

The Joy of Inequality: The Libidinal Economy of Compassionate Consumerism

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Abstract

This paper develops a critique of cause-related marketing and other forms of ‘compassionate consumerism’, which draws attention to the mobilisation of *jouissance* – or enjoyment – within this ideological formation. I explore three cases of compassionate consumerism – Table for Two, Toilet Twinning, and Sir Richard’s Condoms. In each case, I show how an explicit ethical appeal to assist those less fortunate than ourselves is underwritten by an invitation to participate in a disavowed enjoyment of relations of inequality. This enjoyment is procured, not through the manipulation of ‘natural’ pleasures, but through the staging of specific fantasies, which make pleasure possible through their framing of the alien materiality of the bodily drives.

Introduction: Psychosexual/Development

The signifier... evacuates enjoyment from the body, but this evacuation is never fully accomplished; scattered around the desert of the symbolic Other, there are always some leftovers, oases of enjoyment, so-called 'erogenous zones', fragments still penetrated with enjoyment – and it is precisely these remnants to which Freudian drive is tied: it circulates, it pulses around them.

Slavoj Žižek (1989: 123)

Table for Two International is a social enterprise with a simple idea for doing business while making the world a better place: for every meal bought at its participating restaurants, one school meal is provided to a poor child in sub-Saharan Africa. Toilet Twinning is a charity with a similar premise, which offers participants the opportunity to 'twin' their toilet with a latrine in a poor region of south-east Asia or sub-Saharan Africa. Sir Richard's Condoms is a condom company that likewise donates one condom to a 'developing' country for each condom purchased. This paper explores these three cases of 'compassionate consumerism', and asks what they can tell us about the ideological content of this increasingly pervasive form of development financing, in which the consumer participates in 'development' through the purchase of a specific product. From the perspective of the orthodox Marxist critique of ideology as false consciousness, all three of these campaigns can be accused of obscuring the profound inequalities of the global economy beneath a false representation of equality: in each case there is a one-for-one relation between the product enjoyed and the product donated – a meal; a toilet; a condom. Much of the broader literature on compassionate consumerism critiques it in these terms, accusing it of a disingenuous morality that 'celebrates a culture of global capitalism while sympathising with its victims' (Nikel and Eikenberry 2009: 979), and that constitutes a 'therapeutic discourse of the West, a feel-good factor hiding us from how our privilege is produced' (Sharp *et al* 2010: 1140).² In this paper, I argue that this critique does not go far enough. Compassionate consumerism does not merely conceal relations of global inequality beneath a veneer of ethical concern, or justify them on the basis of the charitable giving of the privileged. Instead, it invites 'us' (the affluent populations of Western consumer societies) to *enjoy* the relations of inequality that it simultaneously stages and disavows.

I develop this argument through an engagement with Slavoj Žižek's critique of ideology, which draws on the work of Jacques Lacan in challenging the orthodox

understanding of ideology as false consciousness. At its deepest level, Žižek argues, ideology functions not as an illusory appearance concealing an external reality, but as a web of social fantasies that structures 'reality' itself in relation to *jouissance* (Žižek 1989: 28, 124-125). *Jouissance* is commonly translated as 'enjoyment'. But it is a much more complex and ambiguous phenomenon than the 'simple pleasures' denoted by our everyday usage of that term. Lacan's understanding of *jouissance* departs from Sigmund Freud's theory of psychosexual development, according to which the libido, or sexual drive, comes to be concentrated in specific erogenous zones during early childhood: In the oral phase, it is focused on the mouth in relation to the mother's breast; in the anal phase it is attached to the pleasure derived from the retention and expulsion of faeces; and in the phallic phase it is shifted to the genitals (Stratton 1996).³ Lacan replaces this biological naturalism with an emphasis on the symbolic and imaginary structuration of enjoyment. For Lacan, the libido is associated with the traumatic Real of *jouissance*. The child is born into a world unstructured by language, and replete with the unmediated *jouissance* of the bodily drives. Through its entry into the symbolic order of language, the child abandons its direct relation to *jouissance*, escaping its overwhelming intensity, but also losing access to its enjoyment. Yet *jouissance* continues to impinge upon the symbolic universe of the subject, with an alien material persistence that is both disturbing and compelling (Braunstein 2003; Declercq 2004).

