

ISSN 17551-8229

Volume One, Number Two - Žižek and Badiou

## *Against Spontaneity: The Act and Overcensorship in Badiou, Lacan, and Žižek*

Ed Pluth - Department of Philosophy, California State University, Chico

### **Introduction**

The notion of the act has been an important part of Žižek's work ever since his major discussion of it in *Enjoy Your Symptom!*<sup>1</sup> Žižek is widely credited with calling attention to the shift in Lacanian theory from its emphasis on the opposition between the symbolic and the imaginary to its emphasis on the relation between the symbolic and the real. The act is a very important notion, then, since it is situated right on the boundary (if that is the way to put it) between these two orders.

In his recent works, and in *The Parallax View* especially, Žižek has been expanding his vision of an act. He tends to emphasize an act's formal qualities now, which contrasts a bit with his earlier emphasis on an act's pure negativity, or negative force – although these are still important traits of an act, according to him. I will be exploring the nature of an act here in some detail, and my focus will be on an act's relation to sense. According to Lacanian theory, the stringing together of signifiers in speech normally creates a signified-effect that is difficult, if not impossible, to pin down

with exactitude; and so one, a bit unjustly, simply stops the interpretation at some point and acts as if one has understood. The use of signifiers in an act creates a rather different effect – one that, I argue, must *not* be thought of primarily in terms of the generation of sense, however elusive it may be. In this manner, it can be said that what is at stake in an act is something beyond or outside of interpretation. It would be tempting to associate acts with nonsense (Žižek and others are tempted, at times), but I am going to argue that this is not right either. Considering signifiers in acts to be, instead, something like *mathemes* allows for a better account of how they are outside of, or perhaps before, any determination of their possible sense or, even, their nonsense. This seems to be one way in which the performative nature of signifiers in acts – the fact that they do something more than they express or say something – can also be highlighted.

The first part of my paper will be concerned with simply explaining this view. The second part of my paper will discuss how and why this take on acts is linked to a critique of spontaneity in the works of Badiou and Žižek.<sup>2</sup> If there is an ethic of the act shared by Badiou and Žižek, spontaneity is not part of it. According to Žižek this is mainly because spontaneity reproduces and reinforces unwittingly what is trying to be transgressed. I think Badiou may agree with this point, but he finds it important to add that an act also requires construction as well as destruction. So, while they share a critique of spontaneity, the alternative to spontaneity is envisioned differently by each. In my conclusion, I will explore how this difference is manifested in their conflicting takes on Bartleby from Melville's short story. Žižek's reading appreciates Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" for its resistance to transgression and spontaneity. Bartleby also refuses to engage in any interpretive game at all, and to give any content to his refusal. For Žižek, such a refusal is a major feature of any act. Badiou's reading finds that such a refusal falls short as a construction, and he sees in Bartleby the betrayal of a truth procedure.

## Part One

### 1. In an act, a signifier signifies itself – almost

I am assuming it is well known that the act in Lacanian theory is supposed to be distinguished from acting out and *passages à l'acte*, and also that an act is a matter of "signifying": "*l'acte est signifiant*," Lacan claimed in his fourteenth seminar (1966-1967:

22 February 1967). So it is safe to say that an act entails a use of signifiers.<sup>3</sup> But doesn't every speech act use signifiers? What makes this notion of an act so different? One of Lacan's stranger claims about an act is that a signifier does something like signify itself in it:

One could say, but this would be mistaken, that in its [an act's] case, the signifier signifies itself. We know that this is impossible. It is nonetheless true that it is as close as can be to this operation. The subject, let's say, in the act, is equivalent to its signifier. It is nonetheless divided by it. (1966-1967: 15 February 1967)

Lacan adds qualifications and hedges to this claim about the signifier in an act because, of course, it had long been an axiom in Lacanian theory that a signifier is something like pure difference. In other words a signifier, by definition, is in fact not capable of signifying itself: "it is of the nature of any and every signifier not to be able to signify itself" (1966-1967: 16 November 1966). Lacan had just about always maintained this. There are all sorts of reasons for this view of signifiers as pure difference, which are probably familiar to most and I will not go into them here.<sup>4</sup>

This basic claim about acts is a strong indication that to Lacan's way of thinking there is something going on in an act that does not compare easily to a typical use of signifiers. We could even put it this way: if there is anything like a use of signifiers in an act, an act uses them in such a manner that they are not normal signifiers anymore. Or, that an abnormal, unusual use of signifiers is constitutive of the act. But what led Lacan to make such a claim?

It is helpful to consider, by way of contrast, the way in which ordinary signifying practices use signifiers. In our ordinary signifying practices Lacan thought that we rely upon the Other as a guarantor of meaning. We suppose that what is said is possibly understood and, moreover, we generally try to be understood. The Other is, among other things, Lacan's name for this "place" where we put this (supposed) understanding we are aiming for in our communications. Žižek has a nice way of discussing this in *The Parallax View* with reference to some phenomenological studies of communication. When I communicate, I assume that my interlocutors understand roughly the same thing by the words I use as I do:

how does shared meaning emerge? Through what Alfred Schütz called 'mutual idealization': subjects cut the impasse of the endless probing into 'do we all mean the same thing by "bird"'? by simply taking for granted, presupposing, acting as if they do mean the same thing. There is no language without this 'leap of faith'. (Žižek 2006: 51-52)

The assumption of shared meaning is unjustifiable because, of course, we do not know for sure if we have the same meanings in mind as our interlocutors, and we may not be able to find out. But at the same time presuming otherwise is a necessary, if unjust, move; because without this assumption we would never even be able to begin to figure out if we actually do share meaning:

the 'leap of faith' is both necessary and productive (enabling communication) precisely insofar as it is a counterfactual fiction: its 'truth effect,' its positive role of enabling communication, hinges precisely on the fact that it is *not* true, that it jumps ahead into fiction – its status is not normative because it cuts the debilitating deadlock of language, its ultimate lack of guarantee, by *presenting what we should strive for as already accomplished*. (52)

What is important here is the idea that we must act *as if* what we are trying to accomplish is already here (or somewhere), if what we want is ever to come about. This shows something significant about ordinary signifying practices. In Lacanian theory, one of the basic features of what is called empty speech is the assumption that we are like-minded: we can all understand each other, ideally. Differences are minimal. I bring this up just because I want to show how this normal conversational use of language and its background assumptions contrasts with the way in which signifiers are used in acts.

