

## An obsessional act of erasure: Žižek on *L'Origine du Monde*<sup>1</sup>

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Any desire is maintained in so far as the object that causes it is kept at a certain distance. The obsessional neurotic specializes in emphasizing the confrontation with the impossibility traced in this space or distance by setting things up "so that the object of his desire *becomes the signifier* of this impossibility" (Lacan 1977:36; emphasis added). Slavoj Žižek describes a moment of such confrontation while locating Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* in the history of modernity. In 1866 Khalil Bey, a collector of erotic art, commissioned Courbet to paint the naked torso of a woman. Amid cream cloth and the soft, still, luminous flesh of her thighs and lower buttocks, her navel and right breast is an exquisitely painted vagina. A vulva traced amidst deep brown pubic hair, whose detail evokes the eroticism of each brush stroke. Žižek writes that:

What Courbet accomplishes here is the gesture of radical desublimation: he took the risk and simply went to the end by directly depicting what previous realistic art merely hinted at as its withdrawn point of reference -- the outcome of this operation, of course, was (to put it in Kristevan terms) the reversal of the sublime object into abject, into an abhorrent, nauseating excremental piece of slime. (More precisely, Courbet masterfully continued to dwell on the imprecise border that separates the sublime from the excremental: the woman's body in *L'Origine* retains its full erotic attraction, yet it becomes repulsive precisely on account of this excessive attraction.) Courbet's gesture is thus a dead end, the dead end of traditional realist painting -- but precisely as such, it is a necessary "mediator" between traditional and modernist art -- that is to say, it represents a gesture that had to be accomplished if we were to "clear ground" for the emergence of modernist "abstract art" (Žižek 2000: 37-8).

The account -- that a reversal to repulsion takes place on account of the fullness of the erotic attraction, that is, as a formation outside the image which is only its prop -- is purely subjective and one with which many would simply not agree.<sup>2</sup> My hesitation with Žižek is this manner in which he imposes an external consciousness (his own) as a kind of agency in the psycho-social history of modernity that he constructs, and the gesture by which he elevates that consciousness leaves open the very question of the elevation of his own subjective position, his own jouissance; it's very Hegelian. Žižek's account of *L'Origine* as the reversal of a sublime object into "a nauseating excremental piece of slime" is, I shall argue, an example of an obsessional erasure raised to the level of a historical truth. That is, he tells you what happens in the work from the perspective of his own jouissance and generalizes it as history. This is not to presume or suggest a diagnosis of his structure, simply a comment on the example he provides in this instance, which illustrates two facets of an obsessional economy: the erasure of the sign of the other's desire as the means by which the obsessional sustains a relation to his or her own desire and the role of the specular image within this relation.

The obsessional neurotic's relation to his desire is characterized by a number of distinctive traits. Firstly, the relationship of the subject to his demand is marked by an insistence already evident in childhood. Secondly, the obsession is always something verbalized, its proper structure is revealed as a verbal obsession. The destruction that the obsessional imagines takes place by means of the word, by means of the signifier, in this form of verbal cancellation is the essential point of his anxiety. (The magical thinking so prevalent in an obsessional neurosis is simply this verbal power.) For, thirdly, the

obsessional subject finds him or herself prey to a destruction of the other, which is at the basis of the very structure of the obsessional symptom.

Where Freud describes the obsessional's relationship to desire as subject to a precocious defusion of the drives and isolates the function of destruction, Lacan adds that an obsessional structure is entered into insofar as the desire of the other (by which any subject takes its bearings) "was first of all and as such destroyed, canceled" (Lacan 1957-58: session of 18.6.1958). He articulates Freud's conclusions in a new way when noting that the obsessional's

desire flickers, vacillates and vanishes to the degree that he approaches it ... [That desire was] approached as something which is to be destroyed because first of all the reaction of the desire of the Other was presented to him as something which was his rival, as something which immediately bore the mark to which he reacted with the style of destructive reaction which is the reaction underlying the relationship of the subject to the image of the subject as such, to this image of the other in so far as it dispossesses and ruins him. [It is] this mark which remains in the approach by the obsessional to his desire which ensures that every approach makes it vanish (Ibid.).

The obsessional's relationship with the other is "fully articulated at the level of demand", situated first in relation to the mother and subsequently applied to everything else, especially to his or her spouse where "the demand demands to be pushed to the limit." How is this done? As Lacan notes, the "obsessional spends his time destroying the desire of the other ... [in a] permanent wearing away" (Ibid.) that culminates in the abolition or the devaluation of his own desire. The obsessional depreciates his own desire by aiming at and erasing the desire of the other, for he must maintain a distance not from the object (of desire) but from his desire in order that desire itself might subsist.