It is only by appealing to specific fantasies, operating in the Imaginary register, that the subject is able to pacify the traumatic dimension of *jouissance*, and to experience it as enjoyment. In Žižek's words, 'fantasy animates and structures enjoyment, while simultaneously serving as a protective shield against its excess' (Žižek 1997: xxiv). This understanding of fantasy differs from the common-sense usage of the term in two important respects: Fantasies are not dream-like illusions through which we escape from reality, but are central to our organisation of the Imaginary and Symbolic co-ordinates of 'reality' through which we keep the Real at bay (Žižek 1989: 45); And fantasies are not merely 'private affairs', but circulate in the external symbolic order of language and culture (Fink 1995: 12-13; Homer 2005: 85, 126). This social dimension of fantasy is central to its ideological operation. According to Žižek, all social orders are underpinned by the mobilisation and regulation of *jouissance* through the production and circulation of specific social fantasies. However, whereas other societies have attempted to restrict enjoyment

through scarcity and moral sanction, Western consumer capitalism entails ‘a passage from a *society of prohibition* to a *society of commanded enjoyment*’ (Stavrakakis 2007: 246, emphasis in original).⁴ Compassionate consumerism is an integral element of this social order, and its critique must therefore inquire into the ways in which it organises the consumer’s relationship to *jouissance*. From this perspective, the existing critical literature on compassionate consumerism is limited by its understanding of ideology. Though not necessarily Marxist, this literature reproduces the orthodox Marxist understanding of ideology as false consciousness: cause-related marketing and other forms of compassionate consumerism are criticised for projecting a semblance of equality and humanitarian concern onto a reality of inequality and impoverishment, which conceals the individualistic character of consumption while legitimating the exploitative activities of multinational capital (see for example Hawkins 2012: 756; Farrell 2012: 11). This critique is accurate up to a point, but as Žižek explains, ‘The relationship between fantasy and the horror of the Real it conceals is much more ambiguous than it may seem: fantasy conceals the horror, yet at the same time it [invites us to enjoy] what it purports to conceal, its “repressed” point of reference’ (Žižek 1997: 6).

In what follows, I draw on Žižek’s critique of ideology in arguing that compassionate consumerism invites us to participate in a disavowed enjoyment of inequality as its own ‘repressed point of reference’. My argument challenges the understanding of ideology as false consciousness, by revealing the ways in which *jouissance* is mobilised and regulated within this ideological formation. This critique goes beyond Žižek’s own influential work on ethical consumption, which he sees in terms of the inclusion of the act of penance in the sin of consumerism itself (see for example Žižek 2008a: 5, 19). Ironically, Žižek’s critique reproduces the limitations of the broader critical literature on this topic, to the extent that it remains in the register of the ethical/symbolic, and fails to engage with the Real of *jouissance*. This is symptomatic of Žižek’s failure to fully develop the potential of his own theory in his work on global capitalism, in contrast to his more sophisticated work on cinema and popular culture (Sharpe 2004: 198; see also Wilson 2014a, 2014b). In advancing beyond Žižek’s own work on this topic, this paper contributes to an emergent literature that seeks to realise the potential of a Žižekian critique of political economy in the field of development policy and practice (see for example Bohm and Batta

2010; Dean 2008; De Vries 2007; Fletcher 2013; Kapoor 2005, 2013; Kingsbury 2005; Wilson 2014c, 2014d).

