I. Representation and the law

As Jacques Lacan induced, “a signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier” (Lacan, XI 207).\(^1\) This proposes a sort of grammar of subjectivity, governed by the principle of exchange, which Hegel’s note on the relation of subject to predicate provides some explication of:

Only in the end of the proposition does the empty beginning become actual knowledge. This being so, it is not clear why one does not speak merely . . . of that which gives the meaning without adding the meaningless sound as well. But it is just this word that indicates that what is posited is not a being \([i.e.\] something that merely is\), or essence, or a universal in general, but rather something that is reflected into itself, a Subject. \(\textit{Phenomenology of Spirit} 12-13\)

The experience of subjectivity, that is, our self-reflexive perception of ourselves, entails a certain structure of representation. Borrowing from mathematical language, the situation of the signifier in this structure can be designated as \textit{medial}, as the graph of the adjacencies between edges. A consequence follows: If all possibilities of subjectivity are governed by signification, they must also be functions of representation.

A certain positing negativity is constitutive of the possibility of representation itself, but, and as in the sense of \textit{media}, this \textit{mediation} has an irreducibly materialist ground in our corporeality. As Hegel intoned and Slavoj Žižek delights to insist, the Subject is also \textit{substance}\(^2\), and those representations you hold to yourself as the most integral of possessions (unless you have lost your mind) are material both in the sense of the horrifyingly spongy texture of your cerebral cortex and in the sense of the object of the observational avarice that torments of the stand-up comedian. Simultaneously, subjectivity-as-representation requires an irreducibly abstract ground: “If the Real is a minimal difference, then repetition (which establishes this difference) is primordial” and, consequently, “the Real is primordially nothing but the gap that separates a thing from itself, the gap of repetition” \(\textit{Žižek, LN} 614\). This gap
is, in Freud’s model of consciousness, one that is characterized by difference and by trace:

We shall suppose that a system in the very front of the apparatus receives the perceptual stimuli but retains no trace of them and thus has no memory, while behind it there lies a second system which transforms the momentary excitations of the first system into permanent traces. (Freud 538)

And so Jacques Derrida, in his brilliant ventriloquism of Freud, states that even at the level of the so-called substrate of consciousness—the neuronal register, as it might be called—there is the necessity of a resistance, a site of minimal difference:

They “thus offer a possibility of representing (darzustellen) memory.” First representation, first staging of memory. Darstellung is representation in the weak sense of the word but also frequently in the sense of visual depiction, and sometimes of theatrical performance. (Derrida 77)

It therefore follows that representation is a matter medium specificity: “Fraying, as the tracing of a trail, opens up a conducting path. Which presupposes a certain violence and a certain resistance to the effraction” (Derrida 77).

There is a third entity that exerts its force within this theatre of operations: The effects of the Real are manifested in the field composed by the subject’s relationship with the Other, which is also the site of the primordial articulation of the Law. As Lacan notes, this is “the symbolic articulation that Freud discovered at the same time as the unconscious that is, in effect, consubstantial with the unconscious. The necessity of this articulation is what he indicates to us in his methodical reference to the Oedipus complex” (Lacan, *Ecrits* 181). This Law (honoured, as the Tsar by the Imperial Ballet, by the enactment mobilizing representation) emerges in a manner that is simultaneously antecedent to and concurrent with the subject’s originary encounter with the Other, and that takes place as a joust under the auspices of recognition. In this engagement, the subject’s challenge to the Other is her desire to assume the Other’s desire, for the only way by which she can be certain that the Other recognizes her is if that Other requires her recognition in turn. This dialectic produces the ground from which she can stage the experience of subjective perception and, as it follows, the fantasy of consistent reality. As Slavoj Žižek summarizes:

What, then, is fantasy? The desire “realized” (staged) in fantasy is not the subject’s own but the other’s desire—that is to say, fantasy, a fantasmatic formation, is an answer to the enigmatic “Che vuoi?” (What do you want?) which renders the subject’s primordial, constitutive position. The original question of desire is not directly “what do I want?” but “What do others want from me? What do they see in me? What am I for others?” (LN 686)
In order to locate herself by the coordinates of the Other’s recognition, the subject asks, “What do you want from me?” But, notwithstanding that this occurs in a field, it must not be understood as a Euclidean diagram: “The L of the calling-into-question of the subject in his existence has a combinatory structure that must not be confused with its spatial aspect. In this respect, it is the signifier itself that must be articulated in the Other” (Lacan, *Ecrits* 185). Accordingly, the graph of this act—which is unconscious and pre-ontological, but an act nonetheless—must be thought of in the most resonant application of the term: “I draw.” This sense of the verb conveys both an invocation of the Other’s desire and the inscription of “the lines that condition the perceptum—in other words, the object—insofar as these lines circumscribe the field of reality rather than merely depending on it” (Lacan, *Ecrits* 187).

