

M. Hommelette's *Wild Ride: Lamella as a Category of Shame*

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The troublesome acephalous blob of psychoanalysis

Well! This is not very reassuring. But suppose [the lamella] comes and envelopes your face while you are quietly asleep ... (Lacan 1981: 197).

Despite the lamella's standard denotation as an extreme and often visible manifestation of drive, Jacques Lacan's brief admission in Seminar XI that his description of the lamella is 'not very reassuring' is perhaps the most consistent (and certainly the most concise) definition of this bizarre psychoanalytic myth/metaphor for the "missing part" of the libido (*Ibid*: 205). Indeed, the lamella's status as a methodologically nebulous and conceptually erratic unreal organ certainly affords it a quality that is worrisome and not particularly 'reassuring', at least from a philosophical perspective; exemplified by its appearance in recent Lacanian discourse on popular culture, the lamella itself has come to occupy the place of a 'universal singular', or analytical substitute for those encounters/objects which are simultaneously coded as abject and abstract. For cinema studies in particular, the implications of the lamella's cultural hypervisibility have resulted in a proliferation of identifiable lamellas and an overvaluation of their signification.

Whether it is applied to the seemingly endless (mis)readings of Humpty Dumpty's identity as an '*hommelette*', or embodied by the pulsating, gelatinous life-substance of the alien queen's

egg chamber in the *Alien* quadrilogy, the lamella is almost unilaterally symptomatic of that especially pernicious variety of self-obfuscating scholarship. This faulty and often self-defeating metacritical tendency to mythologize further or render metonymic an abstract concept which is, by definition, a myth, metaphor, or metonym in itself, is well-evidenced by the inclusion of an excerpt from Slavoj Žižek's *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* in the critical-instructional collection *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Removed from its original context as an exploration of feminine depression and situated amongst essays which attempt to systematically 'decode' Lacan's seminar, Žižek's contribution (here reimagined as "The Lamella of David Lynch") addresses its own deficiencies in a brief introduction: "How are we to approach this notion of the lamella? Let us risk a detour... [through Lynch, postmodernity, and feminine depression] and... let us risk an additional detour [through the Pre-Raphaelites]" (1995: 205). Following this provocation, the word 'lamella' does not appear again in Žižek's essay, save for a single mention in the hastily-appended conclusion.

Nonetheless, Žižek's haphazard dissimulation of Lynch and the lamella has precipitated profound – albeit methodologically irregular – repercussions for the scholarly investigation of drive in general, and of the lamella in particular (although such specificity is rare). Approaching "The Lamella of David Lynch" as an exhaustive and didactic record rather than a characteristically evasive philosophical reformulation of the problem, theorists attempting to address the lamella are apt to rely on a chaotic assortment of Žižekian epithets to simplify Lacan's concept. Ambiguous and critically underexplored though it may be, the original, Lacanian context of the lamella has become lost in a proliferation of illustrative (and alliterative) postmodern signifiers. In a recent, unpublished manuscriptⁱⁱ on the body in virtual reality, cyberspace theorist Terry Harpold dismisses the lamella's potential as a conduit to virtuality on the basis of Žižek's paradigmatic essay, asserting that the lamella's essentially fleshy and organic kernel renders it "too biological" (Harpold) for consideration from a post-human perspective. Such confusion of Lacan's original concept of the lamella with Žižek's tangentially-related contribution to *Reading Seminar XI* is not uncommon. Accordingly, the vast body of drive scholarship (which tends to relegate the lamella to parenthetical or notational definitions) variously normalizes the lamella as "damp, 'unwholesome', and permeated with the decay of death" (Žižek 1995: 206), the "disgusting substance of enjoyment, the crawling and twinkling of indestructible life" (Ibid), and most commonly as the "flayed, skinned body, the palpitation of raw, skinless red flesh" (Ibid: 208). In short, the lamella is here conceived as symbolically functional – a determinate and metaphorically-loaded object that demarcates abjection/disgust, exposure, invasiveness, and an anarchic biological determinism that sets the subject against his organs (which behave independent of his will or intervention).

A recent discovery of a parasite at a London fish market is the embodiment of this particular conception of the lamella at its purest. The *cymothoa exigua*, a small parasitic crustacean, was found inside the mouth of a red snapper fish. The isopod had attached itself to the artery under the fish's tongue and drained the blood until the organ atrophied, whereupon the tiny parasite

effectively replaced the fish's tongue. Remarkably, the *cymothoa exigua* does not cause any other damage to its host and, in addition to performing all the standard duties of a tongue, actually relieves strain on the host fish's circulatory system. Although the BBC article which initially reported the incident is careful to reassure its readers that "the creature does not pose any threat to humans and only attaches itself to fish tongues" (par. 7), one cannot help but imagine a Cronenbergian future where such paradoxically 'benign parasites' become fashionably healthful accessories, and where a slightly improved circulatory system warrants offering one's tongue as a Kafkaian 'undead wound' to a disgusting parasitic crustacean. Indeed, the scenario bears a strong resemblance to an early sequence from David Cronenberg's 1975 film *Shivers (They Came from Within)*. In this sequence, two doctors discuss the creation of "imitative parasites" which, much like the red snapper's isopod, act as an alternative to organ transplants, ultimately 'improving' the organ that they colonize. We again return to what may be termed 'the cultural studies lamella' *par excellence*: an organ that enlists the services of the subject only to supersede his false sense of autonomy, strip him of control, and essentially "find its way" (Žižek 1996 par. 34) at the expense of the unified, 'total' subject which it infects.