The paper is organised around Freud's three infantile stages of psychosexual development, which I relate to the three cases of compassionate consumerism introduced above. The first section addresses Table for Two International, as the oral stage. The second explores Toilet Twinning, as the anal stage. And the third examines Sir Richard's Condoms, as the phallic stage. As already discussed, my understanding of enjoyment is based on (Žižek's reading of) Lacan, rather than Freud. My appeal to Freud's periodization is therefore purely schematic, and the 'stages' should be understood as performative instead of temporal: in each case I show how the enjoyment of the libidinal drive is procured through the *staging* of a specific fantasy, and how this enjoyment is central to the ideological function and appeal of the product. Each of these fantasies is framed in ethical terms, as an act of generosity for someone less fortunate, in which both consumer and beneficiary receive an equivalent good. But this ethical dimension is underwritten by an invitation to enjoy the inequality that is simultaneously staged and disavowed. This invitation is never made explicit: 'In order to be operative, fantasy has to remain 'implicit', it has to maintain a distance towards the explicit symbolic texture sustained by it, and to function as its inherent transgression' (Žižek 1997: 24). Yet it can be read 'between the lines' of each of these campaigns. By demonstrating that compassionate consumerism mobilises a disavowed enjoyment of inequality, I aim to expose the obscenity that underpins its 'ethical' discourse, and to advance our understanding of the relationship between ideology and enjoyment. Ideology does not manipulate our 'natural' pleasures. Instead, it structures our fantasies in order to procure enjoyment from the alien materiality of the bodily drives.

The Oral Stage: Table for Two International

Table for Two International is a social enterprise that aims to address the problems of obesity in the 'developed' world and malnutrition in the 'developing' world by tackling both simultaneously. It serves low calorie meals in its participating restaurants, and sends the calories it has 'saved' to countries in south-east Asia or sub-Saharan Africa in the form of a cash donation, which is used to provide free

school meals for impoverished children. It was launched in 2008, and has been a great success. By 2014 it had served over 50 million meals globally, and had attracted over 630 partnering institutions, including Bank of America, Barclays Capital, Caterpillar, Coca Cola, Goldman Sachs, Panasonic, and Toyota. Table for Two meals are now served in American corporate cafeterias, Norwegian hospitals, Japanese karaoke bars, and at the World Economic Forum in Davos and the annual meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.⁵

From the perspective of orthodox ideology critique, Table for Two can be accused of depoliticizing global inequality by reducing it to an imaginary relationship between the obese and the underweight – a representation that is not only simplistic, but also inaccurate, given that malnutrition and obesity are both problems associated with poverty. Instead of engaging with the causes of poverty and malnutrition, Table for Two offers the easy ethical gesture of ‘healthy options that feel AND taste good!’⁶ And it explicitly promotes itself as a cheap and convenient mechanism for corporations to improve their brand image: ‘With no start-up cost or business disruption, a company or consumer product can partner with TFT to quickly and effectively convey its social responsibility’.⁷ It also has a disciplinary dimension, which ‘helps companies promote healthy eating and... wellness initiatives’⁸ in their corporate cafeterias while providing ‘African’ parents with the incentive of a free school meal to encourage them to show ‘a greater appreciation for the education of their children’.⁹

Table for Two thus provides a quick-fix ethical gesture in the service of multinational capital, which absolves Western consumers of the guilt associated with their privilege. Its ideological dimension, however, is located not only in its explicit appeal to the alleviation of suffering, but also in its implicit invitation to enjoy the relations of inequality that it both stages and disavows. At the level of immediate appearances, Table for Two represents itself in terms of equality. The concept is of a ‘Customer’ and a ‘Recipient’ sharing their meal at the same table, as expressed in the company slogan: ‘At Table for Two, you never eat alone’.¹⁰ Yet closer attention to its promotional literature reveals a consistent focus on the difference between the two meals in terms of quality and price. The Customer is repeatedly told that while their meal costs US\$6.25, only US\$0.25 of this price will be spent on the meal of the Recipient. This difference is graphically represented in various images in the

promotional literature, in which two cartoon figures face each other across a table. In these images, the Customer's meal is consistently much larger than that of the Recipient.¹¹ Attention is also placed on the difference between the content of the two meals. Prospective customers are presented with mouth-watering images of the healthy and delicious menu options to be enjoyed in participating restaurants on 'this side of the table', including 'braised chicken couscous', and 'tofu salad with plum sauce'.¹² Meanwhile, images of 'the other side of the table' depict charred cauldrons being stirred over open fires, and long queues of poor black children clutching their plastic bowls in eager expectation of their humble meal (see for example Table for Two 2013a; 2013c; 2014). In contrast to the exciting menu options on our side of the table, we are told that in Uganda 'the food being served is called "*posho*", made by boiling maize (or corn) flour in water. It is most commonly cooked to a dough-like consistency and eaten with vegetables. Here, it is served as porridge'.¹³