If a signifier in an act signifies itself (or is a "counter-sense," as Lacan called it in one of his writings) what is going on, I think, is that the signifier in an act stands out from a normal signifying chain in a way that other signifiers do not (Lacan 2001: 325). It would be natural, then, to consider these signifiers to be something other than signifiers. Lacan did just this by calling them "letters" when presenting his essay "Lituraterre" to his seminar, and in his discussion he said that "the letter is in the real, and the signifier in the symbolic" (1970-1971: 12 May 1971). However helpful this distinction between a

letter and a signifier is, it did not stop Lacan from continuing to speak of a signifier that “would not have any type of meaning, like the real” (Lacan, 1979: 21). This would also be a way of thinking about the nature of a signifier in an act.

This idea of a signifier “not having any type of meaning” – rather than being sheer nonsense or simply enigmatic – is very important, and is why it is appropriate to say that a signifier in an act comes close to signifying itself. This signifier does not actually manage to signify itself, of course. But it does not *fail* to do so in the way that typical signifiers do either. A signifier that signifies itself would be, somehow, its own interpretation. But since interpretation is always a further chain of signifiers, this is impossible. A distinction between classical signifiers and these strange signifiers in acts is helpful here. It is true that any classical signifier may be said to resist interpretation, as Žižek’s discussion of everyday conversation above suggests. Not only do these signifiers require other signifiers in order for any sense to be made of them – the very ambiguity of signifiers is part of the reason why interpretation is inexhaustible. But in an act a signifier’s resistance occurs in a different way. One reason why a classical signifier resists interpretation is because there is a “too much” to it: an excess of signified-effect that comes from its endless ability to be joined up with other signifiers, or from our ability to throw other signifiers onto it, so to speak. But another type of resistance to interpretation – a “subtractive” one we could say, after Badiou – could be found in something “too little” about a signifier. A signifier in an act is not the dense, fertile, and classical signifier of interpretation, but an empty shell of a signifier, one that somehow drops out of any relation to other signifiers. Hence, it is almost like it signifies itself: only it does not signify at all, which virtually amounts to the same thing.

## **2. Sense and nonsense in free association and working through**

Before I continue exploring the nature of signifiers in acts, I want to ground the discussion a bit by referring to the practice from which this theory of the act emerges. There are at least two aspects of psychoanalytic practice in which we could find a strange, unconventional use of signifiers: free association and working through. Both, obviously, involve a use of signifiers. Free association is the “fundamental rule” of psychoanalysis, and is probably something the psychoanalytic cure is most famous for: the injunction to say whatever comes to mind. Working through is perhaps less known,

even though the phrase has acquired a kind of pop-psychological status now. It is usually not even recognized as a Freudian concept.

It is fair to say that both of these elements of psychoanalytic practice defy the normal rules of conversation. In fact, it is questionable whether they involve conversing at all. Free association seems to be, ideally, a presentation of the ticker tape of the unconscious; a kind of automatically produced chain of signifiers. However, I will argue that the signifiers in free association are classical signifiers: they represent a subject to another signifier. Working through appears to be even less communicative, in the typical sense, than free association, and this is why I think one is more likely to find in it some lessons on how acts use signifiers.

Of course, if we are looking for the act in psychoanalytic practice, it would be strange to find it in free association itself. Free association is not itself the cure: it is a technique used to bring it about. I would like now, however, to quote one of the key discussions of free association in full because it will provide the groundwork for talking about the relation between spontaneity and truth later on. Freud recommends telling the patient something like this when starting the cure:

'One more thing before you start. What you tell me must differ in one respect from an ordinary conversation. Ordinarily you rightly try to keep a connecting thread running through your remarks and you exclude any intrusive ideas that may occur to you and any side-issues, so as not to wander too far from the point. But in this case you must proceed differently. You will notice that as you relate things various thoughts will occur to you which you would like to put aside on the ground of certain criticisms and objections. You will be tempted to say to yourself that this or that is irrelevant here, or is quite unimportant, or nonsensical, so that there is no need to say it. You must never give in to these criticisms, but must say it in spite of them – indeed, you must say it precisely *because* you feel an aversion to doing so. Later on you will find out and learn to understand the reason for this injunction, which is really the only one you have to follow. So say whatever goes through your mind. Act as though, for instance, you were a traveler sitting next to the window of a railway carriage and describing to someone inside the carriage the changing views which you see outside. Finally, never forget that you have promised

to be absolutely honest, and never leave anything out because, for some reason or other, it is unpleasant to tell it'. (1964a: 134-135)

This “fundamental rule” of psychoanalysis, as it came to be called, is followed because of the idea that the unconscious possesses some kind of truth that can be coaxed out under special circumstances – circumstances that are enhanced when the tongue is let loose, and the mind allowed to wander. The signifiers in free association are taken to be expressive, then, even though they seem to be generated automatically.

Since they are treated as if they contain a subject’s hidden truth, the ethic guiding free association’s production of signifiers could be put as follows: “have faith that the apparent nonsense you speak is, indeed, only apparent. The spontaneous nonsense you produce will turn out to have a sense more profound than you suspect. And interpretation will show us the way.” Free association produces only apparent gibberish, then, that turns out to be open to interpretation after all: and for this reason, I call the signifiers that appear in it classical Lacanian signifiers – they signify something other than themselves, or they “represent a subject to another signifier” (Lacan 2001: 377). Free association does turn out to be communicative, but it is a communication from that “Other scene” called the unconscious.

What about the notion of working-through and how signifiers are employed in it? About this, Freud has little to say. In the essay entitled “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through” Freud devotes only the last few paragraphs to the topic of working-through, and even sets about it with a bit of reluctance: “I might break off at this point but for the title of this paper,” he writes, “which obliges me to discuss a further point in analytic technique” (Freud 1964b: 155). Well, why not change the title of the paper and not write about it then Dr. Freud? But Freud bravely sticks with it: and he writes about working-through because he sees it as the crucial step of the psychoanalytic cure – a crucial step, but not the first step. The first step in the cure involves “uncovering the resistance, which is never recognized by the patient, and acquainting him with it” (155). As one would imagine, this is a step that is heavily dependent on interpreting what results from free association. But this is not enough. Freud:

One must allow the patient time to become more conversant with this resistance with which he has now become acquainted, to *work through* it, to overcome it, by continuing, in defiance of it, the analytic work according

to the fundamental rule of analysis. Only when the resistance is at its height can the analyst, working in common with his patient, discover the repressed instinctual impulses which are feeding the resistance. (155)

