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# Jameson *avec* or *sans* Žižek: Psychoanalysis, Marxism, and the Impossible Social Bond<sup>1</sup>

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A common strategy in academic theory conferences is to try to pair up disparate or even discordant paradigms as if to suggest an improbable reconciliation is in the offing: thus Lacan with Deleuze, for instance, or affect theory and psychoanalysis. The grand-daddy for this affectation is Lacan himself, in his essay “Kant with Sade,” which found in Sade the purest expression of Kantian ethic, a libertine purity beyond Kant’s wildest – or most rigorous – dreams (or nightmares). What I want to suggest here is that we must always think the *avec* alongside the *sans*, that in fact a joining together of different theories is also an entertaining of their tearing each other apart. As this last phrase may suggest to my post-punk cohort, my model for this is a late night radio host’s suggestion, in the 1990s, that one should put out a 45 with Trent Reznor doing the Captain and Tenille’s “Love Will Keep Us Together,” backed with PJ Harvey doing Joy Division’s “Love Will Tear Us Apart.”

In my recent book on Fredric Jameson, I averred that while Jameson and Žižek seem to be ideologically aligned, a misperception suggested or affirmed by their frequent citation of each other’s work, these citations were, I argued, a screen that obfuscates more profound differences (Burnham 2016: 10-11). But what *are* those differences? I propose here to lay some stress on what I take to be some important differences between those two projects, in terms of their attitudes towards the dialectic (that is to say, the impossibility of reconciling those antagonisms, but also the importance of that non-reconciliation). Grounding that dialectic via the vicissitudes of the Lacanian “non-relation,” I then turn to the question of historicism or historicity, articulated via contrasting readings of Jeff Wall’s 1994 photograph *Untangling* that allegorize via the pictorial not so much mark making (as Walter Benn Michaels would have it) but looking as labor – the labor of the clinic with or without the labor of the workshop.

### **The Non-Relation; or, Dialectics**

Dany Nobus’s recent book *The Law of Desire: On Lacan’s ‘Kant with Sade’* provides an exhaustive (Sadean?) bibliographic annotation on the publication history of Lacan’s essay, which originates in his remarks on Kant and Sade in

Seminar VII. In a footnote, Nobus develops an important concept of the non-relation (which he, following Lacan's introductory comments to Seminar VIII, calls "subjective disparity"), arguing that "the principle of non-reciprocity ... applies to how Lacan himself plays out Sade against Kant in his text. Whilst he employs Sade as an instrument for performing certain critical tasks on Kant, he does not draw on Kant when it comes to exploring the limits of Sade" (Nobus 2017: 22n). There are three implications of this methodological, or even metaleptic, turn. First, we should take into account Žižek's remark, *au contraire* Nobus, that Lacan's thesis is not that Kant is Sadean but Sade is Kantian: "Far from 'besmirching' Kant, Lacan 'purifies' Sade: the sadist Will-to-enjoy is the exemplary case of a pure, non-pathological desire" (Žižek 2007: 173). Then we should consider the career of Lacan's *il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel* – there is no sexual relation – all the way up to how both Žižek and Alenka Zupančič have turned that proposition around to "there IS a non-relationship" (Žižek 2012: 794-802), or "that sexual difference precedes the two sexes," and the non-relation is "*the inherent (il)logic (a fundamental 'antagonism') of the relationships that are possible and existing*" (Zupančič 2017: 24; italics are the author's). As Zupančič makes clear, this non-relation also pertains to the class struggle, and so we can finally take that form of logic to think, first, of how Žižek's and Jameson's dialectics differ (but are also the same, for surely the great danger is to fall into the narcissism of small differences, a warning against which stretches from Freud to those two present-day hair-splitters, Larry David and Donald Trump) and then, again reflexively, of how those differences and similarities help us to think about Marxism and psychoanalysis. (Perhaps the proper name for one, and the disciplinary apparatus for the other, is a place to start.)

Or another avenue would be to contrast what it means to read Jameson *avec* Žižek (to read Jameson in terms of Žižekian theory or reading practices) *versus* what it means to read Žižek *avec* Jameson (to read Žižek via Jameson's interpretive praxis) and, then, to consider what it means to read each of them "alone" (which signifier, a typo just reminded me, is very close to "along" or alongside), or *sans*, but only *after* reading them *avec*. That is, and here I anticipate my discussion below of how Jameson understands Žižek's dialectic in *Valences* (to compress the coal of Jameson's argument into a diamond for our present drill: "stupid first impression as the appearance, ingenious correction in the name of

some underlying reality or 'essence' ... a return to the reality of the appearance [which] was 'true' after all" [Jameson 2009: 57]), Žižek *sans* Jameson or Jameson *sans* Žižek is not simply the appearance of each theorist shorn of any reference to the other, but instead what we think of their work, or read in their work *after* reading them together. AND, that "together" is not a symmetrical reading, but a non-relation (which is to say, is itself dialectical, a dialectical subroutine, let's put it, part of the grand dialectic figured in the quotation from *Valences*), for, after thinking of what both Jameson and Žižek have to say about "Kant with Sade," we now have two "togethers," one of which is reading, as I said at the beginning of this paragraph, Jameson *avec* Žižek (to read Jameson in terms of Žižekian theory or reading practices), while the other means to read Žižek *avec* Jameson (to read Žižek via Jameson's interpretive praxis).