Table for Two thus presents its Customers with an ethical discourse of equality and generosity, while simultaneously inviting them to enjoy the inequality between their meal and that of the Recipients. Crucially, *it is precisely this staging of inequality that makes the Customer's meal enjoyable*. Our common-sense understanding of enjoyment would lead us to believe that Table for Two operates by offering us the natural pleasure of a good meal along with the opportunity to help someone in need. But there is nothing inherently enjoyable about the act of eating – of shoving objects into our mouths and grinding them into a congealed mass before forcing them down our throats. According to Lacanian theory, it is only by framing the oral drive with a specific fantasy that even our 'favourite food' can be enjoyed, as Žižek explains:

Fantasy mediates between the formal symbolic structure and the positivity of the objects we encounter in reality – that is to say, it provides a 'schema' according to which certain positive objects in reality can function as objects of desire... To put it in somewhat simplified terms: fantasy does not mean that when I desire a strawberry cake and cannot get it in reality, I fantasise about eating it; the problem is, rather: *how do I know that I desire a strawberry cake in the first place?* This is what fantasy tells me (Žižek 1997: 7, emphasis in original).

In the case of Table for Two, the fantasy that tells the Customer that he desires his tofu salad with plum sauce is the imagined inequality between this meal and the boiled maize porridge that will be served to the Recipient. Table for Two encourages its participating restaurants to include 'signage' on its walls and tables,

in which this inequality is staged in a variety of ways. Its website provides print-offs and instructions for a variety of 'table tents', which are to be placed on the tables at which people eat their meals. One of these tents stages the gap between the two meals in direct visual terms. On one side of the tent, a healthy white woman smiles radiantly into the camera, while tucking into an exotic gourmet salad. On the other, a ragged brown child crams beans into his mouth with his bare hands.¹⁴ Another table tent presents a graphic representation of the Table for Two concept.¹⁵ The slogan at the top of the tent is a statement of equality and global harmony: 'Order for One. Feed Two. And Help the World Eat Better.' But the cartoon imagery beneath the slogan comprises a complex representation of the inequality between the two meals. The Customer sits upright before a large plate of food, gazing across the table at the Recipient, whose head is bowed submissively above a plate containing a much smaller portion. A pie-chart beneath the table graphically represents the Recipient's miniscule 25 cent slice of the 'pie', in contrast to the massive 6 dollar chunk that the Customer will consume. And while the Recipient 'receives a healthy school lunch', the Customer 'enjoys a healthy meal' (emphasis added). Enjoyment is therefore located entirely on the side of the Customer, and it is only through this staging of an excessive enjoyment at the expense of the 'less fortunate' Recipient that the Customer is able to really enjoy his meal.¹⁶

The company's 2012 annual report includes a particularly explicit staging of this fantasy, in which we are shown a mock-up photograph of the meals on each side of the same table. On 'our' side is a delightfully presented plate of braised chicken couscous, complete with an adventurous medley of tropical fruit and vegetables. On the other side is a loathsome bowl of beans and *posho*, lumped together in an excremental mass, with a fork stuck crudely into it (Table for Two International 2012: 28).¹⁷ It is as if the relationship between the Real and the Imaginary has broken down, and the fantasy of our meal has floated free of its vile materiality, which lies abandoned in the bowl of the unfortunate African child. The juxtaposition recalls Žižek's reading of the scene from Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, in which the protagonist sits down to a meal in an exclusive restaurant, only to find that 'the food on [his] plate is split into its symbolic frame (a colour photo of the course above the plate) and the formless slime of *jouissance* that we actually eat' (Žižek 1997: 63). But whereas in *Brazil* this rupture indicates a moment of symbolic breakdown in the ruling ideology (a terrorist bomb rips through the restaurant shortly afterwards), in

Table for Two this gap is the very foundation on which the ideological structure is sustained. The same gap is staged in a different way in the case of Toilet Twinning, in which a different form of enjoyment contributes to the same ideological formation.