Attempting to restore the primacy of the phallus (in desire), the obsessional attempts to cure himself of symbolic castration, by attacking the *signs* of the other's desire. A refusal of these signs thus takes the form of a degradation of the other as a function of an "imaginary elision of the phallus" (Lacan 1960-61: session of 19.4.1961) As Safouan (1966) has noted, to the extent that the subject's erotic life is "placed under the sign of dependency on the all powerfulness of the other, one is not surprised that the beloved object is also found to be identified to faeces." <sup>3</sup> For the:

more the desire of the mother is lured into what is going to function in the sight of the subject as i(a), the more the subject not only regresses, but is alienated in a pre-genital object ...[which nevertheless] will only function in reference to the gap, which in the desire of the other is always signified as castration (Ibid.).

Castration is a perception of the lack in the Other, a lack which can be defined as lack of being. The subject questions him or herself with respect to jouissance by means of the object a, objects that escape from the specular structure of the body. Language exiles the subject from his or her body and if the image of the body is captivating it "is by means of the look ... that this body carries weight" (Lacan 1989: 9). Yet the body as a way of jouissance is inharmonic to the being of the subject for the subject is "eclipsed at the precise point where the object a attains its greatest value" (Lacan 1977: 29). The difficulty for an obsessional subject is that he or she cannot tolerate this moment of eclipse and remains suspended, divided from desire by the drive, a jouissance on the side of *das Ding*, and bound to the narcissistic attachments that bar his way to the act. Hamlet, for example, can only act when he knows he is mortally wounded and when these attachments can at last fall away. For the obsessional everything seems to be at stake in his dependence on the image of the other, yet the goal of his relation to the other is his belief in the absolute being designated as the phallus. Lacan described the obsessional as someone who is *thought* in a circuit closed unto himself alone.<sup>4</sup> Closing off the access to desire provokes the regression or fixation to the Other's demand as a way of satisfying the drive. As Bogdan Wolf (2001) has noted, in "libidinal terms, the anus is the eye that looks at the world of others by way of refusal." In the Ratman's case, scopophilia accompanied an anal refusal to pay and in this way the lack in the Other is phallicised as an impossible gaze. The refusal of castration strengthens the tie between the scopic and the anal, for the

phallicization of the other's look aims to cover the subject's castration or to give the subject a sort of anonymity of being invisible. To want to see means that I am not to be seen, or, that I am where I am not. This 'I am not' in the field of vision is another example of the obsessional's belief in Being (Ibid.).

The phallus itself organizes "the beyond of demand for the obsessional" yet remains "a solitary signifier" coupled only with the void, as it "can only be found where it is not, in the void of being". While "the void is the only match for the phallus, the beyond is the

true place of desire. It is there where the Other does not exist” and “the lack in the Other is not, as it were, on the path of the obsessional” (Ibid.). By totalizing demand, the obsessional seeks to erase the dialectic of demand in which he is caught. Having failed to do so “he heads toward the nothing. The struggle unto death to erase the “beyond” would thus be the obsessional’s ultimate reward – his being” (Ibid.). We can retrace these steps in Lacan’s reading of Hamlet. After seeing his father’s ghost Hamlet’s response to Ophelia is marked first by estrangement and then by aggression. Lacan notes that when fantasy is “tipped towards the object”, the perverse imbalance of this relationship is revealed:

Hamlet no longer treats Ophelia like a woman at all. She becomes in his eyes the childbearer to every sin ... what is taking place here is *the destruction and loss of the object*. For the subject the object appears, if I may put it this way, on the outside. The subject [...rejects the object] with all the force of his being and will not find it again until he sacrifices himself. It is in this sense that the object is here the equivalent of, assumes the place of, indeed is -- the phallus. ... Ophelia is at this point the phallus, exteriorized and rejected by the subject as a symbol signifying life (Lacan 1977: 22-23, emphasis added).

Let us recall, here, the title: *L’Origine du Monde*. Courbet’s work operates in a space between the title and the image, the representation of something traditionally veiled. Žižek’s association of the image with “nauseating excrement” leads to his conclusion that the painting represents a “dead end”, a void of being. Courbet, he argues, depicted the “incestuous Thing itself” in a way that “threatens to implode the Clearing ... in which sublime objects can appear” (Žižek 2000: 38) and the task of modernism is to re-establish the matrix of sublimation (the minimal gap that separates the Void of the Thing from the object that fills it). Malevich’s “Black Square,” depicting only the square as an abstract object against the Place that contains it, is then, he argues, a reversal of *L’Origine* and the most elementary matrix of sublimation. If apocalyptic imaginings were prevalent before the twentieth century, Žižek ascribes their impact in that century to the overlapping of aesthetics and commodification such that the capacity to sublimate is drained away with the result that every encounter with the Thing changes “into a disruptive global catastrophe, the ‘end of the world’” (Žižek 2000: 39). With the traumatic impact of real or fantasized global catastrophes, “the Thing is no longer absent, that is, present as a Void ...[it] threatens to become directly present, to