What Freud is telling us here is that free association must continue even after the sense latent in it has been exhausted – because there is still a resistance to the cure. What happens at this point, technically or procedurally, can still be characterized as a talking cure, but the target is now directly “the repressed instinctual impulses” and not any signifying content. Freud elaborates on this step, and points out how it marks the difference between psychoanalysis proper and hypnosis or “treatment by suggestion”:

This working-through of the resistances may in practice turn out to be an arduous task for the subject of the analysis and a trial of patience for the analyst. Nevertheless it is a part of the work which effects the greatest changes in the patient and which distinguishes analytic treatment from any kind of treatment by suggestion. From a theoretical point of view one may correlate it with the ‘abreacting’ of the quotas of affect strangulated by repression – an abreaction without which hypnotic treatment remained ineffective. (155-156)

If signifiers are still involved in this process, it is worth noting that they are playing a very different role when compared to how they were used and handled in the “first step” of the cure, a step in which the difference between interpretation and suggestion may never be as large as one would hope. The work involved in working through is not centered on unveiling the sense hidden within whatever signifiers have been brought out by free association. It is not interpretive. In this period, these signifiers are used, rather, as things useful for abreacting affect.

Jacques-Alain Miller has been discussing a “post-interpretation” phase in psychoanalytic practice lately, and what he is saying about it is very helpful for explaining this obscure idea. Miller is considering in this context what status a signifier “on its own,” in separation from other signifiers, might have (Miller 2007: 7). Thus, his discussion is pertinent to this study of signifiers in acts. He claims that an isolated signifier is an enigma, one that calls for an interpretation that can never really be grounded or justified by the enigmatic signifier itself. And, in a striking move, Miller



brings interpretation and delusion together: when confronted with an impenetrable enigma, we make something up for it. We invent a meaning for it, and this is a basically “delusional” activity. What analysis is about, Miller thinks, in fact, is something like the operation of a reverse-interpretation: interpreting not in order to build up a chain of signifiers that would explicate the supposed sense of an enigmatic signifier (the delusional construction), but a work that would peel away sense until the subject is brought “back to his truly elementary signifiers, on which he has, in his neurosis, had a delusion” (7). Thus “the reverse of interpretation consists in circumscribing the signifier as the elementary phenomenon of the subject, and as it was before it was articulated in the formation of the unconscious that gives it the sense of a delusion” (7). When Freud wrote about working through as a period in analysis in which some kind of abreaction of affect happens, it sounds to me like this return to an encounter with signifiers as things, as elementary phenomena of the subject, prior to their having any sense.

### **3. The becoming-matheme of a signifier in an act**

Miller describes analysis as something whose goal is to bring about a repetition of an encounter with signifiers as pure enigmas – and we should think, here, of those “enigmatic signifiers of sexual trauma” to which Lacan refers (Lacan 2002: 158). But is the signifier in an act itself an enigma? In some way it is – but I would think of it, rather, as a matheme. The difference is important. Badiou makes much of Lacan’s use of mathemes, and even links Lacan and Plato on this point – both are often portrayed as advocates of the matheme over the poem. What Badiou has in mind as mathemes are the formulas that Lacan used to transmit his theory, involving the use of little *a*, barred *S*, *S*<sub>1</sub>, *S*<sub>2</sub>, etc. Does a poem not also allow for a transmission of knowledge? Perhaps it does: but one has the sense, with a poem, that there is always more that can be said about it, that it contains more than any interpretation can get from it. In other words, in a poem the signifier is classical. As mathemes signifiers have a different status, and it is worth considering signifiers in acts to be not enigmatic or poetic but mathematical.

There is another notion of the matheme that catches Badiou’s interest, and this one is found not in the transmission of theory but in the practice of analysis itself. How is something like a matheme operative in the psychoanalytic cure? Consider Badiou’s claim that psychoanalysis is not about the production of sense, but of truth:

I do not believe that analysis is an interpretation, because its rule is not sense, but truth. It is certainly not a discovery of the truth either, about which we know that it is vain to hope that it is discovered, because it is generic. It would be, then – this is the hope that remains for us – the forcing of a knowledge in truth, in the risky game of anticipation, by which a generic truth in the process of appearing delivers, in a fragmentary fashion, a constructible knowledge. (1992: 208)

The distinction between sense and truth here can be taken as a repetition of a well-known theme to readers of Badiou: it is the difference between knowledge and truth, between what can be understood and called true (veridical) in a situation and the appearance of a truth whose status is generic and undecidable in that situation. As he put it in one essay, a truth procedure involves “producing the murmur of the indiscernible” (1998: 57). This is another way of saying that what a truth articulates in a situation appears to be garbled, with the question of its sense or nonsense being undecidable – and this is why I think it is appropriate to think of the signifiers that are used in it along the lines of mathemes. In his discussion of how language is used in a generic procedure, Badiou writes the following:

since the language with which a subject surrounds itself is separated from its real universe by unlimited chance, what possible sense could there be in declaring a statement pronounced in this language to be veridical? The external witness, the man of knowledge, necessarily declares that these statements are devoid of sense (‘the obscurity of a poetic language’, ‘propaganda’ for a political procedure, etc.). Signifiers without any signified. Sliding without any quilting point. (2005: 400)

While a truth procedure’s use of signifiers may be called devoid of sense by many, such a charge is coming from the point of view of knowledge within the situation that is challenged by the truth procedure itself. If we take a matheme to be something like a signifier that is not primarily about generating a sense but performs, somehow, or functions (“forcing a knowledge in truth” Badiou claims), then we are closer to describing what a truth procedure actually does.

We can now see why Lacan wrestled with how to describe signifiers in psychoanalytic acts. The problem is that if they are signifiers at all, they are going to

*appear* to have sense and may thus be accused of being nonsense from some other perspective. Whatever the case – sense or nonsense – as signifiers, there is a side of them that is enigmatic. Any enigma is a signifier magnet – as an enigma, the signifier would draw other signifiers to it, generating the effect of sense. And calling the signifier in an act nonsensical does not get us out of this problem. Even nonsense gives an appearance of sense, and is able to be interpreted. Miller called the “elementary” signifiers that are gradually isolated and stripped of sense in a psychoanalysis “nonsensical,” and I would take issue with this. At some point a treatise on nonsense will have to be written, and I think its thesis will have to be that nonsense does not exist. As Schreber wrote, “*aller Unsinn hebt sich auf!*” – all nonsense cancels itself out, and lets itself be lifted up into the order of sense. There is no nonsense for which one cannot also invent a sense. What is being looked for in this theory of how acts use signifiers, then, is a use of signifiers that is prior to, or at least beyond and outside of, the difference between sense and nonsense. Considering signifiers in acts as mathemes highlights that side of them that does not even appear to have a sense; and although devoid of sense, as mathemes such signifiers cannot properly be called nonsense either.