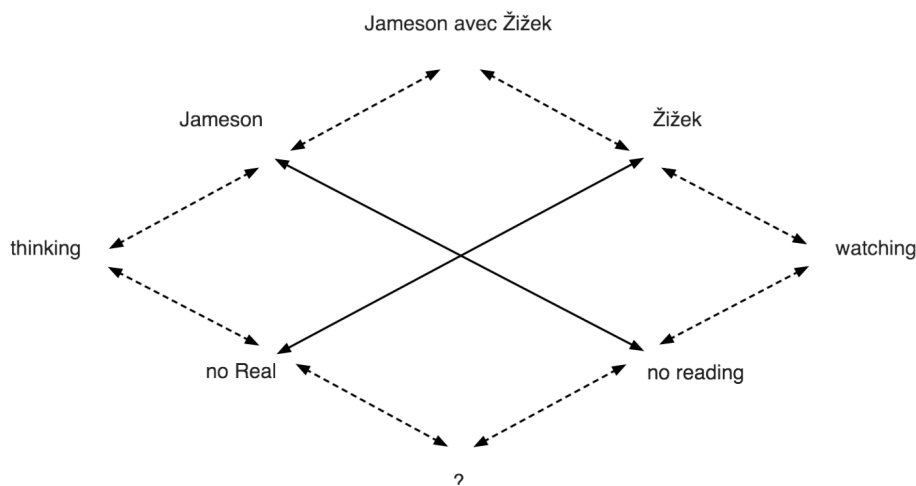
I should like now to work through these different positions (and perhaps venture a semiotic rectangle *avec* the formula of sexualization), but also first to acknowledge that I may seem to be stacking the deck in Jameson's favor: is he not, we all agree, the better reader than Žižek, whether we think of reading as reading a book, literature, a written text, or whether we think of reading in its cultural studies/metaphorical sense of reading a film, a painting, a political scene? That may well be for a certain canonical Jameson (by canon we always mean what we read in graduate school) – so, *The Political Unconscious* and *Marxism and Form* certainly feature bravura passages of reading (of Conrad and Balzac in the former, on Adorno and footnotes in the latter, say). Frequently, reading for critics of my generation still means *close reading*, where distant and machine reading is what we leave to *our* students (whom we expect to then provide us with the glosses and short cuts – but hopefully not short-circuits). There are, however, some important and different kinds of reading that Žižek offers us throughout his work, ranging from his comments on Kant and sentimental literature (but also Joyce and Kafka) in *Looking Awry*, and his readings of Edith Wharton and Henry James in *The Parallax View*, to his use of Pierre Bayard in *Less than Nothing*. In *Looking Awry*, Žižek reads Kant with Colleen McCollough, arguing not only that McCollough's novel *An Indecent Obsession* continues the tradition of courtly love, and that it helps us to understand what Kant did not know, that duty itself was "the most indecent of all obsessions," but, key to our argument here, the novel itself is nonetheless "completely unreadable" and indeed appeared in a French series

called *J'ai lu* or "I've read it" (Žižek 1991: 160). The logic, Žižek seems to imply, is that if a book is unreadable it is better to say you have read it, without, presumably, having done so. *Oh yeah, we say, I've read that. One and done. Ticked the box.* This question of reading then leads in two directions: on the one hand, we have the infamous proposition or manual of Pierre Bayard, *How to Talk about Books You Haven't Read*. Žižek refers to that text (which, who knows, he may not have even read beyond the title) in *Less than Nothing*, arguing that "in order to really formulate the fundamental insight or achievement of a book, it is generally better *not* to read it at all – too much data only blurs our clear vision" (Žižek 2012: 279-80). But there is the opposite proposition, floated scandalously in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, when Anthony Blanche (who had been "cured ... of an Oedipus complex in Vienna"!) tells the narrator that he had "just bought a rather forbidding book called *Antic Hay*, which I knew I must read before going to Garsington on Sunday, because everybody was bound to talk about it, and it's so banal saying you have not read the book of the moment, if you haven't" (Waugh 1945: 48). So we have two kinds of reading: not reading but nonetheless discussing, analyzing, etc., that is, acting as if you have read it, and reading but claiming not to have read (although my neighbor Paul Kingsbury's reading is that Blanche reads it so he does *not* have to claim he has not read it); these all turn out to be the same: posing a break between action and claim.

What I have argued in the past few pages is a trial run at the question of reading via Žižek with and without Jameson. To clarify: we first of all would have Jameson, the theorist who brought Marxism to America; who introduced a formidable tripartite hermeneutic of the text as symbolic act/ideologemes figuring class struggle/genre and its ideology in relation to history in its broadest strokes; the *maître penseur* of postmodernism, pop culture, and film; and the late period Jameson alternating between massive tomes on utopia and the dialectic and minimalist monographs on Marx, Hegel, Chandler. A thinker, that is, of the USAmerican academy *par excellence*, his career characteristic of the reception/production of theory, but also one whose ideas resist any neat narrative of neoliberal excess or presidential periodization (this last captured so well in

Chandler's *The Lady in the Lake*).<sup>2</sup> With Žižek, we have the theorist of the Real, wedded to Lacan, explaining the graphs of desire and the *sinthome* at the start of his career; inserting an exotic Balkan presence into the European and then American academic discourses while claiming universality; bringing psychoanalysis and German idealism to bear not only on middle-brow Hollywood and trash novels but epochal events from 9/11 to Occupy; an inveterate and irreverent gadfly online, from YouTube and podcasts to the *Guardian* and *Al Jazeera* and *Russia Today*; pontificating on the refugee crisis and trans rights and the royal wedding in the same tenor and tone.

Then, if Žižek *avec* Jameson is what I outlined in my discussion of reading (that is, thinking of Žižek's practice in terms more usually associated with Jamesonian interpretation, or, to adopt Nobus' formulation from above, employing Jameson as an instrument for performing certain critical tasks on Žižek), how would it work the other way around, and could it? How could we use Žižek as an instrument for performing certain critical tasks on Jameson? There is a certain attraction here to say "I would prefer not to," and instead to assert a non-symmetry (as Nobus notes is present in Lacan's "Kant with Sade"), to declare that one cannot bring the Slovenian to bear on the giant of, um, Cleveland. Instead, let us jump to the following semiotic rectangle:



Following Nobus' logic of "subjective disparity," or "the principle of non-reciprocity," *the diagram reveals that in this essay's pairing, Jameson is Kant and Žižek is Sade.*

<sup>2</sup> "He wore the same clothes he had worn that afternoon, with the addition of a leather jerkin which must have been new once, say about the time of Grover Cleveland's first term" (Chandler 1976: 60).

In this reading, the diagram is both my unconscious and my toolkit. The former, diagram as unconscious, means in a psychoanalytic way it reveals, or is a symptom (a *sinthome*) of, the non-relation between psychoanalysis and Marxism, but also leads us to see the social link that obtains between those two emancipatory theories, as a later iteration of the diagram in this essay will show. The latter, the diagram as toolkit, a Jamesonian theory of the semiotic rectangle, embraces the Silicon Valley/Digital Humanities tool talk & masculinist solutionism as a Utopian figure of precisely the blue collar worker that such a fantasy forecloses, a way of situating the role of the Greimassian rectangle in Jameson's theory. I return to such "workerist" themes in this essay's closing discussion of Jeff Wall.