This symbolic mechanic, and its complement, the spatial and narrative coordinates of the bourgeois family, stage the primary scene. Accepting this proposition, the fulcrum of the problematic of subjectivity—the punctum of the analytic question—returns, again, through the motif of the signifier. This mark—the mark of the signifier—is typecast from the symbolic matrix designated Name-of-the-Father and the schematization Lacan offers early on is one means of rendering its effect, the subject, precisely as she is: As a graph. Glossing Freud’s “A Note Upon a Mystic Writing Pad,” Derrida observes, “Psychical content will be represented by a text whose essence is irreducibly graphic,” (75) which can be understood both as the graph of the Lacanian function $<>o$, but also and at the same time, from its full significance, the graph as it signifies to scratch, to carve, to write, and to write down, and to propose a law.

**II. The symbolic coordinates of psychosis**

As the guarantor of symbolic exchange taking place on the field that, defined by signifiers, becomes the ground of their meaning, the Name-of-the-Father is one of the surveyor’s pegs designating the site where the subject emerges as an effect of the contest there enacted. For the subject who evades psychosis, the Other is the “locus from which the question of his existence may arise for him” (Lacan, *Ecrits* 182), and the “the fourth term is given by the subject in his reality, foreclosed as such in the system and entering into the play of signifiers only in the form of the dummy [mort], but becoming the true subject as this play of signifiers makes him signify”(Lacan, *Ecrits* 186). This is so because the enunciation of the Name-of-the-Father bars, and therefore defers, the subject’s desire, and in doing so provides the minimal difference that is constitutive of her subjectivity (and of those imaginary operations coordinated in classical psychology under the identity “percepens”). In order for the requisite minimal gap to emerge, something, as Žižek argues, “has to be radically (constitutionally) excluded” (LN 668). This object, “objet petit a, is that which should be excluded from the form of reality, that whose exclusion constitutes and sustains the frame

“Pop/Corn”
itself” (Žižek, LN 668). The object a functions as the object of desire precisely through its relation to the subject who has been denied it by virtue of the bar of deferral, creating a minimal difference within the object necessary for it to bear gracefully the subject’s desire. To extrapolate this statement into the neuronal register we can again consult Derrida, who extrapolates its function there from the periodicity that Freud insists governs the action of perceptual neurons, which, as he quotes Freud, “appropriate the period of an excitation”: “Pure difference, again, and difference between diastems. This concept of period in general precedes and conditions the opposition between quantity and quality and all which that opposition covers” (83).7 Periodicity, resulting from deferral, is in this sense both a material and ontological ground for the subjective perception of the world as consistent. In the symbolic order, periodicity is produced as a function of phallic signification, which, precisely by its limiting of jouissance, produces the first “petite mort” and all those that follow. This structure of termination—of death—governs the functions that constitute the percipiens: “Traces thus produce the space of their inscription only by acceding to the period of their erasure” (Derrida 112).

In the economy of psychosis, the advent of the Master-Signifier, and therefore, the emergence and situation of the Name-of-The-Father, is thrown off-kilter. In this event, the dialectical rhythm—the flickering of the signifier as it is barred—disintegrates, producing a failure of the fantasized stability of representation: “the object (in this case, the gaze or voice) is included in reality, the outcome of which is the disintegration of our “sense of reality,” the loss of reality” (Žižek, LN 667). In this scenario, the primal scene is bereft of the source of minimal difference and is rendered obscene:

It is the lack of the Name-of-the-Father in that place which, by the hole that it opens up in the signified, sets off a cascade of reworkings of the signifier from which the growing disaster of the imaginary proceeds, until the level is reached at which signifier and signified stabilize in a delusional metaphor. (Lacan, Ecrits 207)

The “foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father” opens a space through which the obscene father emerges, usurping, so to speak, the father in his symbolic function as the establishment of Law. If the Name-of-the-Father is summoned but fails to appear, “a pure and simple hole may thus answer in the Other; due to a lack of the metaphoric effect, this hole will give rise to a corresponding hole in the place of phallic signification” (Lacan, Ecrits 191). The vortex marking this absence is both utter, excessive jouissance and the substantified Real: The blind spot where the object returns the gaze of the Other to us becomes seen, and the Law, which, as a terminus, is symbolically bound to death, no longer bars the subject, causing the establishment of a fantasy-structure in which the objet a of her desire, no longer deferred, collapses from its function as the mark of the site of pure...
abstraction into the screen of fantasy as a perceptible entity.