Without wishing to demote these formulations of the lamella (which are unquestionably illuminating and illustrative), I should here like to merely state the obvious: the lamella presented in Seminar XI exists beyond the respective mythical universes of Davids Lynch and Cronenberg, and indeed beyond the entirety of the symbolic realm. Accordingly, while the focus of this paper involves an interrogation of a new and distinctly symbolic permutation of the lamella as a reciprocal category of shame, it will be necessary to first briefly address the lamella as it appears in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* – that is, as a pre-Žižekian/pre-Lynchian lamella, unencumbered by its current and principal association with (skinless) flesh.

For Lacan in Seminar XI, the lamella essentially functions as an 'unreal organ' or mythical referential double for the libido which, in the cycle of sexual development, prefaces even the phallus. It is initially difficult to conceive of such an object/organ given its status as beyond and preceding the subject, as if somehow exterior to him. Indeed, if the lamella is an antecedent to the phallus and all its psychic permutations (privation, gendering, castration), how does it come to 'enter' the subject and exist within him as a constituent of his being? Primarily, it is essential to note that Lacan associates the lamella with a libidinous *pure life instinct* rather than with drive-proper; as such, while drive implies a certain fixity on the part of the subject, a 'stubborn attachment' which is caught in an "infinitely repetitive cycle, endlessly circulating around the void of its structuring impossibility" (Žižek 1997: 31), the lamella (as the mythological representation of the libido) is situated "at the centre of drive" (Lacan 196), as its instrument, but must be conceived "as an organ, in both senses of the term, as organ-part of the organism and as organ-instrument" (Ibid: 187).

We may note how this relationship manifests in the "Sexuality" lecture of Seminar XI, when Lacan locates the libido between the unconscious and the field of reality. Schematically

representing the libido as the intersection between the two 'lobes' in his diagram of the interior 8 (ibid: 156), Lacan asserts that the libido exists "at the point at which the lobe defined as field of the development of the unconscious covers and conceals the other lobe, that of sexual reality" – that is, the libido is the 'supplemental' lobe that "belongs to both" (ibid: 155-156) biological development and symbolic signification. Lacan concludes, however, that the libido's determinate existence as a point of intersection is "precisely what it does not mean" (ibid:156), and should rather be conceived as an empty space between the two fields which functions as a lack. Simply stated, the libido – the primordial, prephallic abstraction represented by the unreal organ of lamella – is another manifestation of the agency of the lost object (*objet petit a*). This lost object is in fact "simply the presence of a hollow, a void, which can be occupied... by any object" (ibid: 180).

Yet it is necessary to trace the lamella's origin back further than this void to ensure against any indiscriminate materializations; for while the lamella represents the libido and its contingency as void, the lamella's appearance (contrary to many contemporary interpretations) is not an arbitrary infection/colonization of the subject. Anterior to any symbolic loss which occurs in the signifying chain between child and mother is a primary, essential loss that, as was mentioned earlier, is prephallic. This is the *loss of immortality* which occurs at the moment of birth, when the infant-organism is initiated into the cycle of sexed reproduction; what is lost in this moment is "immortal life, or irrepressible life, life that has need of no organ, simplified, indestructible life" (*Ibid* 198). While numerous accounts in cultural studies interpret the 'immortality' of this life substance as an anthropomorphized persistence or supernatural vitality (the monster that refuses to die, for example), Lacan's initial distinction is purely biological. Unlike single-celled organisms, clones, and cyborgs, which are capable of infinite asexual reduplication and, by extension, 'eternal life', the birth engendered by sexual reproduction is always-already constitutive of death. Here, my invocation of the term 'engendered' should be interpreted literally, since the organism's primordial loss (of immortality) is concurrent with its acquisition of gender or an identity as a sexed individual. This confluence of fundamental loss and identificatory inscription heralds the infant-organism's necessary initiation into the self-perpetuating cycle of individual death (real lack) and signification (symbolic lack).

Lacan's myth of the lamella functions to explain this loss which occurs at birth. He illustrates the phenomenon using the following scenario: "Whenever the membranes of the egg in which the foetus emerges on its way to becoming a new-born are broken, imagine for a moment that something flies off, and that one can do it with an egg as easily as with a man..." (*Ibid*: 197). The 'thing' that flies off and is effectively lost to the subject is the lamella/pure life/immortality, and since it is indeed a 'loss' in its purest form, it is possible to discern why many contemporary theorists envision the lamella's incessant anthropomorphized 'return' to the gendered subject as a traumatic and disorienting experience. This coincidence of asexual immortality and the physical death of a gendered subject is perhaps best exemplified by the stubborn biological-supernatural fixity of the alien life force which pursues Ripley across the *Alien* series. As a number of critics (Žižek included)

have emphasized in regard to the films, the alien that returns to colonize Ripley's body in the latter half of the quadrilogy is

just, merely, simply life, life as such: it is not so much a particular species as the essence of what it means to be a species, to be a creature, a natural being – it is Nature incarnate or sublimed, a nightmare embodiment of the natural realm understood as utterly subordinate to, utterly exhausted by, the twinned Darwinian drives to survive and reproduce (Mulhall 2001: 19).