Jameson is Kant and Žižek is Sade. That is, Jameson without or *sans* Žižek is Jameson without the Real (which is both the sexual Real and the Real of the class struggle), reduced to pure Reason, speculation, thinking, and Žižek *sans* Jameson is Žižek without reading, unable to interpret a film, only able to watch it (which is the argument Russell Sbriglia makes, in an article discussed below, with respect to a Žižekian-fetishist reading, one that is post-interpretation [Sbriglia 2017: 112-113]). But, again, *sans* is only possible after *avec*. And so this section of my paper is arguing not that Jameson is Žižekian but Žižek is Jamesonian for, far from "besmirching" Jameson, I "purify" Žižek: the sadist Will-to-enjoy (from dragging the Real back in from the dead, late Lacan to trampling over the refugee, the trans person, but also Jordan Peterson) is the exemplary case of a pure, non-pathological desire (which is to say the magisterial, dialectical-sentence-machine that is Jameson's praxis). This last logic then is the following: the very reversal that is a hallmark of Žižek's theory, from his juxtaposition of, say, the sublime and *Titanic* to the way he has made the counter-intuitive his jam, not simply his argument but his premise, is surely the reified kernel of Jameson's dialectical sentence (which I took apart exhaustively in my first book, *The Jamesonian Unconscious*).<sup>3</sup> Think of a

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<sup>3</sup> Žižek's counter-intuitive strategy (what Jameson [2009: 59] calls his "paradox effect") is perfected in two places in *Less Than Nothing*: as mentioned earlier, when he argues that even while there is no sexual relation, there is a non-relation (Žižek 2012: 173), and when he declares that Hegelian universality is actually an expression of the concrete particular (Žižek 2012: 359). In the conclusion to his review of *The Parallax View* (Žižek 2006a) in the *London Review of Books*, Jameson wonders if or fears that this paradoxical thinking is in danger of becoming its own theory (Jameson 2006: unpaginated), reminiscent of his own remarks, in *Late Marxism*, that "the concept of reification is itself reified" (Jameson 1990: 22; see, for my comments on this passage, Burnham 1995: 32-33). Related, too, to our present inquiry is Jameson's contention that Žižek's "paradox

sentence near the opening of the second part of *A Singular Modernity*. Jameson has proposed to build a theory of totality, which edges to the unrepresentable, and then he turns back onto his proposition, writing the dialectical counterpart to that very *enunciación*: “But since the premise of the preceding discussion [the first half of the book] has been that of the preliminary requirement to reconstruct the situation of modernism, it seems appropriate to start with that, and to propose the hypothesis that what we call artistic or aesthetic ‘modernism’ essentially corresponds to a situation of incomplete modernization” (141). You see what he’s doing here – Jameson is not only countering or contradicting the previous statement, but this sentence is also contradicting itself: a “situation of modernism” turns out to be a “situation of *incomplete* modernization.” Thus modernism is a symptom of the lack in modernization, and that argument (which is then fleshed out in the Warwick Research Collective’s remarkable book [2015]) *emerges via the dialectic*. Here we have an argument that is constructed by the sentence-machine of Jameson’s writing, an argument that is then taken as a premise (or at least formally) by Žižek (as when, say, he draws on Jameson’s *bouleversement* of Hemingway, in *Absolute Recoil* and elsewhere).<sup>4</sup>

But where does that dialectical sentence-machine come from? One possible and hardly implausible source is Adorno.<sup>5</sup> A recent favorite argument of Adorno’s comes in his essay “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” where, commenting on activists who trashed an overly diligent student’s room, he says: “The thinking denigrated by actionists apparently demands of them too much undue effort: it requires too much work, is too practical” (Adorno 2005: 263).<sup>6</sup> So thought itself is

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effect is designed to undo that second moment of ingenuity which is that of interpretation” (Jameson 2009: 59; see also this essay’s discussion of Sbriglia 2017).

<sup>4</sup> See my discussion of same in Burnham 2018: 51. Jameson’s signal reading of Hemingway occurs in the final pages of *Marxism and Form*: “one is wrong to say that Hemingway began by wishing to express or convey certain basic experiences; rather, he began by wishing to write a certain type of sentence, a kind of neutral *compte rendu* of external displacements” (Jameson 1971a: 411). But see also, from the same year, his “Metacommentary,” where Jameson effectively defamiliarizes interpretation, seeing it as a kind of optical illusion (a figure with great resonance in *Marxism and Form*), but also, tellingly, as a paradox: “we are condemned to interpret at the same time that we feel an increasingly repugnance to do so” (Jameson 1971b: 11).

<sup>5</sup> I am driven by an anxiety not to plagiarize from my own graduate students’ work and hence told one, Ed Graham, who has an essay in the present issue, that I did not want to read it before finishing my own (even though his essay is also work for a course I am directing). And yet, my mantra is I do *not* learn from my students – I always find it disingenuous, or perhaps admitting too much, when academics claim that – but I do *steal* from them. So I did, it turns out, read Graham’s essay.

<sup>6</sup> “Actionists,” not “activists,” making me wonder if Adorno was somehow knowledgeable about the Vienna Actionists. Their critique of the university, in the *Kunst und Revolution* action of 1968,



eminently practical, a neat solution *avant la lettre* of today's Bartlebian forbearance – "I would prefer not to" becomes "I prefer to think it over, give me a minute." And not simply, Adorno says, is thought more practical than the actionists recognized, but it is *too practical*. Perhaps thought steals (the jouissance of) practicality from the actionists?).<sup>7</sup>

But the purpose of this turn to Adorno was, of course, to seek to find a source for Jameson's dialectics – and perhaps, in their very compression (in Adorno, that is), we arrive at the unexpected conclusion that Žižek is more Adornoan than Jameson, another version of the purity of his Sadism perhaps also explicable when we recall, with the help of Rebecca Comay, the twinning of Kant and Sade already at work in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>8</sup>