In light of these considerations we may re-read Guy Debord's theses on the coordinates of late capitalist subjectivity in their ontological specularity. Debord, joining Marx and Lacan after Freud, articulates a fundamentally historicist analysis of the problem: “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (Debord 12). This constitution of simulacra, is, as Debord diagnoses, the drive of the late capitalist mode of production, composed of an everyday life that should be understood as the systematic organization of a breakdown in the faculty of encounter, and a replacement of that faculty by a social hallucination: a false consciousness of encounter, or an “illusion of encounter.” In a society where no one is any longer recognizable by anyone else, each individual is necessarily unable to recognize his own reality. (Debord 152)

Here, abstraction is reified into the spectacle; so that it is no longer an encounter with the Name-of-the-Father that articulates the signifying cut of abstraction or its Law. With no place from which to pose the question “What do you want?”, the subject is no longer a symptomatic conversion of this question, but is rather a figure of the obscene: A psychotic hallucination of encounter.

The mediation constitutive of subjectivity has its correlation in representational technologies:“The structure of the psychical apparatus will be represented by a writing machine” (Derrida 75). But not all writing machines are bound by Law—or, rather, some writing machines reproduce not the chain of signifiers made possible by the cut in the real but the substantified cut itself. The narrator of Kafka’s In the Penal Colony describes a scenario in which the coordinates of signification are evocative of a technique of representation wherein the signifier itself has become the subject of reference—in which the writing machine that graphs the Law onto the skin of the prisoner is the most obscene substantification of the signifier that the cruel, primordial father could produce. The apparatus performs the operation of “substituting the signs of the real for the real” in a manner that illustrates the implosive consequences of the deployment of a representational, “perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes” (Baudrillard, Simulacra 2), and the Commandant is an exemplum of the obscene father, “an absolute Master for whom there are no limits; yet simultaneously, he possesses an insight into the very kernel of our (subject’s) being, our desire has no secret for him . . . [he is] a father who knows” (Žižek, Symptom 159). It is this father from which we have no secret, no place from which to ask, “What do you want?”

In terms of a critique of capital, this structure also emerges in the spectacle: “The
spectacle is the self-portrait of power in the age of power’s totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence” (Debord 19). In such scenes, we find parables describing the iteration of a symbolic system (that of late capital) in which “the barriers of representation rotate crazily, an implosive madness which, far from being ex-centric, keeps its gaze fixed on the center, on its own abyssal repetition” (Baudrillard, Simulacra 73).

III. The Spectacle and The Ring

Guy Debord’s inaugural thesis on the society of the spectacle takes on a resonant insistence when considered in terms of this graphing: “The spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of non-life” (12). Here Debord is invoking Marx’s distinction between dead labour and living labour (Marx 287-90). However, recalibrated as it is under the regime of real subsumption, this autonomous movement is not that of a death drive, but of an un-dead drive—that is, what we might imagine as the sex drive of a virus:

Replacing that necessity by the necessity of boundless economic development can only mean replacing the satisfaction of primary human needs, now met in the most summary manner, by a ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs, all of which come down in the end to just one—namely, the psuedo-need for the reign of an autonomous economy to continue. (Debord 33-34)”

An exemplary allegory of the psychotic coordinates of this mode of subjectivity and of production is presented in the 2002 psychological horror film, The Ring. As could be expected, the generic conventions of the family-drama horror film are invoked by the manner in which the incidents of the plot unfold and the regular coordinates of the (improper) family drama emerge. Rachel is clearly a failing mother, Noah is an absent, immature, father, and their preternaturally independent son Aidan is being plagued by “visions” it becomes clear he is receiving from a diabolical source. But the events of the film are inscribed in a manner that is fundamentally concerned with mediation, both in its subjective and technical senses, and it is this scene that ultimately configures the subject-position of the its protagonist and of the identificatory subjectivity of those who view it.