Compare this to what Deleuze refers to as a “floating signifier” and/or a “letter” in *Logic of Sense*:

What are the characteristics of this paradoxical entity? It circulates without end in both series [that of signifier and signified – EP] and, for this reason, assures their communication. It is a two-sided entity, equally present in the signifying and the signified series. It is the mirror. Thus, it is at once word and thing, name and object, sense and *denotatum*, expression and designation, etc. (1989: 40)

And later Deleuze describes this “paradoxical element” as “both word = x and thing = x” (66). The major difference between what Deleuze is talking about here and the status of a signifier in an act is that as a matheme, I want to say that this signifier does not have any generative qualities either, while this “floating signifier” in Deleuze seems to be the nonsensical foundation of sense. While such a notion does have a place in Lacanian theory, it is, I think, still not what the signifier-as-matheme is about. Again, as a matheme the signifier is not even nonsensical. It is doing something different. This notion of a

signifier that is outside of sense – a signifier that purely performs, perhaps – has become a central component of Žižek’s discussions of acts, to which I now turn.

#### 4. Žižek on how acts use signifiers

Žižek has tended not to highlight the fact that acts use signifiers at all. This is understandable since, as we have seen, signifiers in acts are not really signifiers. So most of Žižek’s standard examples of acts do not involve a use of what one would normally call signifiers. Sygne de Coûfontaine, whose “no!” is actually not a spoken “no!” at all but appears in the form of a facial tick, would be the most notable example of this. Another is Ingrid Bergman’s character Karin, from *Stromboli*, whose act is also described as a “no,” albeit, again, a non-verbal one (1992: 43).

Since Žižek claims that the act is a refusal of the symbolic as such, it stands to reason that an act may be related to silence somehow, and that it would entail a refusal of signifiers altogether. As Žižek puts it, “‘Sygne’s No’ should thus not, in a pseudo-Hegelian way, be confounded with the zero gesture of negativity which grounds the symbolic order; it is not a signifying ‘No’ but, rather a kind of bodily gesture of (self-) mutilation” (2006: 84). This non-signifying “No” is also said to generate something Žižek calls “pure Meaning,” which he understands as a “meaning...reduced to the minimal difference between the presence and absence of meaning itself – that is to say, in a strict analogy to Lévi-Strauss’s reading of ‘mana’ as the zero-signifier, the only ‘content’ of pure Meaning is its form itself as opposed to non-Meaning” (85). However, it is in the very same paragraph that Žižek writes: “pure, unconditional Meaning can appear (and it *has* to appear) only as nonsense” (85). Clearly, what Žižek is trying to isolate here is something like a signifier that is “opposed to non-Meaning” yet still does not have any particular sense-content. Again, as I said with respect to Jacques-Alain Miller’s point, I am not sure it is a good idea to link this signifier to nonsense, since nonsense can always be fertile ground for interpretation. What Žižek describes here sounds like what Miller calls an enigmatic signifier. At stake in an act, I am arguing, is a different kind of signifier that, additionally, also resists any conversion of nonsense into sense. In other words, the mathematized signifier in an act does not offer any salvation of its apparent nonsense, and is outside any meaning-effect altogether.

In a very interesting passage at the end of *The Parallax View* Žižek uses the idea of *Versagung* to make a crucial distinction between an “act proper” and what he calls a

“symbolic act”. What is at stake here is the difference between an act that negates within the symbolic – that is, one that uses particular signifiers against certain other signifiers in the symbolic – and an act that negates a symbolic order as such (and this would be the “act proper”). A similar distinction was made in *On Belief*: “The act proper is thus to be opposed to other modalities of the act: the hysterical acting out, the psychotic *passage à l’acte*, the symbolic act” (2001: 84). Žižek describes a symbolic act here as one that involves “the self-assertion of one’s subjective position” (84). A symbolic act, in other words, is an act in which one somehow either states or performs what one is. A proper act, however, is, Žižek writes, “the only one which restructures the very symbolic coordinates of the agent’s situation: it is an intervention in the course of which the agent’s identity itself is radically changed” (85). So, an act proper is one in which one’s very being is transformed by virtue of a negation of the symbolic itself.

And with this distinction between symbolic and real acts in hand, Žižek is able to say something else about how such acts “proper” use signifiers: signifiers in them are not caught up in the production of sense at all, and have the strange quality of being something like signifier-objects. Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to,” for example,

is not so much the refusal of a determinate content as, rather, the formal gesture of refusal as such. It is therefore strictly analogous to Sygne’s *No!*: it is an act of *Versagung*, not a symbolic act. There is a clear holophrastic quality to ‘I would prefer not to’: it is a signifier-turned-object, a signifier reduced to an inert stain that stands for the collapse of the symbolic order. (2006: 384-385)

This description of an act as a “formal gesture of refusal” represents an important adjustment to the negative emphasis Žižek has given to the act. Signifiers in acts turn out to be negative in a special sense. Signifiers in acts are not really signifiers anymore, and are thus not really capable of negating anything in particular either. What we have in these cases is not an internal negation – in which one signifier negates others, which would be entirely an affair of the symbolic. We have instead a signifier as a thing beyond or outside of sense. Again, I think this is consistent with viewing these signifiers as mathemes. Whether a matheme is primarily negative, as Žižek claims, or is also doing something else remains to be seen.

## Part Two

### 5. The critique of spontaneity

I would like to shift gears now and discuss how this understanding of signifiers in acts as mathemes, shared by Badiou, Lacan and Žižek, is linked to a move against spontaneity. When we think about free acts, we tend to think of them as spontaneous. We tend to think of them as cuts in a deliberative process. The act of decision, as Kierkegaard said, is madness; not justified by what preceded it, and certainly surprising. And even the Lacanian “moment of concluding” is an equally precipitous, unjustifiable cut in the potentially endless “time for understanding” (Lacan 1966: 210). But is this the proper way to consider an act, if the signifier in an act has the features that have been discussed above? Is an act indeed spontaneous, or does it emerge in another fashion, under other conditions?