### Historicism and the Symptom

Let us take the question of historicity next, for this is surely the bedrock of both Jameson's thought (via his imperative, in *The Political Unconscious*, to "always historicize!", even if his tripartite levels of analysis demonstrated how complex that hermeneutic will inevitably be) and Marxism proper, although historicism has, as Kirk Boyle argues, become "a conviction institutionalized by the theoretical technique turned ideological doctrine" (Boyle 2014: 118) whereas, for Todd McGowan, "[h]istoricism assumes an unbroken continuity between the text itself and the historical context that establishes the choices from among which a text emerges" (McGowan 2017: 97). For McGowan, historicism, in reacting against the mythopoetic or humanist paradigms that characterized literary studies before the theory revolution, sought a closure of sorts by shackling the text to the social order

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however, can hardly be thought of in Adorno's anti-intellectual terms. But it was a crazy time, and alliances that seem self-evident to us today were often obscure in the historical moment/present. Please see Parent (2018) on the Actionists and Adorno, and, for a discussion of the Adorno passage from "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," Jeffries (2016).

<sup>7</sup> Three final ways of reading this Adorno patch: note that Adorno immediately refers to "giving way to a regressive and distorted form of the pleasure principle"; throws in another dialectical gimme – "it is more comfortable to swim with the current, even when one declares oneself to be against the current"; and adds, in a footnote, that the "concept of the traitor comes from the eternal reserves of collective repression, whatever its coloration may be," all of which may turn out to be a guide to dealing with today's various social media/millennial shitstorms (as Han [2017] puts it).

<sup>8</sup> In "Adorno avec Sade," Comay parses first of all Adorno and Horkheimer's excursus on "Juliette, or Enlightenment and Morality" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and then, by way of contrast, Lacan's essay. While for Adorno, "Sade serves to expose the logic of reason's ultimate short circuit" (Comay 2006: 7), Lacan's split subject, *if we do not ontologize loss*, helps Comay to arrive at the argument that "the historicization of lack may be matched ... by an implicit hypostatization of utopia" (Comay 2006: 14) – but for the question of Adorno and utopia, see Graham's essay in the present issue.

of its historical milieu. Recall, as an extreme Althusserian version of this paradigm, Terry Eagleton's LMPs (Literary Modes of Production) and GI (General Ideology) in his *Criticism and Ideology* (1978). The debate over the past decade in cultural studies has been between the false choice of historicist or "symptomatic" readings versus "surface readings" (now that distant reading has turned out to be not very distant after all), whereas both methodologies, Russell Sbriglia argues, rely on a disavowal of surplus enjoyment, a Kantian renunciation that "conceals an obscene superego injunction *Enjoy!*" (enjoy the racist slavery text or the misogyny in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the better to denounce it): "the historicist can never be historicist enough for ... one thing will always elude historical analysis, the *objet petit a*, the unhistorical kernel of the Real" (Sbriglia 2017: 113-114).

But I would like to dwell a bit on Boyle's argument that historicism has become "a conviction institutionalized by the theoretical technique turned ideological doctrine," that is, not simply a matter of recognizing the importance of the contingent to Žižek's critique.<sup>9</sup> And so here we might consider both that institutionalization, in which Greenblatt and Jameson give rise to a generation of scholars, a raft of PDFs, a plethora of colloquy, and the way in which the contingent turns out to be an event, with or without the majuscule. Or perhaps this patriarchal metaphor is misleading, and, like Phillipe Bourgeois among the crack dealers we can taste the forbidden fruit of historicism to, well, historicize the rise of historicism in the 1980s and 90s academy. Discussing "the belief that historical phenomena can always and only be explained in terms of the contingent factors ushering them into existence," Boyle argues that for Žižek, this *belief* is the problem, for that belief then is the "conviction institutionalized by the theoretical technique turned ideological doctrine Žižek alternatively calls *radical historicism* and *historicist relativism*" (Boyle 2014: 118). So the initial, "reductionist," belief or conviction is then "institutionalized" – but how?<sup>10</sup> By a technique turned doctrine – which is to say, the reification of the concept qua praxis, with the attendant social rewards for commitment to this praxis while other commitments are disparaged or at best marginalized. But how did the belief or conviction become a technique – or is this all too chicken and egg? And where did

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<sup>9</sup> Perhaps also provoking the discomfort of that same Boyle, who is the editor of the present issue? But I approach Boyle's analysis here as a mere "cut-out" for Žižekian critique in general.

<sup>10</sup> Belief must always be reflexive, no? Here Žižek on the reflexivity of communication, in *How to Read Lacan*, is instructive (Žižek 2006b: 16), as is Jameson on reflexivity as a sub-category of dialectics, self-consciousness that is eventually a matter of ideology-critique (Jameson 2009: 281-286).

the contingent go, and why are we talking about contingent factors ushering historical phenomena into existence, and not (or not also) the role that historical factors play in the creation of cultural objects (Boyle begins his article on “Historicism/Historicity” with a setpiece on how new historicism informed our understanding of Shakespeare)?

The reader will be forgiven if she wonders whether by “historical factors” that play a role “in the creation of cultural objects” I mean, say, the role of colonialism in our understanding of *The Tempest* or the role of Reaganism in the institutionalization of New Historicism and cultural studies in the 1980s American academy. But perhaps we can speak about both – first about how, as Alberto Toscano recently argued, in *The Tempest* it isn’t so much that Shakespeare has borrowed from, in a *détournement*, Montaigne’s *Des Cannibales*, “the least original, the most conventional of Montaigne’s musings on the philosophical lessons of Brazilian anthropophagy,” but rather that the play stages an imaginary colonization that “projects onto ‘savage’ colonized lands, spatializing [those lands], a European desire for the negation of his own civilization” (Toscano 2017). That is, both Toscano and Margaret Hodgen (1952) argue that ancient ideas of barbarism and “the other” informed colonial attitudes during the Renaissance – and so, are “ushering historical phenomena into existence,” as Boyle puts it in his paraphrase of Žižek, *and* are among the “factors [that] play in the creation of cultural objects,” as I demanded.