This is precisely why one should endeavour to read the *Alien* series as a dramatization of the death drive, of the subject's desire to 'return' to the metaphysical fantasy of asexual immortality through biological death - and at the expense of her individuation as a gendered/symbolic/phallic organism.ⁱⁱⁱ

Because the lamella is simultaneously a "profound lost object" (Lacan 198) and "the remainder of the Life-Substance which has escaped the symbolic colonization" (Žižek 2005: 142), its propensity for return in narrative accounts often manifests as transubstantiation. Its absence is felt everywhere as a spectral and undead semblance awaiting (re)materialization. Here we can reimagine Lacan's initial analogy of broken fetal membranes with a slight but essential difference: when the membrane breaks and the lamella 'flies off', it parasitically attaches itself to the subject and (unbeknownst to him) becomes his *agalma* – the lost object that is 'in him more than him', much in the same way that fire in David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* (1990) and *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992) becomes somehow 'stuck' to the protagonist and cannot be therapeutically exorcized (Žižek 2000: 229). Such libidinal reflexivity is a key feature of science fiction and horror films, wherein a repressed/unknown psychosexual attribute manifests as a positive ontological entity such that "the very repression of (phallic) sexuality is sexualized and mobilizes forms of prephallic perversity" (Ibid: 221). The crucial point not to be missed in this formulation of libidinal reflexivity is its basis in *temporality*: the anarchic and properly immortal prephallic perversity must necessarily remain concealed until it is 'awakened' by a secondary repression of symbolic or phallic sexuality. The lamella here is nothing less than another variant of 'the return of the repressed', representing the object-cause of the moment that the façade of contingent reality dissolves to reveal the libidinal and forgotten 'truth' of the unbearable pre-ontological Real beneath.

Is that the lamella in your pocket, or did someone just forget to castrate you?

Although the standard reading of the function of repression in the science-fiction and horror genres (briefly outlined above) is certainly germane, we should not neglect a third, essential reading of Lacan's metaphor of the fetal membrane on page 197. This reading accounts for Lacan's introduction of the neologism "*hommelette*" in relation to lamella. While this neologism initially appears as little more than another example of Lacan's talent for sparkling wordplay, it nonetheless imposes a radical corollary on our interpretation of the lamella. Debunking a stringent distinction between an outer 'alien' lamella and the physical substance of the individual upon which the lamella becomes 'stuck', the term '*hommelette*' functions to linguistically flatten our understanding of libido and lamella; essentially, it situates the symbolically-initiated/phallic subject (man) and the primordial, prephallic Life-Substance (shapeless mass of egg) on a plane of equivalence. The *hommelette* is, therefore, an embodiment of the 'impossible' collision of the pre-symbolic (prephallic, primordial) and symbolic (phallic, sexualized/gendered, individuated) realms; it is the figure that designates the precise moment in metamorphosis when both originary and transmutative states co-exist. It seems unnecessary to state that this conception is far-removed from the notion of lamella-as-parasite evidenced by many horror and science fiction films; the lamella of the *hommelette* is not a spectral semblance that materializes as a mere constituent of the subject's being – the 'morsel of immortality' on/in him that eventually manifests as a violent and traumatic enactment of the death drive – but is rather a positive condition of the subject's existence, a grotesque identity.

We have here encountered the uncomfortable impasse of *the subject as lamella*, himself the interstice between eternal 'undead' life and the defenses of phallic symbolization – in short, the pre-ontological, malformed subject of an unbearable and impossible existence. One can imagine how such a scenario would transpire narratively by returning to my previous example of the Ripley-clones in Jeunet's *Alien: Resurrection*. Had the film detailed the no doubt depressing misadventures of Ripley Clone #7 – the deformed and boneless blob that is also entirely sentient, a representation of the *hommelette* at its purest – then the libidinally predatory alien would have been rendered irrelevant. In other words, it would have been unnecessary to seek out the undead and asexual organ of lamella, since it would remain eternally tied to the incomplete and properly 'subjectless' body of the *hommelette* clone.

This problematic aspect of the *hommelette*'s identity, which does not distinguish the lamella's prephallic immortality from its (precariously) subjective and symbolically-initiated 'host body', is an implicit concern in Slavoj Žižek's recent essay, "Odradek as a Political Category." Throughout this essay, Žižek employs the figure of Kafka's Odradek (the unidentifiable/confounding object that "displays all the features of a human being... although he... does not resemble a human being, but appears clearly inhuman") (2005: 141) to address the

paradoxes inherent in *jouissance* and the lamella. However, the truly noteworthy feature of this essay is Žižek's proposed intention to trace the very *appearance* of lamella, or alternately assign a historical and temporal contingency to the *hommelette*-figure.^{iv} When does the lamella emerge, and how can its materialization be effectively induced? Indeed, Žižek here finally takes up the provocation posed over a decade earlier in "The Lamella of David Lynch" with his question, "How are we to approach this notion of lamella?" (1995: 205) by reading the two 'paradoxical' features of the *hommelette*-figure together: the lamella is presymbolic but cannot be properly comprehended (in the sense of its place or status) until it "solidifies into a signifier" (Lacan 1981: 199). In other words, the *agalma* at the centre of the lamella (the primordial lost object) can only be accessed by means of a distinctly symbolic and phallic *sinthome* which belongs to a subject. Even and especially if the 'subject' (amoeba, clone, cyborg, etc) is not fully-formed and has somehow remained impervious to the cycle of sexed reproduction, he/it must be forced in some way to assume the position of a subject, to acquire the subject's *sinthome* in an effort to expose that which is 'in him more than himself.'

What, then, is this *sinthome* that exists in the gap between the real lack of individual death and the symbolic lack of signification? Following the analyses of Emmanuel Levinas, Walter Benjamin, and (more recently) Giorgio Agamben, Žižek puts forth a somewhat unexpected hypothesis that links the object of pure life with the *sinthome* of shame (2005: 145). The problematic aspects of such a hypothesis (especially from a psychoanalytic rather than a purely philosophical perspective) are clear: since shame itself is a category of castration, and more specifically a Kantian auto-affectation of "*respect for castration... an attitude of discreetly covering up the fact of being-castrated*" (Ibid 147: emphasis mine), does the asexual false organ of the lamella not properly escape the cut of castration – and, by extension, shame – by logically preceding it? In other words, is the lamella not already lost and 'flown away' before the encounter with castration?