My take on acts is that in them signifiers become something like mathemes. This gives us something to go on for the assessment of whether a signifying production is an act or not. If it makes sense, it is not an act. But also, if it is obviously nonsense it is not an act either. Badiou might say that the signifiers used in a truth procedure may still, of course, be called nonsensical by many, from the point of view of the situation’s “encyclopedia,” or the “men of knowledge” he referred to in *Being and Event*. In acts signifiers “produce the murmur of the indiscernible,” and this murmur is not easy to situate as sense or nonsense.

As a result, an ethic of an act is a difficult, perhaps impossible, thing since by definition we do not know, concretely and specifically, what such an ethic is asking us to do or say – we know only formally what acts look, or sound, like. If Žižek is right, they may even be silent. There does not seem to be a possible rule then, for the generation of acts: only a rule (maybe!) for the recognition that they have occurred. However, one of the reasons why both Badiou and Žižek engage in a critique of spontaneity is that there are strong reasons to be suspicious of spontaneity’s ability to engender acts at all. Whether this contributes to an ethic of the act or only to the building of a theory of the act that just allows us to recognize them more easily is an issue I will not resolve here.

Consider what is becoming one of Žižek’s most widely cited lines: “we ‘feel free’ because we lack the very language to articulate our unfreedom” (2002: 2). Even this refers, obliquely, to the problem with spontaneity: spontaneity covers up our actual

unfreedom while providing the feeling of freedom. How so? Žižek's expression of frustration with spontaneity in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* gives a few pointers:

Take today's deadlock of sexuality or art: is there anything more dull, opportunistic, and sterile than to succumb to the superego injunction of incessantly inventing new artistic transgressions and provocations (the performance artist masturbating on stage, or masochistically cutting himself; the sculptor displaying decaying animal corpses or human excrement), or to the parallel injunction to engage in more and more 'daring' forms of sexuality? (2003: 35)

The reference to the "superego injunction" to create and provoke here is revealing. It seems as if an ethic of transgression favors some kind of spontaneity – much like the ethic guiding free association. Indeed, free association certainly transgresses the rules of normal conversation. The question is whether this transgression shows us any freedom. Just as Žižek likes to reiterate Lacan's point about how free association is not really free (the machinic unconscious has its way with us in it) the "superego injunction" to be transgressive would be coercive too.

Žižek's suspicion of spontaneity is also motivated in part by his take on the psychological appeal of good old fashioned repression. Whether in the form of a totalitarian state or an authoritarian father, Žižek claims that the psychological appeal of such figures is that one could fairly easily carve out a subjective space in opposition to the repressive authority, thus constructing for oneself a fantasy of transgression and spontaneity as liberation. But the command to transgress is linked to the preservation of the authority being transgressed. Authority and transgressive spontaneity form a happy couple, as it were.

Žižek addresses what we could call the *fantasy* of authority in his works – a fantasy that has emerged in response to the breakdown of what he calls symbolic efficiency:

we no longer have the public Order of hierarchy, repression and severe regulation, subverted by secret acts of liberating transgression (as when we laugh at our pompous Master privately, behind his back); on the contrary, we have public social relations among free and equal

individuals, where the 'passionate attachment' to some extreme form of strictly regulated domination and submission becomes the secret transgressive source of libidinal satisfaction, the obscene supplement to the public sphere of freedom and equality. (1999: 345)

When reading these kinds of discussions it is helpful to have someone like Herbert Marcuse in mind, as a counterweight. Marcuse argued that "surplus repression" is a main source of contemporary discontent. With echoes of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, Marcuse suggests that excessive social controls may have been necessary for a time in order to create the kinds of individuals capable of sublimating their drives into more socially productive avenues like work, art, and society. (Recall Nietzsche's question – how did a creature capable of making and keeping promises ever come about?) Marcuse adds that we have developed, however; we attain libidinal maturity as part of our upbringing, and now we suffer from too much repression coming from the persistence of social pressures and institutions that are no longer needed. So, according to Marcuse we can afford to ease up on repression without risking an anarchic collapse or regression to savagery.<sup>5</sup>

One of Žižek's persistent themes has been that this model – both its solution and its formulation of the problem – is exhausted. Where the classical Freudian superego used to forbid a particular type of enjoyment, making us feel guilty whenever we came close to enjoying ourselves that way, the superego's function has now changed (corresponding to changes in the family structure) and it commands, rather than prohibits, enjoyment. Or, as we saw above, it commands transgression, innovation, and spontaneity. Thus, our problem is no longer the one Marcuse was analyzing. We suffer not so much from a guilt that comes from enjoying in an illicit fashion (even when this is just a fantasy of transgression); rather, we suffer from an anxiety at not enjoying ourselves – both quantitatively (not enough) and qualitatively (not the right kind, not in the right way).

Thus, the "superego injunction" to transgress and be spontaneous is, according to Žižek, hiding our attachment to unfreedom – now manifested in our attachment to the command "Enjoy!" – and what needs to be kept in mind here is that the problem Žižek is studying is actually about a contemporary passionate attachment to some authority and some form of prohibition, despite appearances: in other words, it is our fantasmatic interest in supporting order (despite our public or overt interest in transformation) that is



surprising, and that is one of Žižek's most important insights. And it is his discernment of this fantasy of law and order at work underneath transgression that makes him suspicious of transgression as a mode of opposition. As he puts it in his reading of St. Paul:

what the Pauline emergency suspends is not so much the explicit Law regulating our daily life, but, precisely, its obscene unwritten underside: when, in his series of *as if* prescriptions, Paul basically says: 'obey the laws as if you are not obeying them,' this means precisely that we *should suspend the obscene libidinal investment in the Law, the investment on account of which the Law generates/solicits its own transgression.* (2003: 113)

Such a suspension is the point of Žižek's discussion of acts, and in his discussion of beliefs and fundamentalism the technique he suggests for bringing about such a suspension is an odd form of irony, one that sounds like hyper-literalism: "is not irony, then, the ultimate form of the critique of ideology today – irony in the precise *Mozartian* sense of taking statements more seriously than the subjects who utter them themselves" (2006: 354). Žižek's recent ethical gamble is that a hyper-literalist practice would be able to break the law/transgression couple. That such a practice would not be spontaneous is all I want to point out for now.

Badiou also engages in a critique of spontaneity, but perhaps not for the same reasons as Žižek. The critique, if not the reasons for it, is most often visible in Badiou's discussions of art. For example, in *Logiques des mondes*, Badiou makes a point about how progressive battles are not primarily battles against a reactionary regime – he holds that reactionary periods always post-date revolutionary ones, and so "it is not because there is reaction that there is revolution; it is because there is revolution that there is reaction" (2006a: 71). The illustration for this point is taken directly from the art world. This insight, he claims, would allow us to circumvent "a certain modernist tradition which believes that art's criterion is the 'subversion' of established forms" (71). What would it allow us to recognize? I will return to this question in a moment.