Does the same reconciliation of history and culture obtain when we think about the institutionalization of historicism? Here the Žižekian argument I am reconstructing from Boyle’s essay is the following. We begin with a conviction or a belief, a belief in the role of contingent historical events in contributing to cultural phenomena. Beliefs are reflexive, they are a belief *for the other*. In this case, this methodological belief is a fantasy, an answer to the debilitating *Che vuoi?* question that so troubles the academic or intellectual. All forms of intellectuals’ guilt trips (as Jameson notes in his “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” essay [1992b]),<sup>11</sup> or imposter syndrome, or representations of academics in popular culture (who are either philanderers as in Zadie Smith’s [2005] novel *On Beauty* or ivory tower self-

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<sup>11</sup> “Populist radicals are also intellectuals, so that this position [“a widely based sense that high culture is an establishment phenomenon”] has suspicious overtones of the guilt trip” (Jameson 1992b: 9).

loathers as with Tim Robbins' character in the recent HBO series *Here and Now* [Ball 2017]) come down to this paradoxical question: what is my academic Thing? And if my academic Thing is historicism, how has that reflexive belief or conviction become a theoretical methodology or technique? How has Boyle's *institutionalization* taken place? And did that institutionalization (which we can use the Althusserian shorthand of social reproduction to demarcate) mean a matter of syllabi, teaching strategies, article vetting, and conference planning – which is to say, the habitus of the advanced society's university professional? And yet this is to ignore the *point-de-capitonnage* at work in Boyle's sentence: he is not saying that our academic Thing (in this case, historicism) then becomes institutionalized (bad, very bad) when the “theoretical technique” (discussing, say, the relationship between the anamorphic death's head in Holbein's *The Ambassadors* and a silver skull brooch on one of the ambassadors in the painting, as Greenblatt does in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* [1980: 18-21]) turns or is turned into an ideological doctrine, an orthodoxy, a rigid worldview (again, bad, very bad). Boyle isn't saying this in part because orthodoxy is Žižek's (and Jameson's) wheelhouse, but also because this analysis (from sublime belief to academic sterility) is precisely the narrative of the lost object that Žižekian critique warns us against. Rather, it is the (reflexive) belief or conviction that is already the problem, that already lacks, the reductive belief “that historical phenomena can always and only be explained in terms of the contingent factors ushering them into existence.” And that *lack* is then institutionalized – isn't this how *habitus* works? By taking our lack and giving it its own colloquy, an institute, a tenure line or research grant? Finally, “a theoretical technique turned ideological doctrine” means that the technique itself was already doctrinal. Even before Greenblatt finished his book, the notion of a historicist hegemony was a *fait accompli*:

It is only when one takes leave of this world – quite literally takes leave by walking away from the front of the canvas – that one can see the single alien object, the skull. The skull expresses the death that the viewer has, in effect, himself brought about by changing his perspective, by withdrawing his gaze from the figures of the painting. For that gaze is, the skull implies, reality-infering; without it, the objects so lovingly represented in their seeming substantiality vanish. To move a few feet away from the frontal contemplation

of the painting is to efface everything within it, to bring death into the world.  
(Greenblatt 1980: 20)<sup>12</sup>

You can see in those lines how close Greenblatt is to Lacan, with a reading that is as uncanny as Lacanian anamorphosis, before heading off in the other direction – or in the “other other” direction, back to the painting, back to representation, back to the imaginary. It is in this sense that we can return to the notion of the contingent floated above. Contingency is a rather ... *random* ... form of historical causality, no? And yet it is there throughout Žižek.<sup>13</sup> Consider this commentary on Lenin in *Incontinence of the Void*: “One usually associates Hegel with linear teleology and progressive ‘historical necessity’ – but the basic lesson Lenin drew from Hegel was exactly the opposite one: the complex contingency of the historical process, overdetermination of every ‘basic’ tendency by an intricate network of specific conditions where ‘the exception is the rule’” (Žižek 2017a: 241).

This contingency or randomness – this turn to the anamorphic Real away from the imperial pleasures of the Holbein painting, say – is the form of Žižekian or Lacanian historicity that allows us to understand the importance of the left aligning itself with the energies of the alt-right, the incels and red pill manosphere, which I take to be the proper, Utopian lesson of Angela Nagle’s *Kill All Normies* (2017) – not to bemoan the “bad infinity” that sees the Tumblr left mirroring the subreddit right, but instead to seize that very convergence. Here is Lenin on a similar moment, quoted by Žižek just before the comments above:

The socialist revolution in Europe *cannot* be anything other than an outburst of mass struggle on the part of all and sundry oppressed and discontented elements. Inevitably, sections of the petty bourgeoisie and of the backward workers will participate in it – without such participation, *mass* struggle is *impossible*, without it no revolution is possible – and just as inevitably will they

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<sup>12</sup> Greenblatt is the paradigm evoked by McGowan, who discusses two of his works, crucially for the conservative notions of the masterpiece that I argued were already there in Greenblatt’s discussion of Holbein. Thus, McGowan counters Greenblatt’s argument for the “half-hidden cultural transactions through which great works of art are empowered” (Greenblatt 1988: 4) responding that a “masterpiece is not a work of art which transcends its time but one that changes the symbolic coordinates of its time” (McGowan 2017: 99).

<sup>13</sup> And the contingent is throughout Lacan, not only conceptually – the *tuché* – but also in the way in which random, everyday events made their way into the Seminars, including, notably, the testing of the microphones in *Seminar XXIII*, although not in the official versions sanctified by Jacques-Alain Miller (Lacan 2016) – rather, in the Cormac Gallagher pirate translation (Lacan 1975-76). Fred Moten notes that “Lacan’s voice irrupting into these texts he calls seminars ... [is] full of the scandal/chance” (Moten 2004: 285-6).

bring into the movement their prejudices, their reactionary fantasies, their weaknesses and errors. But *objectively* they will attack *capital*, and the class-conscious vanguard of the revolution, the advanced proletariat, expressing this objective truth of a variegated and discordant, motley and outwardly fragmented, mass struggle, will be able to unite and direct it, capture power, seize the banks, expropriate the trusts which all hate (though for different reasons!). (Lenin 1916: unpaginated)

Here we have to note two concepts not unrelated to the dialectics of, let's call it Zed & Fred. First, the contingent here is not only Lenin's acceptance of the petty-bourgeois "slag" (as he quickly refers to such fellow-travellers, noting as well that the victory of socialism, "will by no means immediately 'purge' itself" of said slag) but how that correlates to today's populist right, with its hatred of elites, banks, and experts ("though for different reasons!").<sup>14</sup> That is, the *social link* at work in Žižek's embrace of the alt-right is also a recognition of the *short circuit* operant in the Jordan Peterson ideology. Then, we can also entertain a parallel, or is it parallax, between Žižek's provocations and Jameson's less incendiary, perhaps, arguments for the utopia of Wal-Mart (let alone universal militarization) or the "eBay imaginary" (as in his *New Left Review* article on William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* [Jameson 2003: 108]). These all embrace the contingent, with what Lenin calls "their prejudices, their reactionary fantasies, their weaknesses and errors," as if he were describing the analysand. Or a student, today's millennial!