Before invoking the problematic of the lamella, Žižek proposes a reversal to the equation of castration: we should not approach the shame of castration as shame over a particular remainder that unexpectedly materializes as a visible excess on the body's surface – that is, as an overwhelming confrontation with what, "in [the subject], remains non-castrated, with the embarrassing surplus-appendage which continues to stick out" (Ibid: 149). Rather, we should negate this (mis)conception of the remainder of castration as an unharmed stump that prevailed over 'the cut' and regard both lack (what is missing) and surplus (what results) as concomitant, referring to "the same phenomenon, [but] simply two perspectives on it... Castration and its disavowal are two sides of the same coin..." (Ibid: 150, 151). The reader should recognize this inconsistency as one which was originally formulated by Freud in his discussion of the Medusa's Head: although itself a canonical representation of the terror and shame of castration, the Medusa ironically regulates or 'portions out' its phallic anxieties by presenting to the viewer its head full of writhing snakes. Freud asserts that,

It is a remarkable fact that, however frightening [the snakes] may be in themselves, they nevertheless serve actually as a mitigation of horror, for they replace the penis, the absence of which is the cause of horror (Freud 1991: 273).

However, it is precisely Žižek's designation of this mitigating 'surplus' of castration as a *product* rather than a proper *remainder* that heralds a new conception of the lamella as a quasi-symbolic object/organ. Indeed, Žižek's assertion that the lamella is 'born(e)' of castration shame rather than despite or before it, affords the lamella a specific psychic history as an originary object. For if the lamella, "the 'undead' object, [that] is not a remainder of castration in the sense of a little part which somehow escaped unhurt the swipe of castration, but, literally, the *product* of the cut of castration, the *surplus* generated by it" (Žižek 2005: 151), then the lamella is not the psychic by-product of a repressed/forgotten primordial loss that returns to the subject as the *sinthome* (shame). It is, more precisely, a direct manifestation of shame itself.

The shame of the subjectless *moi*

Although Žižek's analysis is certainly informative in its reconceptualization of the chronically under-investigated lamella, it nonetheless seems to be lacking a crucial methodological step: why connect the lamella to shame at all? How is shame a more appropriate theoretical/psychic framework for lamella than, for example, guilt, hysteria, or enjoyment? Principally, it is essential to mention that Žižek's analysis is heavily indebted to the correlation between shame and *disgust* espoused by Levinas, Benjamin, and Agamben. Levinas' analysis is an especially revealing means of accessing Žižek's argument, given that Levinas connects the subjective deadlock or "radical impossibility of fleeing oneself to hide from oneself, the unalterably binding presence of the I to itself"^v (64) experienced in shame as identical to the subject's encounter with nausea. The means by which these analogous affections impact the subject and his self-conception are of particular interest to Žižek, whose primary interpretation of the lamella is dependent on the disorienting disgust and nausea which it inspires (the so-called "disgust with Life" or "disgusting substance of enjoyment") (Žižek 2005: 142, 1995: 206). In other words, the disarming 'closeness' of our selves to our bodies which occurs at the moment of nausea (when we are compelled to expel the unbearable pain of our insides), ultimately reaffirms our "revolting and yet unsuppressible presence to ourselves" (Agamben 1999: 105). Nausea as such constitutes an intestinal overtaking (a literal 'revolt(ing)') or organic supremacy that renders us suddenly and traumatically aware of our bodily and psychic limitations. As Levinas emphasizes,

Nausea posits itself not only as something absolute, but as the very act of self-positing: it is the affirmation itself of being. It refers only to itself, is closed to all the rest, without windows

onto other things. Nausea carries its centre of attraction within itself (Levinas 2003: 68).

This definition of nausea, taken up and developed by Giorgio Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, should be read alongside of Agamben's own description of shame:

[Shame] is nothing less than the fundamental sentiment of being a subject, in the two apparently opposed senses of this phrase: to be subjected and to be sovereign. Shame is what is produced in the absolute concomitance of subjectification and desubjectification, self-loss and self-possession, servitude and sovereignty (ibid: 107).

Consequently, it is possible to trace Žižek's philosophical basis for positing a relationship between shame and lamella back to the distinct sense of desubjectification one undergoes when confronted with one's own transcendence (seeing/identifying with oneself as an act of perception) and alterity; as was mentioned previously, the link to lamella (a specific psychoanalytic metaphor/myth) is considerably more complex than the abstract association between shame and disgust/nausea, but it is nonetheless valid, and certainly worthy of further exploration.

Additionally, the methodological gap in Žižek's designation of lamella as a category of shame can be filled (or at least temporarily occupied) by a reassessment of Lacan's *hommelette*-figure. Indeed, it is my contention that the incongruous pairing of a phallic *sinthome* (shame) with a presymbolic and immortal organ (lamella) would be much clarified, if not entirely justified, by employing the uniquely tenuous and liminal agency of the *hommelette* as its representative. As an amalgam of subject and partial object belonging to the category of the "subjectless *moi*"^{vi} (Žižek 2003: 115), the *hommelette* is one of the few human-like figures who needs not fear castration. He is, *qua* Odradek, human in appearance *only*; furthermore, considering that he is both prephallic and immortal, he truly has 'nothing to lose' in both senses of the phrase (there is no penis to be castrated and no determinant end to his existence). Apropos of Žižek, we should therefore not be afraid 'to draw the ultimate paradoxical conclusion' to precede/clarify Žižek's own inference in "Odradek as a Political Category": the *hommelette* – the bizarre crossbreed of the elemental loss experienced at birth and the colonization of the symbolic order – is *loss personified*, and therefore not logically subject to loss himself.

