to authority. A very good illustration is offered by Alessia Contu and Hugh Willmott in 'Studying Practice: Situating Talking About Machines' (Contu and Willmott 2006), in which they offer a challenging interpretation of the complexity of the work practices of Xerox technicians described by Julian Orr. What one observes here is the apparent antagonism between the symbolic command emanating from Xerox management, a call for strict compliance with instructions included in repair manuals and the actual (unrecognized and undervalued) practice of technicians which often favors improvisation and creative experimentation not sanctioned by bureaucratic procedure (Contu and Willmott 2006: 1771, 1773). What we seem to have here is a form of transgression of the (Xerox) Law (*symbolic*) by technicians who enjoy (*real*) – and take pride (*imaginary*) – in enacting a different course of doing their job. Sometimes such ironic and/or cynical transgressive acts are presented as effective forms of resistance.

Now, what is the catch here? It may, at first, sound as insanely counterintuitive but what if a transgression of an ideal serves to reinforce the ideal's capacity to secure compliance and obedience? (Glynos 2003). This is because this transgression – and the concomitant failure to meet a publicly affirmed ideal – can serve as a source of enjoyment. For example, military communities have practices and codes of conduct which often transgress the public ideals of the institution (ideals like fair and equal treatment) but which are kept secret – the practice of 'hazing' or initiation ceremonies, for instance. The established private or officer is well aware that forcing a new recruit to undergo a series of painful and humiliating experiences transgresses the military institution's ideals which he officially avows. However, the claim here would be that not only are these ideals not subverted by such practices, they make possible the enjoyment of their transgression which, in turn, sustains those very same ideals: 'Sun an *institutional unconscious* designates the obscene disavowed underside, that, precisely as disavowed, sustains the public institution. In the army, this underside consists of the obscene sexualized rituals of fragging which sustain group solidarity' (Zizek 2008: 142). Fantasmatically structured enjoyment thus alerts us to

the politically salient idea that oftentimes it may be more productive to consider the possibility that concrete ideals may be sustained rather than subverted by their transgression. And this is exactly what happens in Xerox. Although apparently transgressive, the 'misbehaviour' of Xerox technicians ultimately functions in a 'conservative' way that ultimately benefits the corporation: 'By improvising and applying fixes and short cuts, the technicians minimize the expense of machine repairs and replacements and reduce costumer frustration associated with delays in restoring machine use' (Contu and Willmott 2006: 1775). Thus partial deviance from the publicly sanctioned Law – a deviance limited within the confines of the closed community of technicians – 'is indeed functional for, the goal of cost-effectiveness, customer satisfaction and, ultimately, corporate profitability' (Contu and Willmott 2006: 1776). This should not cause surprise; it makes absolute sense from the point of view of a problematic of self-transgression: 'The ideal and the enjoyment procured through transgression are *co-constitutive*: one sustains the other' (Glynos 2008: 687).

On the one hand, the symbolic ideal forms the background for the transgressive practice; on the other, this practice, through the enjoyment it procures, may serve 'to bolster the ideal and the objectives it structures' (Glynos 2008: 694). Every effective hegemony has to operate on all these levels, co-opting opposition and neutralizing its radical potential – and undergoing, in the process, gradual shifts that, however, do not threaten the reproduction of hierarchical order, the basic parameters of domination. To retain its grip, every hegemonic ideology needs to take into account in advance its own failure and to condition its own transgression. Here, we see the lacking Other, an incomplete power structure, indirectly acknowledging this lack, allowing a certain degree of dis-identification, providing a breathing space for its subjects, on the condition, of course, that this remains under control.