My reading of Boyle's argument, via Žižek, Greenblatt, and Lenin, then, is that historicism is an academic Thing which unwittingly reveals or revels in the irruption of the Real via the contingent. If this is so, a problem with considerations of contingency versus historicism, or cause and effect, lies in the question of where, exactly, we locate that history? Where does one begin and end the analysis? What sets the parameters, history or the dialectical machine itself? Does history lie in the period of a literary text's creation, its writing, thereby entailing a Wikipedia-like expansion of the author's biography to timelines, encyclopedic entries, and on to Greenblatt's "half-hidden cultural transactions"? Then, how does all of this history cause a text to happen, or is it to be found in that historical milieu qua effect

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<sup>14</sup> In the same regard, we also care about the popular, about such a celebrity narratives as the Kate Spade or Anthony Bourdain suicides or the Pusha-T/Drake rap beef, "though for different reasons!"

(McGowan's argument)? If that last formulation is so, then where does that effect take place – in the historical context proximate to the literary text, or in that of the critical intervention (leaving alone the problematic that a literary text has a chaotic life)? When, for example, does the condition of slavery stop being a cause or effect of a text? 19<sup>th</sup> century slavery in the US no doubt is part of the cause of, say Fredrick Douglass' *Narrative* or Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but is it properly a *cause* of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* or Octavia Butler's *Kindred*? Or are those two last texts' more proximate causes late 20<sup>th</sup> century culture; are they responses to the Civil Rights movement, to neoliberal governmentality? Then, if *Beloved* is a masterpiece, is it because it stages Sethe's "impossible act," as McGowan argues – the killing of her daughter to save her from a return to slavery, a reorienting of the symbolic? McGowan's is similar to the reading that Sheldon George develops, in fine detail, in *Trauma and Race*, when he aligns Sethe with the Lacanian reading of *Antigone* in *Seminar VII*: "Like Antigone, Sethe believes that her life can only be lived from what Lacan calls "the place of that limit where her life is already lost, where she is already on the other side" (George 2016: 83). Crucially, George adds a few pages later, "[w]hat Sethe strives for, both for herself and for her children, is precisely what the subject can never fully have in life: freedom from the signifier" (George 2016: 87). That is, George does not make the mistake Lacan warns us against: seeing the ethical actions of Antigone or Sethe as some subversive act. Here we can read Octavia Butler avec Morrison, and contrast the science-fiction plot of the former's *Kindred*, in which Dana, an African-American woman living in 1970s Los Angeles, will suddenly "return" to early 19<sup>th</sup> century Maryland, with the historical novel qua genre of Morrison. For Dana's return (to slavery: those who do not remember are condemned to repeat, etc.) is arguably the very thing (or Thing) that Sethe is motivated to avoid for her children. But, given again our historicist proclivity for reading texts in their social context, can both returns not be seen as a working through of Žižekian enjoying of that symptom, or what Wendy Brown calls "wounded attachments"? And, to be even more provocative, can such a reading be aligned with Kanye West's wretched attempts, in spring 2018, to urge African-Americans to stop obsessing over slavery ("that sounds like a choice")? So the charge against historicism is that it is random in its origin and telos, even though it may share the tēchnē of a dialectical approach, whether that approach be Marxist or psychoanalytic. The latter differentiate

themselves from historicism proper by holding fast to the category of necessity. That is, and this is to anticipate the following section of my essay, antagonism, negativity, or the non-relation are the necessary “absent cause” for the appearance of that which is contingent.

### Jameson Dialecticizes Žižek

I want now to take account of Jameson’s discussions of dialectics in *Valences of the Dialectic*, and in particular his argument, in the book’s opening chapter, that incommensurability, of the kind theorized by Lacan, may be a symptom of the dialectic. A quick succession of propositions (or syllogisms) then follow: so Lacan’s “there is no sexual relation” as mark of the incommensurable, must lead to a dialectical rejoinder, which, sure enough it does, with Žižek’s innovation: “there is a non-relation.” That non-relation, that hypostatization of the negative, then can be transferred to the big Other, which does not exist, except that it exists as “there is a non big Other.”<sup>15</sup> But before we allow these syllogisms to continue proliferating, it is worth looking more closely at Jameson’s argument, which takes place in chapter one of *Valences*, a chapter called “Three names of the dialectic” (Jameson 2009: 3-70) Those three names are “the dialectic” (or Marxism), “a dialectic” (readings that examine binary oppositions, antinomies, and other structuralist motifs), and, finally “it’s dialectical!”, or the dialectic as adjective, “when the problem becomes the solution” (Jameson 2009: 51). Jameson situates, in the second section (“a dialectic”), the Lacanian triad I/S/R as indicative of the third term (the Real) added to a binary (the Imaginary and the Symbolic). That third term, he adds, comes to found an entire subfield of Lacanian theory: first the *objet petit a*, then the sinthome, and finally gender on one hand and knots on the other. Jameson holds himself back here from more on Lacan’s “prodigious theoretical journey,” the “Lacanian adventure” but not without “mention[ing] the theory of the four discourses as another illustration of Lacan’s virtuosity as a thinker of incommensurables and discontinuities.” For:

... suffice it to underscore the new vocation this trajectory has opened for the dialectic itself. Now we may begin to hazard the guess that something like the dialectic will always begin to appear when thinking approaches the dilemma of

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<sup>15</sup> Here I am returning to arguments in my recent book on Žižek, *Does the Internet Have an Unconscious?*, esp. chapter 7 and the conclusion (Burnham 2018).