Žižek's analysis closes with the contention that the proper aim of psychoanalysis involves the sublimation of libidinal fixity (the endless, eternally unfulfilled circulation around an impossible point), such that "this very stuckness... pushes us again and again forward to invent ever new forms of approaching it" (Žižek 2005: 153). As is always the case with Žižek's work, the properly curative solution is negated in favour of a perspectival adjustment which "inverts the condition of impossibility into the condition of possibility" (Ibid). Such sublimation is facilitated by an ironic capability of the analysand to *not* fully assume castration or untie the 'knot' of his *sinthome* (Ibid). The success of the analysand, therefore, depends on his ability to 'hold on to' his *sinthome* (shame) - to avoid dissolving the *sinthome* and becoming "fully unstuck, [thereby] losing the

minimal consistency of [his] own being” (Ibid). However, this particular reading should not obfuscate the conclusive link between the *hommelette* and shame. For if the lamella and the *sinthome* (shame) are truly affiliated, then the *hommelette* is indeed susceptible to loss (albeit an extremely self-contradictory loss): that is, the *hommelette* has nothing to lose except for his *sinthome*, his shame. Although absent from Žižek’s essay, it is precisely this concentration on the *hommelette*-figure that comprises not only a coherent link between lamella and shame, but also a validation of Žižek’s forceful injunction at the conclusion of the essay: ‘don’t lose/give up your shame!’ Of course, what should be presupposed by this command is a specific additional address to the liminal *hommelette*-figure: ‘... because it’s all that you have!’ As such, my project throughout the remainder of this paper will involve an interrogation of David Cronenberg’s *Dead Ringers* (1988) and *M. Butterfly* (1993) within the lamella/shame framework instituted by Žižek and augmented by my addition of the safeguard against ‘losing one’s shame’ as a Lacanian *hommelette*-figure.

Son of a birth

The crucial point not to missed in regards to (castration) shame is its status as a necessary and formative stage in development, and indeed its position as a category of pure Being. As such, when we speak of shame, we are always referring to the shame associated with castration. Although many theorists push this particular interpretation of shame’s ostensibly ‘positive’ attributes to the limits of transformative and therapeutic solidarity,^{vii} we must nonetheless acknowledge the fundamental aporia of shame: shame is intransitive and cannot be expiated from/by its bearer, yet he risks its loss as a *sinthome* all the same. Fundamentally, shame is “what is most intimate in us” (Agamben 1999: 105), revealing not “our nothingness but the totality of our existence” (Levinas 2003: 65), while simultaneously emptying us of the very subjectivity it forces us to recognize. As a rudimentary definition, this aporia seems to be an authorial trademark of David Cronenberg’s male melodramas, wherein variously hysterical and psychotic men deeply resent or are confounded by the shame (or shameful deed) that defines them. Whether it manifests as ‘Agent’ Bill Lee’s reticence to assume a homosexual persona in *Naked Lunch* (1991), Spider’s inability to tune his memories of matricide to the proper frequency in *Spider* (2002), or Tom Stall’s complete indifference to familial identity politics (ironically reflected by the text) in *A History of Violence* (2005), shame and its violent/traumatic materialization is a key characteristic of Cronenberg’s existentially-divided male protagonists. Indeed, critic Damon McArthur’s argument that Cronenberg’s male protagonists must “empty [themselves] of identity and surrender to a degraded status as meaningless cipher[s]” before (re)assuming their positions as “meaningful subjects” (McArthur 2004: 23) is certainly germane in this context of shame and selfhood. However, when specifically applied to *Dead Ringers* and *M. Butterfly*, McArthur’s qualitative division of the male

subject (meaningful/meaningless) becomes somewhat irrelevant – not only because the simultaneity of psychic transition and physical metamorphosis is less pronounced thematically in these two texts, but predominantly because the men of *Dead Ringers* (twins Beverly and Elliot Mantle) and *M. Butterfly* (René Gallimard and Song Liling) are hardly subjects at all, let alone subjects who are susceptible to evaluative classification. They are, as Teresa de Lauretis emphasizes, somehow “distorted... [or] tuned to the wrong key of subjectivity” (ibid: 305), insinuating that although we may access them via the route of their *sinthomes*, these pairs of men nonetheless give the impression of a (poorly) affected subjectivity that will never be properly ‘born(e)’ into Being.

The plots of *Dead Ringers* and *M. Butterfly* are as follows: *Dead Ringers* concerns the misadventures of identical twins Beverly and Elliot Mantle (both played by Jeremy Irons) – brilliant and innovative gynecologists who, despite an evenly distributed fascination with the workings of the female reproductive system, initially appear to perfectly (albeit perversely) balance one another’s personal and professional deficiencies. The confident and charming Elliot will often pass off his former girlfriends to Beverly, who is withdrawn and bookish. To Elliot’s great amusement, the twins will occasionally pass unknowing women between them – a game which is disturbed when Beverly falls in love with Claire Niveau (Genevieve Bujold), an actress whose unique gynecological deformity inspires obsessional disgust and fascination in Beverly. Elliot initially attempts to rehabilitate Beverly’s resultant spiral into paranoia, drug and alcohol abuse, and madness, but himself mirrors the destructive and infantile behaviours of his twin. An increasing obsession with their identity as conjoined twins, the possibility of a physical materialization of this phantasmatic coalescence of self/Other, and Claire’s questionably maternal role in the twins’ relationship, culminates in a fatal operation where Beverly butchers Elliot with instruments designed to “separate Siamese twins.”