actualize itself in reality, and thus to provoke a psychotic collapse of symbolic space” (Ibid.). Returning to Hamlet, we might note that Leartes’ open display of grief and mourning at Ophelia’s burial provokes in Hamlet a response of virulent rivalry. Suddenly, Ophelia who had “become for him the very symbol of the rejection of his desire” (Lacan 1977, 24) is regained as an immediate object of love. When Hamlet leaps into the grave, “we see something like a reintegration of the object *a*, won back at the price of mourning and death” (Ibid.). His identification with Leartes, marked by an imaginary aggressivity, is the point that allows him to act.

In this context Žižek’s thesis that Courbet’s gesture is a “dead end,” that the structure of sublimation collapses once its relation to the abject is revealed, invites us to further consider the role of the specular image in an obsessional economy. Recalling the scene of the Ratman interrupting his studies to open the door to his (dead) father before taking out his penis to consider it in a mirror, we might also note that *exhibiting* “the insignia of virility to the dead Other occurs in every case of obsessional neurosis. It shows the typical conjunction of jouissance (“Your Money!”) and death (“Your life!”) for an obsessional subject.<sup>5</sup> All jouissance must be accounted for and signified, which means that all jouissance is mortified and also that the Other of the obsessional must also be dead. Aspiring to a life between two deaths, the obsessional prosecutes any impulse escaping “the signifier’s might. His hatred seeks out what appears to insult the ideal he holds dear because it shields the unspeakable object. The *insult*, says Lacan, hits the Real” (Miller 1988: 39).

While sublimation involves locating an ordinary object in the place of *das Ding*, blasphemy is an inverse operation and an essential element in the schema of verbal obsession. The fear of causing harm by thoughts, by words that are spoken to the other only in thought, is an obsession of blasphemy, and causes “the collapse of the signifier to the rank of object” (Lacan 1957-58: session of 18.6.1958). In blasphemy, an interdiction falls on the enunciation of the Name (be it of God, Woman, Nation) and ruptures the end point of a consistent Other to which the obsessional is bound (Bassols and Garcia et. al. 1994).<sup>6</sup> The obsessional subject thus attempts to preserve the other by means of this kind of signifying articulation: “This relationship with the other is founded on an articulation which ... is itself formed on the destruction of the other, but *because of the fact that it is articulation, makes him subsist*” (Lacan 1957-58: session of 18.6.1958; emphasis added). Where Freud refers to the manner in which the safety of the ego is

guaranteed by preserving the object, Lacan adds that by being “solidly installed” in the signifier, the obsessional preserves the dimension of the other though in a way that is “idolatrized” (Ibid.).

The question of sublimation when there is no signifier for femininity leads in another direction I think for people who are not impelled to erase the difference marked in femininity (though they I would note are usually the ones who will tell you that feminine jouissance is merely a myth, a hysterical moment in Lacan's work).<sup>7</sup> I'll conclude by briefly considering a painting by Chilean artist Juan Davila, which presents a different approach to the writing of modernity: one that is not based on an erasure of femininity or feminine jouissance. His rendition of the issue of representing the origins of the world as we know it, with the implicit question of how one might represent “what a woman wants,” works off a scene cited from Magritte.<sup>8</sup> The daylight sky is counter posed with the image of a house around which night has fallen. Before this juxtaposition of night and day, hence the very term of the symbolic, shimmers another beautifully painted vagina. Pointillist dabs of crimson, green, orange and yellow and a fainter blurring of maroon render pubic hair around the soft and deep pink tones of flesh. It is not veiled or traced but slightly open. It might appear from a distance to be gently flaming. From a tranquil scene of language (for we can write that night is falling and read it anytime) appears this luminous apparition: what does not occur in the symbolic reappears in the real, a hallucinate. The moments recognized by Žižek in Courbet, in Duchamps' ready made objects and in Malevich's black squares on white are here rendered in another way. The vagina in Davila's work is not subject to a verbal erasure but speaks of the infinite as it drifts into the sky. Painted as an absence rather than a void, the image is *given* as a signifier of what cannot be placed. It is not reduced to the excremental, the simple abject, but moves into a floating beyond, a direction spoken of by Serge André when he writes of a feminine jouissance that leaves one speechless.