The opening mise-en-scène explicitly engages with that form of mediation that emerged in conjunction with the transition from industrial to late capitalism, by which I mean to say: Television. As generic convention dictates, it dramatizes the situation of two teenaged girls home alone at night. However, their conversation displays a discomfiting obsession with the subjective encounter with mediation. Katie, remarking “I hate television. It gives me headaches . . . it’s like a big conspiracy . . . any ideas how many electrorays are travelling through our brains every second?” recalls Jean Baudrillard’s succinct technical explanation of the means by which this medium substantifies the gaze of the Other. As an analogue mediation, “the cinema
is an image; that is to say not only a screen and a visual form, but a *myth*, something that still retains something of the double, of the phantasm, of the mirror, of the dream,” and as such is incomparable with

*the “TV” image*, which suggests nothing, which mesmerizes, which is itself nothing but a screen, not even that: a miniaturized terminal that, in fact, is immediately located in your head—you are the screen, and the TV watches you—it transistorizes all the neurons and passes through like a magnetic tape—a tape, not an image. (*Simulacra* 51)

Following Baudrillard’s logic, television is the screen through which the obscene emerges, and it is precisely this obscene relationship to the screen (which, recalling Lacan, is the frame that establishes the consistency of our subjectivity) that is established through Becca’s recounting of a story common in turn of the century North-American oral culture:

“I got a better one. Heard of the videotape that kills you? . . . You start to play it and it’s like someone else’s nightmare. And then suddenly this woman comes on, smiling at you, seeing you through the screen . . . someone knows you’ve watched it.”

The screen is, as we know, not *supposed* to be watching us, and the conviction that it is is a clear indicator of the advent of a psychotic economy of representation.12 These intimations of destabilization converge in the moment that concludes the opening vignette, when the television turns on automatically and registers the real of its medium in the form of the static of a non-signifying signal. The event of Katie’s death, linked causally by virtue of syntagmatic order to the apparition of the television screen, is given to be seen by the viewer of the film in the imaginary register. An imperceptible image flashes, followed immediately by the infection of the entire cinematic screen by static, which functions to inscribe the eye of the viewer within the scopic economy of the film by virtue of the perception of a substantified gaze. This representational schema erupts throughout the film as moments of visceral temporal and visual disturbances that appear visually similar to hallucination but are presented to the viewer as objective by virtue of their inclusion in the diegesis of the film. By virtue of our position as the seeing subject we are required to identify with this psychosis, and this is in no small part responsible for the extremely unsettling subjective effect produced by the film. A strategic intensification of the corresponding affect is effected by the deployment of a consistent visual trope depicting the destruction and the distortion of the image of the subjects who have fallen under the obscene Other’s gaze, and whose faces (by which they ought to be recognizable) are scratched out in drawings, blurred in photographs, subject to digital distortion in security monitors.

Nonetheless, the narrative structure of the film proceeds along recognizably logical lines, therefore appearing to secure the fantasy of consistency that accompanies just-regular-type-pathological subjectivity. Prompted by

“Pop/Corn”
the worrisome drawings being produced by her young son after the death of his cousin, Rachel becomes engaged with the mystery of Katie’s death, interviewing her traumatized friend and tracking down the location of the allegedly murderous transmission. She herself views the montage, which presents a series of disconnected but saturated images that are characterized by their uncanny manipulation of normative proportion and which recur again and again throughout the film. Still, while the effect of these moments is disconcerting, there is nothing to explicitly indicate to the viewer that the incidents of the plot are exceeding the limits of natural logic until Rachel asks Aidan’s estranged father Noah to help her “find out where the tape came from.”

In preparation, Rachel makes a copy of the tape, noticing that the time tracker is scrambled, and won’t make sense. Noah’s more sophisticated playback equipment confirms this, initiating a conversation that indicates that, impossibly, the tape has no record of being recorded.

Noah: “Are you sure this is a copy? The numbers are all screwed up.”

Rachel: “Same problem got copied I guess.”

Noah: “That’s impossible. The numbers are the control track. They’re put on the tape whenever it’s recorded which means, theoretically, that there shouldn’t be any images . . . When you record a track, the makeup is like a signature for whatever does the recording, like a camcorder, VCR or whatever. So the control track can tell us where it came from. To not have one . . . I mean, that’s like being born without fingerprints.”