M. Butterfly details the misadventures of Rene Gallimard (Irons again), a French foreign service employee stationed in Beijing in 1964. Gallimard, who is naïvely enchanted with the beauty and stoicism of the Orient, becomes smitten with Song Liling (John Lone), a Chinese opera singer. Assuming that Song is a woman after witnessing him/her performing an aria as the titular character from Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*, Gallimard courts Song and the two begin a passionate affair. ‘Chinese modesty’ conveniently prohibits Song from ever fully exposing his/her naked body to Gallimard, and the spectator assumes that Gallimard is simply ignorant of the truth. When Song flees Gallimard to return to his/her duties as a communist informer, the question of his/her gender identity becomes increasingly ambiguous: is she transsexual or transgendered, or is he masquerading as a woman for informant purposes, as an effect of operatic performance gone ‘too far’, or as a means of manipulating and prolonging Gallimard’s guileless fantasies of the Orient and its women? Song and Gallimard are eventually reunited in France, whereupon Gallimard is arrested for espionage and Song’s deception is exposed in public court. The film concludes with Gallimard’s suicide in prison before an audience of inmates who assume that he is merely

‘performing’ the final suicide scene from Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*.

Consider the linguistic caveat ‘no man of woman born’ which dupes Macbeth in Shakespeare’s play. When Macbeth is informed that no man of woman born will defeat him, he mistakes the imperative for metaphorical hyperbole, assuming that he will never be defeated at any cost (since, if one considers an independent/determinant existence outside of the mother’s womb to be synonymous with ‘birth’, all men are logically born). Of course, Macbeth eventually discovers that the premonition specifically references the physical act of natural/vaginal birth, thereby leaving him vulnerable to all men born ‘of’ caesarian section (as well as all single-celled organisms and amoebas, which is the defeat one suspects Cronenberg would have imposed upon Macbeth had he authored the play). Although Macbeth predated clones and cyborgs, we may note how the *hommelette* applies to this particular caveat as well, and indeed how the category can be extended to include men who are physically/emotionally underdeveloped, ‘historically bereft’, or lacking a (fixed) past. Many critics, Barbara Creed and Helen W. Robbins among them, have emphasized the essentially infantile, *hommelette*-like nature of Cronenberg’s male protagonists, noting that they suffer from so-called “womb envy”^{viii} (Robbins 1993: 135) and seem to be “in a state of limbo” (Creed 1990: 129) - effectively *awaiting* the shame of castration while defending themselves against its possibility. To return to my invocation of the linguistic caveat in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*: these men are not half-formed *hommelette*-figures because they are single-celled organisms or because they are physically nonexistent, but rather because something has gone awry for them in the space between birth and individuation. Apropos of Lacan, this ‘space between’ is the space of the lost object, *objet petit a*, here figured as the libido and its contingency as void. Simply stated, the men of *Dead Ringers* and *M. Butterfly* have never ‘properly’ been born – ‘birth’ here referring less to the physical undertaking of nativity than to its symbolic permutations of privation, gendering, and difference – due to either an extreme compromise/interruption of identity or some biological deficiency. As such, the key distinction to make is between the subject who is ‘born (of woman)’ and the *hommelette* who is ‘born(e)’ as the past participle of something else altogether.^{ix} In *M. Butterfly*, Song’s vacillation between female masquerade and gendered femininity locates him/her between two equally unstable (yet equally legitimate) personae; in *Dead Ringers*, the threat of separation/castration for the twins is cycled from their own bodies to the sexualized ‘mutant’ body of Claire Niveau, and eventually back to the twins’ reconceptualization of themselves as mutated Siamese twins. The (d)evolution of these characters is therefore far more primal than the standard quest for individuation, where a character strives towards some adjectival specificity in relation to subjecthood and signification (good, meaningful, noble, complete, and so on). Rather, the Cronenbergian protagonist reverses the process of individuation and attempts (largely unsuccessfully) to experience castration anew as an adult; confronted with his own lack, “his own castration or separation from the mother’s body on which, ultimately, is based the constitution of his identity” (Creed 1990:140), the Cronenbergian *hommelette*-figure endeavours to ‘crawl back into the womb’, so to speak, and to literally become the *subject of a birth* – any birth – thereby

(re)creating himself as a 'son of a birth.'

This induction of *hommelette*-like characteristics is best exemplified by the mental and emotional regression of the Mantle twins (particularly Beverly) in *Dead Ringers*. Addicted to drugs, jobless, and delusional, Beverly cloisters himself in the twins' apartment and becomes completely dependent on his brother, tearfully demanding orange pop, cake, and ice cream. Although Elliot initially appears as the more sensible of the two, his inextricable attachment to Beverly (the unindividuated, unsignified kernel that has metastasized into a problematically literal 'identicalness') causes Elliot to regress and deteriorate as well. The relationship to castration and symbolization here is clear: what Elliot must necessarily quash in order to perpetuate his self-conceived sense of normalcy, is the sudden and traumatizing *difference* exhibited by Beverly. When Elliot's attempts at rehabilitating Beverly fail, the only viable solution to close the space of difference between them is for Elliot to assume Beverly's infantilism and dementia as his own. This detrimental affectation is the final, and ultimately destructive, attempt on the twins' part to regain their perverse identificatory defense against the threat of castration/separation/individuation – that is, to restore their ability to "bolster or shore up their own threatened sense of identity... through the reassuring display of their own self-image in the ever-present identical image of the other" (Creed 1990: 133).

And is this not precisely why the narcissistic dyad of the Mantle twins necessarily implodes in dementia and death? Given that each sees embodied in the other his own metaphysical fantasy of transcendental immortality, neither is able to account for his brother's/his own desublimated phallic ephemerality or finitude. This attitude essentially designates the *hommelette*-figure's attraction to death drive without the required compliance to its unconditional payoff of biological death – a death drive impeded by narcissistic self-preservation.