In his recent work Slavoj Zizek has also stressed this intimate relation between the visible symbolic/legal order and its obscene unconscious other side. He designates this institutional unconscious as the terrain of habits:

> The particular ethnic substance, our 'lifeworld', which resists universality, is made up of habits. But what are habits? Every legal order or every order of explicit normativeness has to rely on a complex network of informal rules which tell us how we are to relate to explicit norms: how we are to apply them; to what extent we are to take them literally; and how and when we are allowed, even solicited, to disregard them. These informal rules make up the domain of habits. To know the habits of a society is to know the meta-rules of how to apply its explicit norms. (Zizek 2008: 134)

Habits, in this perspective, incarnate our effective social being, 'often in contrast with our perception of what we are' (Zizek 2008: 140). They also provide ideology with its most important mechanism; the public ideological message is sustained by a series of obscene supplements that make resistance really tricky: the official order can change, what is difficult to change is 'this obscene underground, the unconscious terrain of habits' (Zizek 2008: 143). In that sense, the most essential dimension in ideology critique involves 'not directly changing the explicit text of the law but, rather,

intervening in its obscene virtual supplement' (Zizek 2008: 145).

This ultimately symbiotic engagement between publicly affirmed ideal and secret transgression, between what happens *off stage* and what is *on display* (Shryock 2004) in their mutual co-constitution, observable in a variety of socio-political settings from national identity to workplace identifications, has been extremely well documented by social anthropologists, especially through the problematic of *cultural intimacy* (Herzfeld 2005). According to this extremely challenging body of work, the production of public identities seems to create, of necessity, 'a special terrain of things, relations and activities that cannot themselves be public but are essential aspects of whatever reality and value public things might possess' (Shryock 2004: 3); it is this terrain that has been described by Michael Herzfeld as a terrain of 'cultural intimacy' (Herzfeld 2005). If we go back to our example of the nation, Herzfeld's analysis also points to the operation of distinct logics in the constitution and reproduction of national identity. On the one hand, we have a dimension of self-construction of often elaborate ideologies of self-glorification, and, on the other, the popular support these are able to enjoy 'precisely because they can carry a far greater load of dirty secrets – grounded in everyday experience'; cultural intimacy 'is always th[is] space of the dirty linen' (Herzfeld 2004: 320, 329).

Herzfeld captures cogently this dialectic between the formal narrative of national identity and its *envers*, a dimension of spirited personal (social) poetics that involve fantasies of transgression and practices procuring partial enjoyment. This crucial other side is most often dismissed, obscured, repressed; but remains absolutely crucial: 'the formal operations of the national states depend on coexistence – usually inconvenient, always uneasy – with various realizations of cultural intimacy. ... That is hardly the stuff of which the rhetoric of national unity is officially made, yet it informs the mutual recognition that one finds among a country's citizens everywhere – even among its state functionaries' (Herzfeld 2005: 4). What we have here, in other words, is 'a direct mutual engagement between the official state and the sometimes disruptive popular practices whose existence it often denies, but whose vitality is the ironic condition of its own continuation' (Herzfeld 2005: 5). This mutual dependence between the formal and the intimate aspect of national identity is missed in top-down accounts of the nation-state that dismiss as mere anecdote the intimate social spaces constituting our ways of life and moving people to action (Herzfeld 2005: 6, 24).

Like this anthropological tradition, Lacan-influenced discourse analysis moves beyond the limits of such top-down mainstream academic approaches, orienting its research into accounting in detail for the disavowed dimension implicated in identification and social reproduction, that of cultural intimacy as the *other scene* where administrations of enjoyment are formulated, fantasized and (partially) enacted. As Herzfeld points out, the adherence to static cultural ideals has a surprising consequence: 'it permits and perhaps even encourages the day-to-day subversion of norms' (Herzfeld 2005: 22). In other words, 'norms are both perpetuated and reworked through the deformation of social conventions in everyday interaction' (Herzfeld 2005: 37). Wasn't this also the lesson from the Xerox example? Indeed the public Law, the space of the officially sanctioned ideals, is revealed as

incomplete, and – paradoxically – it receives support from a clandestine supplement of self- transgression (Contu 2008: 369); the lack in the Other demands a fantasy support, ultimately an indirect anchoring in the (partial) *jouissance* of the body. Discourse and affect, in their (often paradoxical) mutual engagement, are thus revealed as constitutive in the construction and reproduction of social and political identifications and socio-political orders.