His position on spontaneity is also given in the fourteenth of his fifteen theses on contemporary art, which states that "we should become the pitiless censors of ourselves". Rather than having faith that the new emerges from the spontaneous,

Badiou advocates restraint and discipline. And in an interview, Badiou added the following gloss on his critique of modernism:

during a long time in the field of arts we had difficulties and oppositions to novelties. Today, in the liberal context the artistic creation represents exactly the contrary: all has to be new, sexual, pornography, an excess... The empire doesn't censor anything anymore. I believe it is a position which finally works against creation itself. Creation is also always the creation of a new style and new rules, but it is not at all pure freedom because absolute freedom is nothing in fact. (2006b: 57)

We see here a suspicion of a pure freedom, and I wonder if he has some aspect of Žižek's position in mind. It is noteworthy all the same that both thinkers are wary of spontaneity, condemning it to be productive of only an institutionalized, permitted transgression. In response to this, Žižek highlights the negativity of an act, and adds the specification that it involves such a strong negation that it is not even really a signifying negation. "Subversion" is perhaps not the right word for what an act does, then, in Žižek's work; something stronger is required.

The point of Badiou's claim that reaction is always a reaction to something else – to a revolution, for example – seems to be that a truth procedure (which is not reaction) is not primarily about negating its situation. Indeed, perhaps its relation to its situation is not what is important about it at all. What receives a heightened emphasis in Badiou's *Logiques des mondes* is a truth procedure's production of a new present, not its perhaps shocking and scandalous (negative) relation to its situation. Taking the slave revolt led by Spartacus as an example, Badiou writes that what these slaves on the march "show (to the other slaves) is that it is possible, for a slave, to no longer be so, and to no longer be so *in the present*" (2006a: 59). In other words, the slaves are not merely cultivating a negative relationship to their situation by attaching themselves to some new (abstract) possibility within it. They have, as it were, turned their backs on their situation altogether by already beginning the work of constructing a new one. This "constructive" dimension of an act can be found in Badiou's work as early as his critical review of *Anti-Oedipus* from 1976. In a corollary to the Maoist slogan "there is no construction without destruction" Badiou adds: "without construction there is no destruction" (Badiou 2004b: 78). Thus, while Badiou and Žižek are both critical of spontaneity, the strategies they

study as alternatives to it are very different. Žižek answers it with the cultivation of negation; Badiou with construction. Yet both, I think, describe a use of signifiers in acts as mathemes.

## 6. On Bartleby as hero or betrayer

The divergence between the two appears very clearly in their different takes on the character Bartleby from Melville's short story. From Žižek's perspective, as we have seen, Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" is a refusal of meaning altogether, and the phrase is a signifier-turned-object. Thus, what happens with Bartleby counts as an act "proper" and not just a symbolic act because of its negation not of any particular content but of meaning as such. We can add that as something like a *matheme*, Bartleby's refusal also resists interpretation. Certainly, the narrator of Melville's story suffers from this resistance – it bothers him, clearly – and he struggles to figure out exactly what is driving Bartleby's refusal. The narrator does, eventually, come up with an interpretation – but whether it is correct or not, the reader will never know, and no one gets any help from Bartleby himself.

From Badiou's perspective, however, Bartleby's utterance is a betrayal, precisely because it refuses any further engagement with the signifiers of its situation (2006a: 422). In *Ethics*, Badiou wrote that a betrayal is "not a mere renunciation" of a truth, but a break with the break that the truth represents with respect to its situation (2001: 79-80). Given the strange status a truth has in a situation – it is, after all, undecidable in terms of the situation whether it is what it claims to be – a truth itself is a rupture. What motivates Badiou's reading of Bartleby is precisely the lack of construction in Bartleby's refusal. It certainly negates, but it does not go any farther than that.

Žižek's recent studies of acts have the virtue of looking at how they use signifiers, at least. But I am inclined to put both "use" and "signifiers" in quotation marks here; for the signifiers they use are not really ones (they are *mathemes*, I claim) and they are not "used" so much as withdrawn from play. This is part of Badiou's problem with Bartleby. On a similar note, Russell Grigg has expressed concern about how acts, as described by Žižek, sound gratuitous. In an essay that carefully considers the case for whether Antigone provides us with an example of an act (and finds that she does not), Grigg writes the following:

the act needs to be grounded in a radical no-saying that is inexplicable not just in terms of a given big Other, but in terms of *any Other whatsoever*. This is because the act of absolute freedom, as Žižek

understands it, derives its essential features (its freedom, its gratuitousness, its criminality, and its unaccountability and unpredictability) from the fact that it lies outside all possible symbolic dimensions. It strikes me that not only does Antigone not conform to this requirement but also that it makes an act indistinguishable from mere whimsicality. There is no objective criterion and there clearly can be no appeal to any subjective features to distinguish an act of absolute freedom from a gratuitous act. (2001: 123)

The problem with the purely negative status of acts is that negation sounds like a fairly easy thing to do – even when it is a strong negation of the symbolic itself. However, Grigg may not be right in asserting that neither objective nor subjective criteria allow for the discernment of an act. What would distinguish an “act proper” from a gratuitous act would be not only the presence of negation, but the use of a signifier as an object without any reference to sense or nonsense. It remains the case, however, that in Žižek’s studies the use of the signifier seems not to go any farther than that. In Badiou’s studies these signifiers as mathemes turn out to be the very ones that construct a new present, or a new situation.<sup>6</sup>

It is easy to sympathize with Žižek’s reading of Bartleby. Bartleby’s refusal does use signifiers in the manner of an act, if the key feature of an act is a becoming-matheme of the signifier. His signifying creation resists interpretation. It does not engage any other signifiers: it is hermetic. And this is also the problematic side of it: there is something nearly autistic about this use of signifiers. Bartleby shows quite well how the becoming-matheme of a signifier has a negative, somehow silent, presence within language, as well as how it can also appear as an enigma calling for interpretation – even though the attempt to discern whether the signifiers in an act are filled with “sense or nonsense” misses their original force. Badiou’s suggestion that this is not enough – that this resistance to other signifiers is also a betrayal – is compelling. Practically speaking, the acts Žižek tends to study do not require anything beyond insistence and repetition: one simply refuses to allow the signifiers in the act to enter into a relationship to any other signifiers. This is crucial to the act’s ability to be an absolute, pure “no!” But Badiou studies how a truth procedure uses signifiers in a matheme-like fashion while also allowing for the signifiers to join to others in the construction of a new situation.