The gift of penis, or, *m. butterfly* goes to the diner: cronenberg's eastern/western *hommelette*

Kaja Silverman has emphasized that castration and its implication of sexual difference is that which is properly "unspeakable within male subjectivity" (Silverman 1988: 38). However, if this is indeed the case, why should the *hommelette*-figure strive to preserve his *sinthome* and 'not lose his shame?' Would an ultimately successful and complete subject not emulate Elliot's attitude and assume not only his own shame but the shame of another, thereby initiating a mutually beneficial and therapeutic arrangement that will facilitate 'working through' the *sinthome*?

Barbara Creed hints at the problematic nature of this collective distribution of shame when she emphasizes that the 'third' figure in *Dead Ringers* that intrudes on and disrupts the narcissistic dyad of Elliot and Beverly is not Claire (the woman and mother-figure of the film), but ironically "the

‘other’ that the twins become when they are together – the twins as a single unity” (Creed 1990: 136). Effectively, the twins attempt to expiate their individual *sinthomes* through the creation of another, more powerful, and phallically-equipped ‘third’ being – their conjoined existence as mutant Siamese twins. Presupposing that their psychic/physical collusion will allow them to expunge their shame as individual *hommelette*-figures onto a phallic substitute, the twins’ desire to coalesce and ‘blend’ into one another also recalls Seth Brundle’s aspiration at the conclusion of *The Fly* (1986). Seth’s overwhelming ambition to splice his genetic material with the DNA of Veronica and their unborn child (thereby creating a hybrid of male/female/fly/offspring) will allow him to recklessly distribute his *sinthome* across a new, third identity – effectively (re)creating his being as “more human than [he is] alone.”

The combined efforts of both Seth and the Mantle twins to violently transfer the *sinthome* to a phallic hybrid of themselves that they believe can more effectively ‘bear the burden’ of the *sinthome*, naturally prove impossible and disastrous: in attempting to expiate their shame, they essentially die of it. Or, to put it more precisely, the *sinthome* ‘outlives’ them. Given that the *sinthome* has genealogically preceded them, their attempts to recreate themselves as wholly phallic ‘thirds’ to defend against the threat of castration, can result only in a failed, Frankenstein-like ‘cobbling together’ of incongruous parts. Neither Elliot and Beverly’s failed rebirth as the Siamese twin entity nor Seth’s BrundleFly supercreature is a sufficiently-equipped conduit on which to sequester or ‘quarantine’ the expiated *sinthome*. It is indeed this characteristic of haphazardly creating (over)idealized revisionings of the currently incomplete/inadequate self that connects the protagonists of David Cronenberg’s male melodramas to the insane scientists and libidinally-infected zombies of Cronenberg’s earlier science-fiction and horror films such as *Shivers*, *The Fly*, and *Scanners* (1981). Conversely, in *M. Butterfly*, we find the very antithesis of this formula; rather than depreciating the penis and regulating castration through the creation of a ‘third’ entity to which all anxieties can be transferred, it is precisely the cultivation of the *sinthome* – its open appearance and presentation – in *M. Butterfly* that effectively mitigates the threat of castration. Even to the most casual and vulgar reader, *M. Butterfly* alleviates its castration anxieties through “foregrounding the penis’ overvaluation” (Grist 2003: 13) and effectively retracing the threat from the loss of the penis (absence) to its textual placement/location (a too close/too literal presence). Simply stated, what we encounter in *M. Butterfly* is less the typical *sinthome* of ‘one penis less’ (with the intention of replacing it with an improved and holistic subject) and more precisely its skewed variant: one penis too many. Given that the narrative reverses the absent/lacking *sinthome* of castration and replaces it with the shame of genital *presence*, we are here in a position to truly verify Žižek’s assertion that the lamella is an originary object: it is not “a remainder of castration in the sense of a little part which somehow escaped unhurt the swipe of castration, but, literally, the *product* of the cut of castration, the *surplus* generated by it” (Žižek 2005 151).

Leighton Grist’s reading of *M. Butterfly* is especially illuminating in this respect, given Grist’s

emphasis on the fetishistic economy of the penis and its various significations. Arguing that the film's narrative is contingent on a series of defenses "against Song's castration, Song's lack of castration, or maybe even both" (Grist 2003: 15), Grist's essay posits the thesis that "Song can be seen to figure the ideal 'female' partner: the woman with a penis" (ibid: 13). This statement is clearly evinced by the comparative vulgarity and repulsiveness of the film's 'authentic' female characters (Gallimard's ineffectual wife Jeanne, who weakly warbles out Puccini's 'Un Bel Di' while sick with a cold, and the mature and predatory Frau Baden, whose brazen nudity strikes both Gallimard and the spectator as horribly unrefined). Similarly, Song's transparent declaration to Comrade Chin that, "Only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act" is a revealing sentiment in regards to his vacillation between genuine 'womanhood' and the convincing performance of femininity. However, it is equally possible to address Song's identity as 'the ideal woman' (an idealization that depends on the presence of his penis) *qua* the indeterminate 'gendering' of his shame, which – as was previously mentioned – is at once unstable and legitimate, strategically manipulative and earnestly selfless. Song's shame in this case is simultaneously affected (his hyperfeminine pretense of "Chinese modesty" which is staged entirely for the benefit of Gallimard's Orientalist misapprehensions) and unbearably real (the fear of genital disclosure which becomes increasingly complex as his relationship with Gallimard intensifies). As such, if one were forced to identify the 'third' entity or 'bearer of the *sinthome*' in *M. Butterfly* (apropos of *Dead Ringers*), it would certainly be appropriate to distinguish this entity as the penis itself, given that it simultaneously represents the cause and the alleviation of shame.