Ethico-political Alternatives and Artistic Practices[5]

Given the various resources (symbolic and affective) hegemonic orders can utilize in order to reproduce themselves, what are the alternatives left for critical theoretico-political interventions? Within the broader terrain of what I have called the Lacanian Left, two orientations seem to emerge. The first one is offered by Slavoj Zizek's perverse voluntarism of the 'radical act', of an idealized act offering a miraculous re-foundation of the totality of the social.[6] In my own work I have consistently resisted the lure of such a fantasy, offering instead a commentary on the character of the act, reflexively articulating some of its formal conditions of possibility/impossibility: an act is always impure, imperfect, located at the intersection between real and symbolic, but, instead of repressing or camouflaging it, it thematizes this imperfection, registering it within its own fabric. And yet, acts proper are not purely negative gestures traversing a dominant fantasy; they also make the emergence of a new articulation possible. But, instead of incarnating an apocalyptic, total re-foundation of positivity, this articulation is characterized by a distinct *ethical* relation with lack: instead of covering it over, it purports to register and institutionalize lack/negativity. Under which conditions, however, could this strategy be able to increasingly claim a hegemonic role? A first condition would clearly concern our ability to move beyond the lure of closure, purity and identity, inscribe lack and event-ness, and thus un-stick desire and enjoyment from its *phallic* crystallizations. Here, from a Freudian and Lacanian point of view, it is a (thoroughly productive) process of *mourning* which is called for and an ability to mourn that has to be cultivated – a lesson particularly important for the Left. A second condition is one related to the affective value of a radical democratic identification with lack. The crucial question here is: what (ethical) administration of enjoyment would permit the formulation and differential cathexis of this alternative articulation? Here, Lacan's sketching of another, feminine *jouissance* of the not-All may be of some help.[7]

However, what examples can be offered in support of an ethical orientation highlighting the reflexive institutionalisation of lack and the ethical mode of *jouissance* that can be associated with it? In fact, two separate issues are at stake here: 1. Can such an acceptance of lack be really appealing, do we see it materializing around us? 2. Can it involve or encourage encounters with such a, by definition,

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[5] This section is based on arguments elaborated in the last section of Stavrakakis 2010.

[6] For detailed critiques of Zizek's position see Stavrakakis 2007, ch. 4, as well as Stavrakakis 2010.

[7] For a recent comparison between the masculine and feminine modalities of *jouissance* very close to this argument, see Madra and Ozselcuk 2010: 491.

elusive (feminine) *jouissance* of not-All? My argument in this closing section of this text is that contemporary art does, in fact, offer numerous examples in which a symbolic inscription of lack is associated with artistic forms of enjoyment with broader appeal, examples of a satisfying reflexive act of sublimation. And this sublimation is never a solitary achievement to the extent that, as we shall see, it always involves the creation of a certain type of public space.

At any rate, we already know from psychoanalytic commentary that 'true creation has its source in the void of knowledge' and that 'the artist endeavors to keep empty' this hole (André 2006: 151-2), to bring it into public view. To highlight this, Serge André speaks about the 'mental anorexia' of writers: 'The writer is basically a case of mental anorexia. He suffers and derives enjoyment from a form of anorexia (because he cultivates it as something precious) that crystallizes around speech rather than food. He does not want to speak; he refuses to be satisfied with speech; he does not want to feed upon the ordinary, standardized words that speech invites him to share, not to mention the stuffing that common discourse seeks to impose on him. … the writer begins by refusing speech and the social link it institutes' (André 2006: 165). By referring to nothing but to the void rupturing the language of representation and meaning, the writer acquires the power 'to renew language and the relation to language' (André 2006: 160, 158). True creation is premised on such a self-critical registering of the lack in the Other, a move that produces a paradoxical enjoyment of the not-All and affects the status of the social institution of language. This is also the case with visual and public art, to which I shall now turn.