Simultaneously, the distinction between visual representation and the corporeal begins to deteriorate. This is viscerally introduced in the scene where the image of a fly, which previously had unsettled Rachel by seeming to so real as to be on the “real” side of the screen, attains corporeality as she is printing photos of images from the tape as they appear on a screen. As she pulls it from the screen in a moment of primordial and obscene transgression, the boundaries of her own body are similarly transgressed—that is, she begins to bleed from the nose. This symbolic movement is reiterated and substantified in the next syntagm, a nightmare sequence in which Rachel coughs up an electrode while water leaks through the telephone receiver she is engaged with. As she looks through the door of Aidan’s room, Samara is in his place, and grabs her arm. Rachel wakes screaming to discern a burned handprint on herself. Again, what ought to be a site of representation proper—the dream—has been rendered obscenely corporeal.

These manifestations of a psychotic economy of subjectivity persist as incidents in the diegesis; yet, as the film progresses towards its anticipated resolution, several scenes indicate a potential return to a normatively configured primal scene. In a moment consistent with this trajectory, Noah admits that while he does not want to be Aidan’s father, “but I don’t want anyone else to do it either—be your father.” Aidan replies, quite properly, “It’s a conundrum.”
Here is a precise dramatization of agency of the Name-of-the-Father: It produces “a riddle in the form of a question the answer to which involves a pun or play on words” (“Conundrum”). However, these gestures towards normativity are persistently undercut by an insistent iteration of the psychotic through its potentials of mediation. While this conversation is going on, Rachel is looking at Becca’s scrapbook. A shot panning across the stage: “2. People don’t even know how luck they are compared to the people in this book. 3. When they referred to the TV as a “magic box” it was so strange.” These words are bordered by a compulsive repetition of a drawing of a fly.

Nonetheless, the overarching tendency of the action of the film continues along a predictable course, which takes the form of a supernaturally-inflected detective story. The island to which Rachel has traced the origin of the images is washed over with the melancholy patina of a curse, but as she becomes more and more engaged with locating the agent culpable for the death of her niece that agent is imagined as a subjective being. And so, while we visually encounter a series of shots that repeat the images of the tape as these irrupt into the diegesis of the film as hallucinatory flashes or montage, these images are figured as merely supplementary to historical record where the ‘real story of the tape,’ so to speak, is to be found. While they retain their hallucinatory quality of the purely visual, they appear to be contained within the logic of the clue. Thus, although Samara’s progeny does seem mysterious—the doctor on the island says of her mother, “She wanted a child... adopted, they said, never where”—it becomes clear to Rachel that the murderous acts of the entity operating through the agency of the tape are those of a terribly angry, because terribly wronged, ghost of a young girl. The reaction of Samara’s father to Rachel’s unearthing of the story—violence, and, moments before his suicide, the categorical assertion, “My wife was not supposed to have a child”—provides the viewer evidence of an unstable perpetrator whose injuries to the little girl require recompense in order to restore balance to the ethical economy of the film. Towards this end, Noah and Rachel locate the site where Samara was, as they understand, imprisoned at the hands of a maddened father. The small room at the top of the barn is staged and lit like a theatrical scene, with a television set prominently placed in the center and vortex of the room. Rachel says, wonderingly, “He kept her here, alone” to which Noah, indicating the television, replies, “Not alone.” This trace of a scenario appears to provide an explanation for the role that television plays in what now seems to be a fairly explicable haunting. When the Ring (the well Samara was pushed down) is excavated, in archaeological fashion, from under the floorboards of a cabin, it seems almost logical that a television set would become animate and knock Rachel into it. This is so especially because it causes her to discover the body that, although it appears grotesquely large for that of a small child, is recognizable as that of the girl represented in the videos Rachel had uncovered through her investigation. This syntagm

“Pop/Corn”
produces what appears to be the narrative closure of the film: The body is recovered and will be buried, posing the identifiable termination of the grievance of an angry ghost. Alongside this resolution, an exhausted Rachel initiates the possibility of normative domesticity with Noah, telling him, “I want to go home,” causing him to embrace her in a gesture towards familial reconciliation that is reiterated in the following scene, when as the reconstituted family drives home, Aidan wakes to see his parents holding hands.