They may lose something of their negative purity by doing so, but – and I will not be able to develop this further here – it is difficult to see how acts could produce a different way of being for a subject (something that must be at stake somehow in a psychoanalytic cure) without construction as well as destruction.

### **7. Coda: Breton's automatic writing versus Duchamp's overcensorship**

When looking for a way to contrast an ethic of spontaneity to this theory of the act, I found a discussion of a technique used by Marcel Duchamp in Thierry De Duve's *Kant after Duchamp* very useful. It involves an artificial, exaggerated use of language, so it seemed like a promising example of the kind of mathematized use of signifiers Žižek discusses. Whether it goes so far as to be constructive of a new present, in Badiou's sense, is less clear to me. Also, it is questionable whether there is the production of a new subjective way of being in its wake.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, it can serve as an illustration of how the use of signifiers in acts requires something other than spontaneity.

As a contrast, the surrealist practice of automatic writing, as promoted by André Breton, was clearly inspired by the Freudian technique of free association and takes spontaneity to be its guiding force. In the way this practice is described in one version of the *Surrealist Manifesto* his indebtedness to Freud is manifest. Breton writes:

After you have settled yourself in a place as favorable as possible to the concentration of your mind upon itself, have writing materials brought to you. Put yourself in as passive, or receptive, a state of mind as you can. [...]. Write quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you're writing and be tempted to reread what you have written. The first sentence will come spontaneously, so compelling is the truth that with every passing second there is a sentence unknown to our consciousness which is only crying out to be heard.

(1969: 29-30)

As with Freud's advocacy of free association, the guiding hunch here is that what emerges spontaneously bears a truth of a special status compared to whatever results from a deliberative, conscious process. And, as with free association, there is a faith here that what might appear to be nonsense is, indeed, only apparent nonsense: with

some interpretive work its sense will be unveiled. Let's call this, ethically, a faith that spontaneity is a pathway to the truth.

But before Breton came up with this method there was another pathway to truth being forged by Marcel Duchamp. In 1916, after having already done a few readymades, Duchamp came up with something like a textual readymade (De Duve 1997: 169). This involved the formation of grammatically correct sentences that would make no sense at all – and would be “not even nonsense” (169). Duchamp called the technique he used in this construction of sentences that would not mean anything at all “overcensorship” (*surcensure*). The term is very well chosen, and calls attention to its difference from what Breton was doing. Duchamp's project was not about spontaneity, and was quite unlike the free association technique, in which the censorship of consciousness, or the ego, had to be suspended. What is at stake here, rather, is an intensification of censorship in order to produce an entirely different type of truth. That is, the ethic here is like the inverse of Breton's and of free association's: faith is put not in a truth emerging from spontaneity, but from a hyper-literal application of the normal rules of writing.

De Duve describes the technique this way, and also alludes to its contrast to surrealist automatic writing:

having chosen the first word of the sentence, Duchamp would then proceed to choose the next, scratching every choice until he was satisfied that no meaning was produced but an *abstract* one. Such a method is both close to and diametrically opposed to André Breton's automatic writing. (Moreover, it anticipates the surrealist technique.) Whereas Breton, thinking that he could let the unconscious flow into his poems simply by obeying the Freudian principle of free association, never achieved much more than a display of the preconscious and its resistances, Duchamp, practicing 'overcensorship' (*surcensure*: his word), forced himself to put the most drastic constraints on his associations, to the point where virtually every word that slipped through could be said to be significant, like an overdetermined lapsus. (169-170)

De Duve wonders, though, whether the meaning Duchamp produced was really all that abstract. One of the lines Duchamp came up with went as follows: '*Conclusion: après maints efforts en vue du peigne, quel dommage*' – which translates as 'Conclusion: after

many efforts toward the comb, what a pity.’ It is possible to treat this construction in the same way that one would treat anything that emerges from free association. In fact, Duchamp used a comb as a readymade after this was written, and De Duve makes much of the fact that *peigne* (comb) is consonant with part of a command in French to paint (*qu’il peigne!*). Given that the readymades emerged from Duchamp’s reflections on painting (and should not be seen as sculptures – De Duve is very convincing on this point) it would seem that the meaning in the construction is anything but abstract, and shows us something about Duchamp’s preoccupations.

However, it is instructive to consider Duchamp’s own description of the practice. When describing it to Arturo Schwarz, Duchamp said that

there would be a verb, a subject, a complement, adverbs and everything perfectly correct, as such, as words, but meaning in these sentences was a thing that I had to avoid. The verb was meant to be an abstract word acting on a subject that is a material object; in this way the verb would make the sentence look abstract. The construction was very painful in a way, because the minute I *did* think of a verb to add to the subject, I would very often see a meaning and immediately I saw a meaning I would cross out the verb and change it, until, working it out for quite a number of hours, the text finally read without any echo of the physical world....That was the main point in it. (Schwarz 1969: 457)

Through “overcensorship” the goal was not to create a fertile nonsense that would allow us to find sense where there appears to be none, but to carefully create an absence of sense, to meticulously drain the signifier of meaning, in what should turn out to be a statement with an “empty meaning” rather than one that is sheer nonsense. Duchamp puts his faith not in the idea that the true is produced by a practice that is more natural, or that the true is found in a more authentic, pre-social, pre-censored realm, but in the strange idea that a truth emerges through artifice, exaggeration, and hyper-literalism.

What is the nature of the truth that emerges from Duchamp’s experiment? I would go back to some of Miller’s ideas for an answer to this. What Duchamp’s practice does is return us to a kind of original perplexity at the mere fact that there are signifiers at all. What Duchamp is doing is using language like the foreign, alien object that it is,



while also forcing a return to that state. So, what the technique of overcensorship does is, on the one hand, simply continue with the way in which we use language all the time: we put some thought into which words we use, making sure our intended meaning is adequately present in what we say, etc. On the other hand, the exaggeration of this normalcy brings to the fore the fact of language as a set of objects that resist sense, and resist expression. This sounds to me something like what Žižek describes when he calls for ironic practices.