From Anish Kapoor's games with emptiness to Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth*, the impressive creation of a 'negative space' inside the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern, from Hans Haacke to the NSK and their NSK state project, from Hirschhorn's to Luchezar Boyadjiev's deconstructions of the monument, the message is more than clear. Today, artistic practices can indeed highlight the central parameters of our present political predicament. There is an increasing need to problematize the emerging post-democratic order, to highlight the malaise it produces and its various (local and global) side-effects and to reinvigorate democratic citizenship; to re-politicise an increasingly post-political, post-democratic public sphere. Yet such a re-politicisation needs to be alert to the dangers of speculative leftist utopianism and voluntarism, and also conscious of our personal implication in the reproduction of power structures and aware of the inability of conscious knowledge to effect a shift in this relation. What is called for, in other words, is a restrained re-politicisation able to function at both the cognitive and affective levels in order to make us assume responsibility for our multiple (conscious and unconscious) accommodation to power structures. Contemporary art has emerged as one of the most forceful agents of such a re-politicisation. William Kentridge's work (his drawings, his films, his texts) provides a clear illustration of this.

Not only are Kentridge's origins (South Africa), family background (his father was a prominent anti-apartheid lawyer), and education (he studied politics before turning to fine art), indicative of a political orientation. The fabric of his work, as well

as the way he himself (and others) perceives it is deeply political. It responds to the post-democratic malaise we currently experience: Kentridge's work intervenes 'in a country – or indeed a world – where many people feel disenfranchised and disconnected from the political process' and attempts to raise issues without providing fixed answers (Macgregor 2004: 13). By bringing together the outrageous, the extreme, and the mundane, Kentridge manages 'to connect the specificity of daily life (with which every viewer can identify) to the broader moral and ethical issues of citizenship' (Christov-Bakargiev 2004: 33).

Furthermore, it is political not in the fetishistic, absolutist way of utopian, speculative leftism, but in a sophisticated way alert to the ambiguities of relations of power and to power, conscious of the promise and limits of democracy. 'I am interested in a political art', Kentridge writes, 'that is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings – an art (and a politics) in which optimism is kept in check, and nihilism at bay' (Kentridge 1992). Speaking about the political implications of his work, he defends his position as 'a polemic for a kind of uncertainty', which he wants to differentiate from relativism: 'To say that one needs art, or politics, that incorporate ambiguity and contradiction is not to say that one then stops recognizing and condemning things as evil. However, it might stop one being so utterly convinced of the certainty of one's own solutions. There needs to be an understanding of fallibility and how the very act of certainty or authoritativeness can bring disasters' (Kentridge 1999: 34).

But Kentridge is also alert to the lack of any automatic escape from the post-democratic malaise. Even more troubling than the malaise we are experiencing is the easiness with which we accommodate ourselves to it: 'Its central characteristic is disjunction. The fact that daily living is made up of a non-stop flow of incomplete, contradictory elements, impulses and sensations. But the arresting thing for me is not this disjunction itself, but the ease with which we accommodate to it. It takes a massive personal shock for us to be more than momentarily moved' (Kentridge 2004a: 68-9). This raises the issue of personal implication, of what he calls 'indirect responsibility'. Indeed Kentridge is particularly interested in the way the political world 'affects us personally' (Kentridge 1999: 14). He has, in fact, positioned his own work accordingly: 'in the years following apartheid, Kentridge's drawings and films began to express the weight of having been one of the privileged few, exploring the notion and implications of indirect responsibility' (Christov-Bakargiev 2004: 34). We are always already guilty: we need to assume responsibility for the 'implications of what one knew, half knew, and did not know of the abuses of the apartheid years' (Kentridge, cited in Fernie 2007).