But then there is the twist, which accomplishes a dialectical sublation of the normative iteration of the trajectory of a horror film. The next day, Rachel, now an attentive mother, wakes Aidan, who asks, “What happened to the girl? Is she still in the dark place?” Rachel replies, “No, we set her free.” And Aidan, terrified, reveals the handprint burned into his arm: “You helped her? Why did you do that . . . You weren’t supposed to help her. Don’t you understand, Rachel? She never sleeps.” And thus the remorseless logic of the film asserts itself. In Noah’s apartment, the television turns on, and on again, to represent the image of the well, and Samara emerges from it, moving disjunctively towards the gaze of the spectator and nearer to the site at which the screen maintains the minimal barrier between representation and the Real. As this traumatic Thing—the gaze substantified—punctures through the field of vision that the screen establishes, her physically distorted body retains the flicker of the pixelated mediation of the television signal.

Rachel discovers Noah’s body moments later. He’s been positioned in the chair in front of the television, and, it is, again, his face which bears the mark of the Other’s violence in its disfiguration. Here, stripped of the fantasy that this Other is a creature of limits, she reacts in a perfectly logical and perfectly ineffectual manner, screaming the agonized question of the subject: “WHAT DO YOU WANT? WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?!?” The receptor is not, in this extremity, the Other whose enigma is represented through metonymy, but, rather, the obscene Other that desires only its unlimited repetition through a medium that is symbolically related not to death but to undeath. Here, then, is the moment of tragic reversal. Rachel asks herself, “Why not me? What did I do that he didn’t?” and realizes: Unlike any of the others who have encountered the tape, she copied it, facilitating the deathless reproductive drive of the Thing. This is the Law that Rachel, in requiring Aidan do the same while knowing very well that the proliferation of the tape will perpetuate the grotesque annihilation of other subjects, is rendered subject to.

The final moment of the film places us under a similar fright, the fright of the confrontation with an absolute Master from whom we can receive no recognition. Aidan, turning to Rachel, asks, “What about the person we show it to? What happens to them?” The next frame is an accelerated repetition of the montage, hailing us as subjects into the psychotic scopic economy of the film.
IV. The Undeath of representation

“The principle which Hegel enunciated in the Jenenser Realphilosophie as that of money—“the life, moving of itself, of that which is dead”—has now been extended by the spectacle to the entirety of social life.” (Debord, 151)

In Hegelian thought, the possibility of representation is ontologically suspended from that movement of abstraction—the advent of terminus—which we might consider as emanating from the space where the subject is punctured into herself by virtue of her missed encounter with death. Death is a fundamental necessity for recognition, and, therefore, for subjectivity, which is, after all, the outcome of a “fight to the death,” in which the “truth of pure negativity and being-for-self” is attained because the subject has experienced “fear and trembling at the encounter of the absolute Lord, death” (Hegel 117). “This pure universal moment,” writes Hegel, “the absolute melting-away of everything stable, is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, pure being-for-self, which consequently is implicit in this consciousness” (117). The absolute negativity and the advent of the Law, is, as has been elaborated here, not represented in the subject’s perception, but rather appears only by virtue of its effects: “This nonexistence, of course, does not simply reduce the Law to an empty imaginary chimera; rather, it makes it into an impossible Real, a void which nonetheless functions, exerts influence, causes effects, curves the symbolic space” (Žižek, PV 39). To clarify by virtue of reiteration: This scene is configured by the ontology of the Notion, which here is the motor—the drive—whose effects comprise the being of recognition, and this scene requires, precisely, a terminus as its condition of possibility. Again, Derrida guides us in tracking this through the technics of mediation:

Force produces meaning (and space) through the power of “repetition” alone, which inhabits it originally as its death. This power, that is, this lack of power which opens and limits the exertion of force, institutes translatability, makes possible what we call “language”, transforms an absolute idiom into a limit which is always already transgressed: a pure idiom is not language; it becomes so only through repetition; repetition always already divides the point of departure of the first time. (95)

The media effect of subjectivity is dependent on a certain relationship to death. What Derrida calls “the datum or effect of repetition,” requires a minimal difference between the representation and its referent (95). A mode of representation that collapses this difference is oriented by the psychotic precisely because “the sting of the relation to death is obliterated in the process” (Derrida 95).

There is another dimension to this relation. It is suspended from the encounter with the Other:

“Pop/Corn”
For it is an experiential truth for psychoanalysis that the question of the subject’s existence arises for him, not in the kind of anxiety it provokes at the level of the ego, which is only one element of his cortege, but as an articulated question—“What am I there?”—about his sex and his contingency in being: namely, that on the one hand he is a man or a woman, and on the other that he might not be, the conjugating their mystery and knotting it in symbols of procreation and death. (Lacan 184).