incommensurability, in whatever form; and that the dialectic henceforth seems to be the shift in thinking on to a new and unaccustomed plane in an effort to deal with the fact of distinct and autonomous realities that seem to offer no contact with each other. (Jameson 2009: 24)

Jameson will shortly add that the solution to the problem of incommensurability (he also calls on Lyotard's *différend*) of the "identity of opposites," is no solution at all. But surely what is so important here is how Jameson provides a dialectical reading of the non-relation.<sup>16</sup>

There are, furthermore, three sets or theoretical ensembles of dialectics that Jameson elaborates upon in *Valences*: the opening chapter which sets up *the, a, adjectival* and as a Lefebvorean filigree, the *spatial*; in a later chapter,<sup>17</sup> dialectics is considered in terms of reflexivity, the temporal, and contradiction (Jameson 2009: 278-90); in the book's finale, theories of history and literature (from Braudel to Ricouer) are given an oddly Aristotelian structure that retains dialectics as a machinic method. (Jameson 2009: 475-612)

Consider, for example, Jameson's assertion in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, that Alexander Sokurov's *Days of Eclipse* (1988), via its imaginary resolution of a real contradiction – that between magic realism and the Soviet new wave – manages to bring together two genres: the fiction feature and the documentary. Musing, in a footnote, that footage in the film appears to have been lifted from an abandoned documentary film about Turkestan, Jameson opines: "*Eclipse* thereby not merely unites two distinct generic aspects of his extraordinary talent – the narrative-fictional and the observational – but also dialectically allows one to batten off the other: the fairy tale drawing unexpected new strength from this *ciné-verité* and vice versa" (Jameson 1992a: 112n5). Now, formally, one does not even have to reach for Žižekian antagonisms (Adorno's negative dialectic will do in a pinch) to see how far from Žižek's dialectics lie Jameson's notion, here at least, of two formal or generic tendencies in a film strengthening each other, rather than, say, positing an absolute difference. Here we might remember, as well, Jameson's slogan from the 1980s: difference relates.

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<sup>16</sup> Part of the problem is that we read Jameson differently than we do Žižek. The first in terms of style (and then ideas) the second in terms of ideas, for the style is seen not in a literary way.

<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting that chapter 11, "Persistencies of the Dialectic: Three Sites," like chapter 15, "Actually Existing Marxism," was published in 1993, and so before much of the book, which mostly appeared in volumes and journals in the first decade of the 21st century.

Such a difference that relates can be seen if we consider the most recent Žižek/Jameson collaboration, the latter's essay "An American Utopia" and the collection of essays in response, edited by Žižek. Jameson's essay here is an attempt to bring together the secular & theological Utopias he has been mapping since he began writing on Bloch. But that "imaginary resolution of a real contradiction" is where Jameson's dialectic can stall. Consider how, in *Valences of the Dialectic*, Jameson, commenting on Brecht's quip that in Hollywood, heaven serves "the prosperous, unsuccessful/As hell", adds "A true dialectic; a true unity of opposites!" (Jameson 2009: 410). No statement could be more un-Žižekian, and even perhaps un-Adornoan in its insistence on that "true unity," were it not for what Jameson immediately asks: "Will it be possible to untangle the negative from the positive...?" This figure, of untangling immediately seems more psychoanalytic – for which, by way of further illustration, we can turn to Jeff Wall's lightbox photograph *Untangling* (1994).

(But first, a brief digression. Whether Jameson's "untangling" of the negative and the positive is a matter of a unity of opposites, we can certainly contrast Žižek's method which, remarkably, insists on fetishizing the antagonism *qua* unbreachable gap. And so Jameson brings to our attention the "perversity" with which Žižek stages a "stupid first impression" to be followed not only by its dialectical opposite, but then a further, paradoxical, return to that stupid first impression "accompanied by a new knowledge of the errors involved in the second moment" [Jameson 2009: 58]. Consider how the psychotic forecloses the big Other, refusing the necessity for an external authority, whilst remaining fascinated with that big Other, when the foreclosed returns as the voices that speak to one. This condition remains, from the *Ur*-psychotic, Daniel Paul Schreber, to today's Bluetooth user. For the Bluetooth user, consider how our "stupid first impression" is that someone is talking to himself, is walking around gesticulating like a madman. But we correct that impression when we realize that, no, he is on his phone, he has that triangular thing hanging off his ear. He is using the Bluetooth technology. And then that second impression itself is corrected, and we go back to the first representation, which now includes wireless technology in the larger picture of daily life as madness.)



Fig. 1. Jeff Wall, "Untangling" transparency in lightbox, 189.0 x 223.5 cm, Courtesy of the artist

And it is from that fantasy of wireless technology that we turn to Jeff Wall's artwork. In that photograph, a man sits in a workshop or basement of some kind, in the midst of untangling a giant knot of thick ropes. The task is Sisyphean to be sure – it is a form of labor captured by the photographer. And the photograph also suggests the work of psychoanalysis (thus in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: it is from the latent content, "and not the dream's manifest content, that we disentangle its meaning" [Freud 2001: 277]). I want to stay with this image because of how it allows us to think through some of the respectively Jamesonian and Žižekian motifs, for how it allegorizes the "difference [that] relates" between these two dialecticians. First of all, we have to distinguish between the dreamwork and labor proper; then we have to distinguish between that labor and the work of the clinic. Finally, because this is a picture, a photograph, a work of art, we have to think about how it thematizes its own looking (as surely as it will mark-making): consider the two different kinds of looking here – the downcast gaze of the main figure, on the left, and the tilted-back head of the figure at the back, on the right (and, too, as if hypostatizing our antagonism, the wall of shelving that lies between them). The figure on the left looks down, with an abject gaze, because merely holding onto the ropes, merely using his hands, or doing manual labor, is not enough for the task at hand. He has to look, to see, to distinguish between which rope leads where, and whether to run this one under the other, and so on. His looking is part of his labor, the labor of untangling – a Freudian