Although Kentridge and his family were opposed to and resisted apartheid, the assumption of this responsibility acquires in his work the most radical representation. This is how Jes Fernie describes that assumption:

> In *Mine*, the third film that Kentridge made, Soho Eckstein is a mine owner enjoying the fruits of his labour. He sits propped up in bed wearing

> a suit with his breakfast placed before him. He presses the plunger of his cafetiere through his tray down into a noisy, claustrophobic, hellish mine in which misery, physical confinement, and the violent sound of drilling are horribly apparent. The contrast between the spaces above and below ground evokes Eckstein's exploitation of the land and the labourers he employs beneath it. He is ignorant of the suffering he is causing, thus avoiding the incapacitating emotion of guilt. The contradictions and ambiguities in the film emerge when we realise that we can't dismiss Eckstein (or any of Kentridge's characters, Ubu included) as a straightforward representative of evil distant from ourselves, but someone or something inside us all. The physical resemblance of Eckstein to Kentridge himself is striking, and indeed Kentridge has talked about the fact that Eckstein is loosely based on his grandfather, Morris Kentridge, a lawyer and parliamentarian for the Labour Party in South Africa during the first half of the 20th century…The physical stature of the repulsive protagonist in the film *Ubu Tells the Truth* (1997) is also based on Kentridge - more specifically on photographs of himself naked taken in his studio (Fernie, 2007).

The need for such a strategy follows from Kentridge's realisation that knowledge is not enough to shift our personal implication in unjust hegemonic orders. His admiration for Italo Svevo's Zeno partly emanates from his realisation of the gap between knowledge – even self-knowledge – and action. As Kentridge observes, 'Zeno, the hero of Svevo's novel, has remarkable self-knowledge. But it is knowledge that is without effect. This absolute inability of self-knowledge to force Zeno to act, or at other times to stop him from acting, feels familiar' (Kentridge 2004b). The first step in any subjective – or collective – change is to assume responsibility for our – direct and indirect, conscious and unconscious, cognitive and affective – implication in our symptom: to put it in Lacan's terms we need to *identify with our symptom*, to thematize our own (traumatic) attachment to what secures our servitude. And as Kentridge's status in the contemporary art world shows, such an active and re-politicizing registration of impurity can produce an ethical form of aesthetico-political satisfaction with wider appeal. Indeed, 'certain artworks seem to bring us to the borders of traumatic encounter in ways that are disturbing and provoking, even painfully so, but also at the same time aesthetically enjoyable' (Ray 2009: 135). To the extent that they 'create a sense of discomfort and inner conflict that leads to a reconsideration of previously held views' and encourage the experience of questioning ourselves and society, such artworks have a true democratic potential (Hersch 1998: 8).

Michael Landy's methodical destruction of all his belongings – as a way to actively test his own implication in ownership and consumerism – in his celebrated work *Break Down*, also points to the alternative satisfaction entailed in the sacrifice of phallic enjoyment, which can acquire a wider appeal. This is how *The Guardian* reported the event, and it is worth quoting in some length:

> Oxford Street, the most famous shopping street in Britain, is playing host to one of the more genuinely disturbing art events of recent years. Michael Landy's *Break Down* is a piece of alternative retail therapy housed in what was once a C&A department store near Marble Arch. Dominating the stripped-down retail space is a long, winding automatic conveyor belt which reminds one, in a consumer year-zero sort of way, of the famous conveyor belt of prizes in The Generation Game, carrying as it does an endlessly circling succession of trays of Michael Landy's stuff, in different stages of breakdown (Cumming 2001).