Further, in the visual regime the split between the eye and the gaze is itself necessary for a symbolic relationship to death:

Indeed, it is by means of the gap in the imaginary opened by this prematurity and in which the effects of the mirror stage proliferate, that the human animal is capable of imagining himself mortal—which does not mean that he could do so without the gap that alienates him from his own image, this symbiosis with the symbolic, in which he constitutes himself to death, could not have occurred. (Lacan 186)

But in a mode of production where valorization no longer has an origin, there emerges an order of pure exchangeability, a translation that is purely transparent because it is without referentiality—without origin.13 The structure that in recognizable subjectivity is suspended from the necessarily unsubstantified traumatic thing produces psychotic subjectivity when, as we have seen, the object a as the blind spot from which we repress our (necessary) engagement with the Other’s desire becomes substantified.14 For Debord, in the register of the scopic, this phenomenon is precisely the characteristic of the spectacle: “The spectacle is essentially tautological, for the simple reason that its means and its ends are identical” (15). In these circumstances, when the minimal gap of representation implodes with the neutralization of the poles between signifier and signified, it is not death or the aim of the death drive which is manifest, but the simultaneous desiccation of subjectivity and death.

To what extent can we propose that this implosion is homologous to the configuration of psychosis as described by Lacan? After all, even in psychosis, the representation of subjectivity is configured by the Law of the Father, even if only by its absence. Perhaps an example might be the obscenity, and the obscene fascination, that emanates from the taxidermied object that no longer functions as a relic, but instead as a corpse that is denied its symbolic resonance and, like the digital photograph, is thereby reduced to nothing but a deathless body because it does not decay. And so also the body of Samara as it emerges from screen of representation itself, abolishing the relationship between the body and its representation in the imaginary and thus, the symbolic status in subjectivity of the body itself, which rests on its immateriality, on the fact that it is and remains a phantasm . . . It belonged to our era to wish to exorcise this phantasm
like the others, that is to say to want to realize, materialize it in flesh and bone and in a completely contrary way, to change the game of the double from a subtle exchange of death with the Other into the eternity of the Same. (Baudrillard, Simulacra 95)

Under this economy, what Baudrillard refers to as the emergence of the structural law of value, representation becomes a consequence of the substantification of the specular into the spectacle. A subjectivity suspended from the mirror stage, from the encounter with the gaze of the Other, is a media effect of the analogue regime of representational technology. But in late industrial capitalism, and the concurrent emergence of the digital regime, we encounter the evidence of an epistemic rupture in a completely different configuration of the symbolic body corresponding to:

the absolute loss of the image, bodies that cannot be represented, either to others or to themselves, bodies enucleated of their being and their meaning by being transfigured into a genetic formula or through biochemical instability, point of no return, apotheosis of a technology that itself has become interstitial and molecular. (Baudrillard, Simulacra 101-02)

This body is homologous with the medium specificity of the digital screen, a body whose representation is the body of the code, that in copying itself without remainder into its representations leaves no tracking, no trace, no indication of an origin prior to itself, and consequently, loses the symbolic relationship to death, and, so, the motor of the drive.

In 1972, Derrida tracks the necessity of the terminus in the register of representation in the following cascade of propositions. In relationship to technē as mark:

The machine is dead. It is death. Not because we risk death in playing with machines, but because the origin of machines is the relation to death . . . Representation is death, which may be immediately transformed into the following proposition: death is (only) representation. But it is bound to life and the living present which it repeats originarily. A pure representation, a machine never runs by itself. (114)

If death is finitude and representation is the consequence of determination, then representation is death and therefore death is for us as is the representation: our ground.

Except when the machine runs by itself.

University of Western Ontario
Lacan continues, “The signifier, producing itself in the field of the Other, makes manifest the subject of its signification. But it functions as a signifier only to reduce the subject in question to being no more than a signifier, to petrify the subject in the same movement in which it calls the subject to function, to speak, as subject” (XI 207).

Or, more precisely, “The living Substance is being which is in truth Subject, or, what is the same, is in truth actual only in so far as it is the movement of positing itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering with itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering with itself. This Substance is, as Subject, pure, simple negativity, and it is for this very reason the bifurcation of the simple; it is the doubling which sets up opposition, and then again the negation of this indifferent diversity and of its antithesis” (Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, 10).