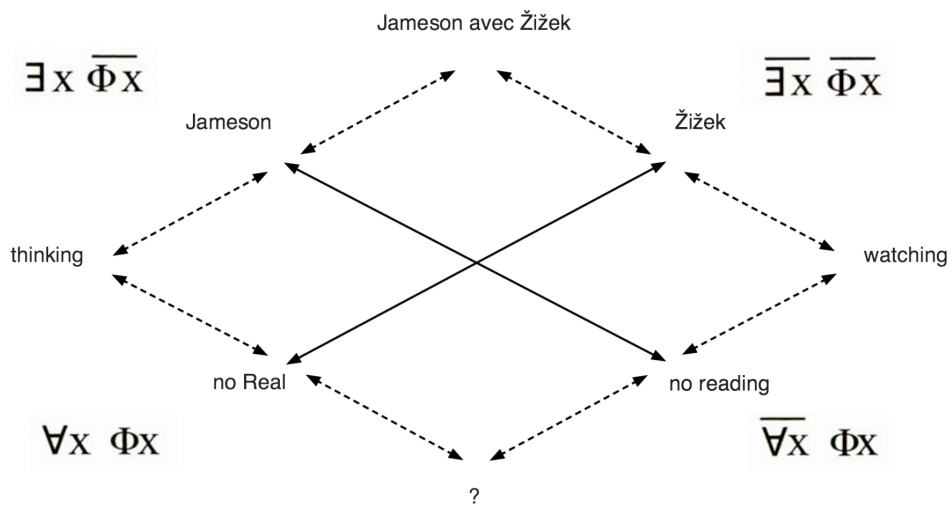
labor, but no, strike that, surely a late Lacanian labor – this is the knot of all knots!<sup>18</sup> The figure on the right tilts his head back – why? Because his ballcap’s brim will otherwise shade his eyes and he will not be able to read the label of the box in front of him – or he will not be able to distinguish which machine part he is looking at, or the label on the machine. Unlike the figure on the left (who, we have to admit, also looks as if he were “lost in thought”), the figure on the right is looking at something we cannot see. Or, perhaps, he is looking at the drillpress (which is closer to the front of the room, towards us as viewing subjects). But I would speculate that this figure is looking *for* something – that is to say, searching, while the main figure is looking *at* something – that is to say, inspecting, ruminating (lost in thought, trying to follow his train of thought, follow the ropes or knots). So on the one hand we have the proverbial needle in a haystack – which means, in digital Lacanese, Google as the “subject supposed to know,” and on the other hand we have the unconscious of labor itself, of the Marxist project.

## Conclusion

This phrase or concept, “the unconscious of labor itself,” suggests the two ways in which I characterized my semiotic rectangle in the first section of this essay: as unconscious, but also as toolkit. By way of conclusion, I would like to return to that rectangle, but adding to it in order the better to stress the non-relation of the dialectic. That is, with the addition of the formulas of sexuation, keeping in mind that, Jameson without or *sans* Žižek is Jameson without the Real, which is both the sexual Real and the Real of the class struggle – in our diagram, the phallic function  $[\Phi]$  is akin to the split subject  $[\$]$  qua economic castration):

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<sup>18</sup> That is, the later Lacan of the 1970s, of the Borromean knots and their complications from Seminar XXIII onward, would think of knots not as that which must be untangled *à la* Freud but rather knots are what hold our Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real together. Discussing this picture with Vancouver photographer Kelly Wood, I was told to consider “the time signature of the picture,” how “the task (labor) of untangling implies a length of time, one that cannot be present in the image, but, is the whole of the narrative in the fraction of the second of the photo,” and that the “laborer endeavors to return to the first cause (of failure, you could even say); he reverses time, and trouble, to begin again, likely tomorrow, as human attempts to conquer the world are always unnatural, inelegant and badly designed” (email, July 2018). Can we not bring Wood’s reversal of time into the question of tangling and untangling? Or even the dialectic of the same?



But by the same token, Žižek with or without Jameson is Žižek who does not read, who cannot be bothered with – not with interpretation, for obviously he does nothing but interpret. But that isn't right either, for it's an interpretation without reading, an interpretation that is just watching. Žižek will say he does not watch films either (and yet that probably is usually untrue) – but for this diagram let “watching” stand in for a riff, say, on a moment in a film, such as the dialogue at the end of the film *Wind River* which Žižek has been commenting on recently in lectures and in his essay on *Blade Runner 2049*.<sup>19</sup>

What, then, do Lacan's formulae of sexuation bring to this diagram? If we accept that the phallic function is also a marker of economic castration – which is to say, the class struggle qua non-relation – then on the upper left we have the position of the primal father (“there exists someone who is not subject to the phallic function”). This corresponds, in my argument, not exactly to Jameson as patriarch of US theory, but to that fantasy position of Jameson both with and without Žižek – by which I mean, both the Jameson of pure thought *and* the Jameson of the Real. Getting to have your cake and eat it to: the impossible-Real. Dare we say, the Utopian Jameson? Then, on the upper right corner, “there does not exist anyone who is not subject to the phallic function”: or, again, Žižek with *and* without

<sup>19</sup> Notably, Žižek claims that we should not read the text that comes up at the end of *Wind River*, which aligns the film with the question of missing and murdered Indigenous women in the U.S. (Žižek 2017b: unpaginated).

Jameson, or Žižek who is able to read but would prefer not to. The Žižek of Bartlebian withdrawal qua revolutionary act (perhaps this thinking that turns out to be practical after all, to recall Adorno?). But what of the two final positions, and why haven't I said anything about the question mark in the bottom of the diagram, the dystopian position? This position, I suggest, is that of the reader. We begin on the lower left, and so the reader, who is, after all, neither Jameson nor Žižek, is aligned with the castrated subject, the split subject, \$. The reader is universal, is all subjects – all are subject to the phallic function, all are subject to the economic. But, just as I argued at the beginning of this paper that we can only read Jameson *sans* Žižek after reading them together, so we can only conceptualize the reader *after* moving clockwise through the diagram, after reading Jameson *with* Žižek and without, reading Žižek *avec* Jameson and *sans*, ending, that is, with the reader as not-All: “not-All are subject to the phallic function.” That is the position of the revolutionary subject: the feminine not-All.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In a generous reading of an earlier draft of this essay, Paul Kingsbury (Geography, SFU) drew comparisons with the conclusion to Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire*, and in particular where she calls for “an ethics proper to the woman” (Copjec 1994: 236).

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