With this overcensorship technique in mind, what was essential to the force of the surrealist project of automatic writing – the idea that we can find meaning in unexpected places, that we are bathing in an ocean of meaning – disappears. Rather than being surprised at our ability to find meaning, we should be surprised at how rare the presence of non-meaning within language is. And what we learn fairly quickly is that it is actually quite difficult for us NOT to find meaning whenever signifiers are used. Duchamp's productions, despite his intentions, still seem to be more suggestive than they should be. They do not fail to produce meaning the way they should. I want to say that this is actually the lesson we should take away from Duchamp's attempt to produce an "abstract meaning," and it points back to something that is at the very heart of an act's mathematization of signifiers: their status with respect to sense or nonsense is perhaps undecidable, and what is important about them is their production of a "murmur of the indiscernible". And of course, using signifiers in such a way that they become something other than signifiers is not far removed from what Duchamp did with everyday objects when he turned them into readymades.

I want to mention in closing that while using signifiers as mathemes may be a necessary condition of an act, it is certainly not sufficient. One could, for example, do something like what Duchamp did simply as part of a game, or an intellectual exercise – is it possible to produce some kind of purely abstract meaning? Not purely nonsense, but not having any clear sense either? What is also present in an act, of course, is some kind of subjective shift – one that Freud covers with his reference to affect in his discussion of working through. Žižek points out how something about the subject itself is at stake in an act: perhaps a fading, or a subjective destitution (1992: 44). When Lacan made his point that signifiers come close to signifying themselves in acts, he was quick to add that even though the subject is "equivalent" to this signifier, the subject produced by such an act is still "divided" by it (Lacan 1966-1967: 15 February 1967). The sense in which a subject is equivalent to its signifier in an act is something that requires a

separate study: but this idea, too, would seem to go against spontaneity's ability to be associated with acts.

## Bibliography

- Badiou, Alain. (1992) *Conditions*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- . (1998) *Petit manuel d'Inesthétique*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- . (2001/1998) *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Translated and Introduced by Peter Hallward. London: Verso.
- . (2004a) "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art". *Lacanian Ink*. 23. 103-119.
- . (2004b/1976) "The Flux and the Party". Translated by Laura Balladur and Simon Krysl. *Polygraph*. 15/16: 75-92.
- . (2005/1988) *Being and Event*. Translated by Oliver Feltham. London: Continuum.
- . (2006a) *Logiques des mondes: L'être et l'événement 2*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- . (2006b) "The Question of Democracy: Analía Hounie Interviews Alain Badiou". *Lacanian Ink*. 28: 54-59.
- Breton, André. (1969/1924) *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Translated by Richard Seever and Helen R. Lane. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- De Duve, Thierry. (1997) *Kant after Duchamp*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. (1989/1969) *The Logic of Sense*. Translated by Mark Lester with Charles Stivale. Edited by Constantin Boundas. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Formis, Barbara. (2004) "Event and Ready-Made: Delayed Sabotage". *Communication and Cognition*. 37: 3/4: 247-261.
- Freud, Sigmund. (1964a/1913) "On Beginning the Treatment". *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XII*. Translated and Edited by James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press. 121-144.
- . (1964b/1914) "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through". *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XII*. Translated and Edited by James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press. 145-156.
- Grigg, Russell. (2001) "Absolute Freedom and Major Structural Change". *Paragraph*. 24: 2. 111-124.
- Hoens, Dominiek and Ed Pluth. (2004) "Working Through as a Truth Procedure". *Communication and Cognition*. 37: 3/4. 279-292.
- Kay, Sarah. (2003) *Žižek: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Lacan, Jacques. (1961-1962). *L'identification*. Unpublished.
- . (1966) *Écrits*. Paris: Seuil.

- . (1966-1967) *Logique du fantasme*. Unpublished.
- . (1970-1971) *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*. Unpublished.
- . (1979) "Vers un signifiant nouveau". *Ornicar?* 17/18: 7-23.
- . (2001) *Autres Écrits*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- . (2002). *Écrits: A Selection*. Translated by Bruce Fink. New York: Norton.
- Marcuse, Herbert. (1966/1955) *Eros and Civilization*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Miller, Jacques-Alain. (2007) "Interpretation in Reverse". In *The Later Lacan*. Edited by Véronique Voruz and Bogdan Wolf. Albany: SUNY Press. 3-10.
- Pluth, Ed. (2004) "How Acts Use Signifiers". *Journal for Lacanian Studies*. 2:1. 18-33.
- . (2007) *Signifiers and Acts*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Saussure, Ferdinand. (1983/1915) *Course in General Linguistics*. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court.
- Schwarz, Arturo. (1969) *The Collected Works of Marcel Duchamp*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
- Žižek, Slavoj. (1992) *Enjoy Your Symptom!* New York: Routledge.
- . (1999) *The Ticklish Subject*. London: Verso.
- . (2001) *On Belief*. London: Routledge.
- . (2002) *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* London: Verso.
- . (2003) *The Puppet and the Dwarf*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- . (2006) *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

<sup>1</sup> See Žižek 1992: 77ff. A good overview of Žižek's view on the act is to be found in Kay 2003: 111-127.

<sup>2</sup> The proper way in which to map concepts from Lacanian theory onto Badiou's work is still in dispute, I think. My view is that "act" does not correlate to "event" in Badiou as well as it correlates to "truth procedure". Dominiek Hoens and I claimed already that "one should not equate truth with event or speak of a truth-event: truth is post-ental" (2004: 282). Similarly, act and event need to be kept distinct: and I would add that an act is also "post-ental". The act is not a major concept in Badiou's work, but he does use the term every so often, especially in his discussions of psychoanalysis.

<sup>3</sup> I discuss this difference in Pluth 2004, where I also study Lacan's view on how signifiers in acts may or may not be like puns.

<sup>4</sup> On this point, Lacan shows his debt to Saussure very clearly. According to Lacan, a signifier shows "the presence of difference as such and nothing else" (1961-1962: 6 December 1961). According to Saussure, in language "there are only differences [. . .] and no positive terms" (1983: 118).

<sup>5</sup> The relevant discussions are in Marcuse 1966 chapters two and three: on the ontogenesis and phylogensis of the "repressed individual".

<sup>6</sup> Badiou's study of Saint Paul suggests another way in which this point might go: what he emphasizes in Paul's work is not its negation, its articulation of a "no" to the situation of Roman Law, but its ability to say "No...but". See Pluth 2007 for a discussion of this point.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Formis has, however, considered Duchamp's readymades as an event within the art world, one with respect to which subsequent artists are either faithful or not. She studies how the readymade is an object with an undecidable status with respect to whether it is art or non-art, presentation or representation (2004: 247). The linguistic practices Duchamp engaged in were decidedly less influential, but are somehow related to his readymade project.