What is also presented here is a problematics of origin, and, more specifically, of an origin that is lost, which, in psychoanalytic terms, is the ground of the drive: “In the case of the object a as the object-cause of desire, we have an object which is originally lost, which coincides with its own loss, which emerges as loss, while, in the case of the object a as the object of the drive, the ‘object’ is directly the loss itself—in the shift from desire to drive, we pass from the lost object to loss itself as an object. In other words, the weird movement called ‘drive’ is not driven by the ‘impossible’ quest for the lost object; it is a push to directly enact the ‘loss’—the gap, cut, distance—itself” (Žižek, LN 639).


The perceptual experience of the world is, precisely, the subject’s fantasy, which is designated by the Lacanian matheme (§ <> o). Žižek elaborates: “The function of fantasy is to serve as a screen concealing this inconsistency; finally s(O), the effect of the signification as dominated by fantasy: fantasy functions as ‘absolute signification’ (Lacan); it constitutes the frame through which we experience the world as consistent and meaningful—the a priori space within which the particular effects of signification take place” (The Sublime Object of Ideology 123).

Here Lacan echoes Freud’s ambiguity: “Strictly speaking, there is no need for the hypothesis that the psychical systems are actually arranged in a spatial order. It would be sufficient if a fixed order were established by the fact that in a given psychological process the excitation passes through the systems in a particular temporal sequence” (Freud 537).

We may also note that this atemporal periodicity is the logic of exchange under capital: “In this opposition commodities as use-values confront money as exchange-value. On the other hand, both sides of this opposition are commodities, hence themselves unities of use-value and value. But this unity of difference is expressed at two opposite poles: the commodity is in reality a use-value; its existence as a value appears only ideally, in its price, through which it is related to the real embodiment of its value, the gold which confronts it as its opposite. Inversely, the material of gold ranks only as the materialization of value, as money. It is therefore in reality exchange-value. Its use-value appears only ideally in the series of expressions of relative value within which it confronts all the other commodities as the totality of real embodiments of its utility. These antagonistic
forms of the commodities are the real forms of the motion of the process of exchange” (Marx 199).

8 This term must be deployed in the sense that its condensed etymological significance provides: facing against the scene, and, to borrow from the language (and logic of origin) of botany, the reproduction of a reversed shape. The primal scene has not been evaded; it is instead reconfigured in a manner that reproduces an inverted subjective effect.

9 To propose a symptomatic condensation that this configuration produces, we can note that the dream of Kurtzweilian singularity—a combination of the foreclosure of death and a desire for perpetual life outside of bodily/sexed reproduction (radically misogynist as many aficionados of this “singularity” are, we must note that their singularity is equally a rejection of the symbolic Other) often correlates to the libertarian political tendency, which also emphasizes the rejection of any determination, that is, the legitimacy of any authority, symbolic or otherwise, that proposes to limit her acts.

10 Just as, for and after Marx, the mode of production is not only the technic (narrowly conceived) of commodity exchange and production, but is a social relationship between people mediated by the commodity form: “It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Capital 165).

11 In an embarrassingly symptomatic fashion, the desire for what is boundless—not sublime, but boundless—has become ubiquitous and indeed pops up in the most astonishing places, like the current marketing campaign advertising the University of Toronto.

12 In strictly psychoanalytical terms, it’s useful here to provide Žižek’s gloss on the sensation of being watched: “What happens in psychosis is that this empty point in the other, in what we see and/or hear, is actualized, becomes part of effective reality: the psychotic actually hears the voice of the primordial Other addressing him, knows that he his being observed all the time” (Žižek, LN 667).

13 “The time of production, time as commodity, is an infinite accumulation of equivalent intervals. It is irreversible time made abstract: each segment must demonstrate by the clock its purely quantitative equality with all other segments. This time manifests nothing in its effective reality aside from its exchangeability.” (Debord 110)

14 “Insofar as the symbolic constitutes itself by way of positing some element as the traumatic non-symbolizable Thing, as its constitutive exception, then the symbolic gesture par excellence is the drawing of a line of separation between symbolic and real; the real on the contrary is not external to the symbolic as some kind of substance resisting symbolization—the real is the symbolic itself qua “not-all”, i.e. insofar as it lacks the constitutive exception” (Žižek, “Woman” n.7).

15 Baudrillard, Symbolic Exchange and Death, 6-7.
Works Cited