Landy's work could be emblematic here: not only does it risk a temporary – but nevertheless courageous – suspension of the coordinates of our (consumerist) reality, not only does it embrace the lack in the Other; it also thematizes the personal cost, the process of mourning, involved in such a critical act, a cost necessary in order to reflexively highlight our own implication in hegemonic orders. This is what we read in a discussion between Landy and Julian Stallabras: 'JS: Some people will read this work as an attack on consumerism, though. ML: People will read it like that, and—well—it is an attack. But it's an inverted attack because it's an assault on me. It's trying to ask: what is it that makes consumerism the strongest ideology of our time?' (Stallabras 2000: 6-7). And yet, this act, this embrace of lack, situated at the intersection of the real with the symbolic, produces its own enjoyment and earns the appreciation of his audience both at the cognitive and at the affective level:

> At the show's private view last week, he still didn't know how he was going to feel as the conveyor belt sprang his intricately planned project into action. The next day he told me he thought it was the happiest day of his life. He'd seen people moved to tears. He'd also seen them nicking stuff from the trays, but that's consumerism, part of what he expected.
> … Instead of showing out, Landy's *Break Down* journeys within, consuming what is his and discarding the accoutrements of modern life to find out exactly what happens when nothing's left (Cumming 2001).

And now, on to something more controversial. Anthony Gormley is another artist in whose work his own body is continuously involved as a model, although in a way very different – and, arguably, less challenging or inspiring – from that of Kentridge. And yet, his recent *One and Other* public art project demonstrates that inscriptions of the lack in the Other can acquire degrees of visibility and popular appeal able to re-politicize the centre of the post-democratic capitals of the West, bringing to mind Claude Lefort's argument, according to which the defining characteristic of modern democracy is that in a democratic regime the locus of power remains an empty space, only to be temporarily occupied. What did Gormley do? He used the opportunity offered by the Mayor of London to a series of artists to exhibit their work on the empty 4th plinth in London's Trafalgar Square to initiate a true democratic experiment. Instead of placing one of his scultpures on the plinth, a space usually hosting statues of royalty and generals, he invited applications from people who wanted to temporarily occupy this space at the heart of London for one hour

each. The response to this call was unprecedented. As we read in the official website of the project: 'No fewer than 2,400 people from as far afield as the Shetland Islands and Penzance occupied the plinth for sixty minutes each, picked at random from nearly 35,000 who applied. 1,208 men and 1,192 women aged between 16 and 84 took part... During the 100 day project, the website received over 7 million hits. The project became the subject of photos and blogs, tweets and newspaper articles. It provoked plaudits and vitriol – in short, it became part of the cultural fabric of the UK'.

Gormley sacrificed the exhibition of his own artwork in favor of an encounter with whatever random selection (lot) would bring to the limelight, in what could be construed as a radical pluralist bid to democratize the public sphere. Interestingly enough, not only did this project involve an aesthetico-political institutionalization of lack stimulating the desire for participation, not only did it risk an unpredictable encounter with the 'divided city', to use Nicole Loraux's expression;[8] it also created new forms of subjectivity, new forms of fidelity to the event of participation. People who participated, now call themselves 'the plinthers' to mark this fidelity to Gormley's innovative and satisfying democratic experiment. This is where the kernel of every true act is located; not (so much) in the action of the one individual who initiates something, but in the collective response to her/his challenge by those excluded and demanding to be heard, in the creation of a particular type of commonality of the not-All. But Gormley's work is also important for one more crucial reason: for reactivating the democratic institution of lot inside an (artistic) terrain dominated by the (aristocratic?) quest for unique individual talent, within a socio-cultural terrain regulated by the technocratic Discourse of the University and a political terrain following a post-democratic direction. Simply put, given that 'the drawing of lots has … been the object of formidable work of forgetting' (Rancière 2006: 42), to embrace this constitutive *scandal of democracy* provides crucial help in the effort to reinvigorate this valuable tradition of equality and to bring back on the agenda sortition and civic lotteries (Dowlen 2008). In that sense, Gormley's work does seem to belong to a type of political art that, no matter in what limited fashion, brings 'political ideas and ideals into the realm of the senses and into the moral and emotional lives of individuals', the type of art that can support democracy by 'educating citizens' (Hersch 1998: 3), encouraging questioning and agonistic participation, an awareness of lack and contingency.