A key sequence in *M. Butterfly* depicts a series of unanswered letters addressed to Gallimard from Song. Following their first (entirely decorous) romantic encounter, Gallimard deliberately neglects to contact Song as promised, and this avoidance prompts Song to author an array of increasingly despondent letters. The sequence – which occurs over a melodramatic montage of slow dissolves and fades, and is scored by plaintive music – illustrates Song's responses to Gallimard's troubling silence. The letters (which are read in voice-over) begin petulantly, progress into melancholic desperation, and finally culminate in abashed despair: "I can hide behind dignity no longer. What more do you want? I have already given you my shame." Although a number of critics, particularly those referencing David Hwang's original stageplay, interpret this admission as Song's regret over his emotional and physical revelation ("the scene of giving [shame] is elided", writes E. San Juan Jr., referring specifically to sexual congress) (37), we should not neglect another reading of this sequence, apropos of the *hommelette*-figure. Contrary to San Juan Jr.'s analysis, shame in this sequence does not refer to the moral dimension of determinate acts, which would in this case reduce Song's gesture of 'giving' to a mere euphemism (i.e., 'giving away one's honour' as a metonym for lost virginity). Rather, the crucial dimension of this gesture is its acquiescence to the fact that, while shame cannot be expiated or exorcized, it must necessarily be given/offered to the Other since – as the *sinthome* – it is all there is to give. Consequently, Song transforms both phantasmatic femininity and the traumatic reality of his penis

into the 'gift of shame', offering both to Gallimard (albeit one more tacitly than the other) – not as a compensatory phallic gesture or 'remainder', but rather as a category of pure Being. It is precisely this ability to proffer or openly display his *sinthome* to another that guarantees its positive fixity within him, initiating the *hommelette*-figure into subjectivity through a confirmation of "the minimal consistency of [his] own being" (Žižek 2005 152).

In Song we encounter the half-formed 'subject' or liminal *hommelette*-figure who truly never loses his *sinthome*, who literally never assumes his castration - in the sense that he passes this responsibility off to another man (Gallimard) in the guise of a gift. As such, Gallimard must effectively bear the burden of castration shame/anxiety (i.e., assume castration) on behalf of another man. Furthermore, Gallimard undertakes this responsibility willingly (before committing suicide, he concedes to the fact that "he gave [his] love, all of [his] love"), precisely because Song's shame was offered to him. Effectively, Song's statement to his (questionably) oblivious lover is: 'The gift I give you is my *sinthome*, my shame – which is of course to say, my penis – so that I may never lose it...'

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- i Žižek's clever reversal of the Kierkegaardian 'singular universal', which posits that universal themes are best articulated through individual human experience. Contrary to this, the lamella can be interpreted as "a stand-in for humanity by way of embodying its inhuman excess, by not resembling anything 'human'" ("Odradek as a Political Category." *Lacanian Ink* 24/25, Winter/Spring 2005: 137-155).
- ii Quoted in Bernd Herzogenrath's "The Question Concerning Humanity: Obsolete Bodies and (Post)Digital Flesh." *Enculturation* 3.1 (Fall 2000).
- iii Such 'undead' libidinous energy "qua pure life instinct" (Lacan 198) and outside the cycle of sexual reproduction materializes iconographically through Ripley's increasing androgyny (shaved head, shapeless clothing) in David Fincher's *Alien 3* (1992), and acquires full presence in Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Alien: Resurrection* (1997) in the cloned, infinitely reproducible, and asexually 'eternal' body of Ripley (the eighth experiment in a series of clones).
- iv It is necessary at this point to note that Žižek never invokes the term '*hommelette*' in this essay, although he does hint at the idea of an object simultaneously embodying prephallic asexuality and phallic signification.
- v Giorgio Agamben, quoting this passage in his own translation (which is later translated from the Italian by Daniel Heller-Roazen), supplies us with a somewhat less abstract formulation: "... the radical impossibility of fleeing oneself to hide oneself from oneself, *the intolerable presence of the self to itself*" (*Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. New York: Zone Books, 1999 - 105).
- vi In contrast to the fully-formed, symbolically-initiated and gendered subject who belongs to the category of 'I.'
- vii This tendency is evinced in the work of critics such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who asserts that the shame experienced by homosexuals as children functions as "a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy" (4), such that shame is not "a discrete intrapsychic structure, but a kind of free radical" (12). ("Queer Performativity: Henry James' *The Art of the Novel*." *GLQ* 1, 1993: 1-16). Similarly, Norman O. Brown's analysis of Freud's "Medusa's Head" stresses that the presence of snakes on Medusa's (castrating) head is not only mitigating, but constructive: "Multiplication [of penis symbols] here signifies... fruitful multiplication, reproduction, many where there had been only one" (*Love's Body*. California: University of California Press, 1990 - 66).
- viii A condition which Robbins defines as "a feeling of impotence clearly stemming from [the male's] jealousy of female reproductive power" (135), womb envy is externalized in a variety of compensatory phallic behaviours which attempt to atone for the male subject's inability to 'hold on' to his creations (*Ibid*, 136). (Helen W. Robbins. "'More Human Than I Am Alone': Womb Envy in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers*." *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*. Eds. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark. London: Routledge, 1993. 134-147).
- ix Such a distinction certainly materializes in the form of the horrible deformed troll-children of Cronenberg's *The Brood* (1979). Indeed, these creatures are not existentially liminal *hommelettes* but actual physical representations of the lamella itself. Both unborn (they lack a navel and are 'grown' in a uterine sack exterior to the woman's body) and asexual (no sexual organs), the creatures are purely 'borne of' a woman's anger and rage. The creature-children have no purpose beyond fulfilling the woman's psychic desires (i.e., they are not individuated beings), and expire shortly after carrying out their violent duties as conduits of rage.