The teaching of Lacan allows us to conceive of the impossibility of a relation between the sexes in a new way. Feminine sexuality is no longer reduced as Freud would have it to a choice between hostility towards the man or something achieved only on a pathway of sacrifice. It is seen as the heart of difference, a moment of encountering, of discovering oneself as radically Other, inscribed as not-all in the phallic function. André (1997) argues that feminine virginity as the veiling of a woman's relation to herself follows rather than precedes the act of sexual intercourse in so far as it raises

a form of jouissance that cannot be accounted for in the term of orgasm, it follows from “it as the silent reserve” made palpable by phallic sexuality.<sup>9</sup> For the phallus brings into being a beyond, where the jouissance a woman experiences may be through a man but is from herself. If this ineffable supplement, an absence, a reserve, “makes of her an oracle for the man,” it is the guarantee of a virginity which cannot be undone: “This is why it is true to say that feminine virginity remains and will always remain the fundamental question and fear of men, when, to however slight a degree, they sense this radical alterity in the sexual encounter” (Ibid.). Davila, we might say, recognizes that which André notes he could not at first express so clearly when writing on what a woman wants: a woman is always a virgin. Moreover, his work is testimony to the possibility of art as a discourse, a social link. “My argument all along has been,” as he said in 1985, “how do we define the socialization of images?”



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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at "Social Symptoms", *The Seventh Annual Conference of the Association for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, November 2001.

<sup>2</sup> We might also note that a reversal is painted *within* the image as there is a strange dislocation in the woman's torso, a difficulty in making out what is happening on her flesh at the point of her belly, where perhaps there is a kind of scar. We might speculate that the working class life model he painted from may have had some particular figuration on her body.

<sup>3</sup> Safouan argues that the identification of the beloved girl with the phallus is an *effect* of what is evoked by the demand of the other: the more the imaginary image  $i(a)$  is identified to the imaginary phallus  $(-\phi)$ , the more the subject tends to use the imaginary phallus (that is always present elsewhere) rather than be identified to it.

<sup>4</sup> "The obsessional is most essentially someone who is *thought*. He is *thought* greedily. He is *thought* in a closed circuit. He is *thought* for himself alone. It's the obsessional who inspired that formula [*Soll Ich werden*]" (Lacan, 1989, 24).

<sup>5</sup> See also Freud, PFL 9, 84. As the phallus is "the site of lack it indicates in the subject" (Lacan, 1965, 25) in this acting out the Ratman demonstrates his lack of being. Moreover as the phallus in its absence "constitutes the amount of the symbolic debt: a debit account when one has it, a disputed credit when one does not" (Lacan 1996: 418), we cannot but be struck by the import of this display to an imaginary father who is dead. Miller describes it rather beautifully as a "hieratic scene" enacting "a man's wedding to his organ."

<sup>6</sup> As a figure of speech blasphemy involves a distinction between the saying and the said, a cleavage of the act from the utterance, and a way back from the deferment of desire (Bassols and Garcia et. al., 1994). Lacan notes that "It is within this articulation that we are going to see what is this relationship, this place of the signifying phallus as regards being it and as regards having it .... which would allow us to see the difference that there is between the solution which would allow the obsessional to be shown what is truly involved in his relationship *qua* signifier of the other, or of satisfying it in a sort of imaginary mirage of conceding to the demand for symbolization by the analysis of the imaginary phantasy" (Lacan 1957-58: session of 18.6.1958).

<sup>7</sup> Whether or not feminine jouissance 'exists', there is an obsessional economy in the erasure of what is presumed to be the desire (for that feminine jouissance). I would argue that Lacan's work is motivated by an ethic in line with the modernist task of letting the infinite exist in an ethical mode - as a cause of desire, and this to some degree rests upon a recognition rather than an erasure of the possibility of feminine jouissance. Lacan's work on sublimation is, I would suggest, more radical than Žižek makes out precisely because Lacan doesn't fall back to the absolute as a moment, however brief, of salvation particularly as it is written around the name of a woman in Žižek's text - a classic version of Woman as a Name-of-the-Father as he would say himself.

<sup>8</sup> Juan Davila, 'Untitled', 1998. Oil on canvas. 36 x 25.5 cm. Private Collection. Cf. René Magritte, 'L'Empire des Lumières', any of the versions 1954, 1957.

<sup>9</sup> Virginity, he says, is an ideological construct that cannot be perceived anatomically and is impossible to prove objectively. The Talmudists used the criterion of a the speech of the woman to settle disputes between newly-weds and their families, "the stake of virginity and of its loss, however impalpable the sign or the moment might be, is that of the value that can, and should, be ascribed to a woman's speech." André questions whether the psychoanalyst can hear the resonance of such speech, and "if he hears it, is he in a position to say a single word about it which might cause its beyond-ness to vibrate?" He concludes that the "outcome of analysis of the feminine subject (never mind the state of her anatomy) might hang on whether or not the psychoanalyst had, or did not have, the faculty of making audible, through the style of his interpretation, a language which would recognize and preserve the impenetrable virginity of speech." (Ibid.) Davila we might say has painted a vibration.