Obviously, such (imperfect) acts will always be, sooner or later, open to some degree of co-optation by established institutions and even by the market. Kentridge has not managed to change our implicit complicity to power structures. Landy's work

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[8] This division was also reflected in press reactions to the event. On the one hand, supporters praised 'The fact that the corner of one of our most famous landmarks has been given over to a group of ordinary citizens, to do with what they will' (Skinner 2009), in a way re-claiming the commons. On the other, dismissive critics where quick to conclude that 'Antony Gormley's "plinth people" don't stand up for democracy, they just stand there – and they look stupid' (Jones 2009).

has not resulted in a massive weakening of consumerism.[9] Gormley, a 'celebrity artist' most people would associate with a New Labour vision of public art, has not reversed post-political trends.[10] Furthermore, through their aforementioned works and stances, they have undoubtedly increased their visibility and perhaps their 'market value'. By embracing, however, the partial *jouissance* of the not-All in terrains where this was considered unimaginable, by partly restructuring a (limited) public space along these lines, their projects address an important challenge to all of us, even beyond what they might or might not be consciously envisaging and irrespective of whether they can support this challenge themselves.[11] Why then disqualify them from being fitting examples?

Co-optation is, at any rate, unavoidable. We are all aware that art has and can certainly function as *ideological support* for the status quo by capturing and rendering harmless energies and pressures for change (Ray 2009b: 80). Marcuse, among others, warns us that an artistic search for sensibility can become an end in itself 'and thereby be co-opted into the reigning ethic of consumption' (Hersch 1998: 170). Almost from its inception, psychoanalysis was also put in the service of the *engineering of consent*, with Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays being one of the pioneers of the public relations industry in the US. When such co-optation/domestication of a radical act occurs, then transformative orientations need to re-direct their objectives, with the frontiers of antagonism displaced to a new position. This is what is at stake in any struggle, which can only be an impure, 'ongoing, multiple, and unpredictable' dialectic between power and resistance (Fleming and Spicer 2008: 305).[12] Unless, of course, one envisages it as a dramatic one-off *a la* Zizek. But then we are closer to religion than to politics and psychoanalysis. In the Lacanian ethical orientation we can only hope that the institutionalization of lack will make the unavoidable dialectic between co-optation and innovation a dynamic one, introducing new rhythms in the

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[9] Landy is, in fact, conscious of the fact that his act can even be construed as the ultimate consumer choice: 'JS: This project reminds me of some of the writing about potlatch and economies in which gifts play an important part. The disposal of goods, sometimes very valuable goods, can be central to a society: in Chichén-Itzá, the great Mayan city, there is a vast, very steep-sided pit, with deep water, into which valuables, and sometimes children, were thrown as sacrifices (archaeologists have fished the treasures out). That disposal can also be a form of conspicuous consumption: does that have a resonance for you? ML: Yeah, this is a kind of luxury in one respect. I don't want the work to be seen as purely negative. In a sense, it's the ultimate consumer choice' (Stallabras 2000: 4).

[10] Associated with SkyArts and relying heavily on media coverage, Gormley's project was all along in danger of being accused of complicity with the post-political mediatised reality it partially put in question.

[11] Even Salcedo, when referring to her aforementioned work *Shibboleth*, seems to ignore its ecumenical appeal and severely limits the scope of possible interpretations by linking it with the legacy of colonialism and racism (Salcedo 2007: 65). And as for Anish Kapoor, briefly mentioned above, he has just decided to alienate many of his admirers by associating himself with a commercial spectacle such as the Olympic Games.

[12] This is especially true as far as art is concerned. As Gene Ray has put it, 'all productions of spirit in class society are entanglements of truth *and* untruth, freedom *and* unfreedom, promise of happiness and marker of barbarism. Critique confronts the social untruth embedded in cultural artefacts in order to set free the potential truth that is also latent in them' (Ray 2009a: 138).

(continuous) redistribution of the sensible and permitting the formulation of innovative post-capitalist alternatives.

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