The Anal Stage: Toilet Twinning

Toilet Twinning is a UK-based charity that offers people in Europe and North America the opportunity to ‘twin’ their toilet with a latrine in south-east Asia or sub-Saharan Africa. A donation of £60 to the charity purchases a latrine in one of several countries in these regions, for a family that did not have one previously. In return, the donor receives a certificate, featuring a photograph of the latrine in question, and the name and GPS coordinates of its location. By providing latrines to people who lack them, Toilet Twinning aims to reduce diseases related to hygiene and sanitation, leading to increased productivity and school attendance, and thus ‘helping to flush away poverty’.¹⁸ This slogan represents poverty, not as an integral component of global capitalism, but as an excremental remainder that can be easily disposed of while leaving the system healthy and intact. Like Table for Two, Toilet Twinning thus reduces the causes of poverty to a single material factor, abstracting from the power relations of the global economy that reproduce and intensify existing patterns of inequality and marginalization. Like Table for Two, Toilet Twinning also adopts a paternalistic attitude towards its beneficiaries, implying that the inhabitants of the Third World require toilet training if they are to join the ranks of civilization. We are told, for example, of a family in Bangladesh: ‘Before a pit latrine was installed... the family had many episodes of vomiting and diarrhoea. Since then, the family has been much healthier, as they’ve learned how to use the toilet’.¹⁹ A further ‘success story’ from Ethiopia is worth quoting at length:

“Before we had a toilet, we were not interested in working in the fields, because the smell was pungent and the field was full of excrement’, says Amanuel from Ethiopia... Toilet Twinning funded Ethiopia’s Kale Haywet Church to show the couple how to build a latrine... They also gave them training and advice on keeping their bodies, house, and compound healthy and hygienic, stressing the importance of using soap and clean water. ‘After the toilet was built, our environment became clean and we wanted to work’ says Amanuel, adding ‘Now, we are in the field and get fresh air. We are much healthier. My compound is clean. It makes me want to be productive’” (Toilet Twinning 2013a).

We should pause for a moment to consider what we are being asked to believe here. According to this account, Amanuel and his family were forced to abandon their fields because they had shat all over them. Incapable of formulating a practical response to this situation, they languished in helpless indolence until a missionary church transformed them into healthy and productive workers. The transparent absurdity of this neo-colonial vignette suggests that the ideological content of Toilet Twinning is located at the level of libidinal investment rather than rational argumentation. From a Freudian perspective, the anecdote would seem to evoke a horrified fascination with the excessive anal enjoyment of the African savage, against which an 'anally retentive' fantasy of the cleanliness and order of the West can be defined.²⁰ Strangely enough, Toilet Twinning combines this sublimated enjoyment of the retention of the stool with an appeal to the 'anally expulsive' enjoyment to be found in its release: a favourite activity at Toilet Twinning fundraising events is the disposal of cash donations into an unplumbed toilet (see for example Toilet Twinning 2012). This act recalls Freud's assertion of the symbolic relationship between money and excrement,²¹ while the light-hearted allusion to 'throwing money down the toilet' betrays a disavowed knowledge that this complacent gesture will have little impact on the poverty that it is supposed to be addressing.

These apparent symptoms of a repressed anal eroticism suggest that the libidinal economy of Toilet Twinning might run deeper than mere feel-good gestures, and might offer a disavowed enjoyment that exceeds its scatological jokes and puns. As Žižek (2006: 16-17) has noted, toilets are as imbued with ideology as any other dimension of everyday life. Žižek illustrates this by comparing the designs of British, French, and German toilets, and noting the parallels between the philosophical traditions of each country and the ways in which their toilets encourage us to confront our excrement. In the case of Toilet Twinning, the significant relationship is not between different styles of Western toilet, but between Western toilets in general and the Third World latrines with which they are twinned. The explicit discourse of Toilet Twinning is one of equality – of the one-for-one relationship between 'our' toilet and theirs. But as in the case of Table for Two, this discourse is underwritten by an implicit staging of the differences between them. This is evident in a poster advertising the charity. The poster features a collage of photographs of poor African families stood in front of ramshackle latrines, accompanied by the phrase 'Take Your Pick'.²² The phrase is clearly designed to be read in two ways: 'Which family would

you like to help?', but also 'Which toilet would you like to use?' The implication would seem to be that you would not like to use any of them, and that something must therefore be done to help the families who are forced to do so. But the images are not of the toilets that the families are to be 'saved' from. Instead, they depict the toilets that these families have been given by Toilet Twinning, as an indication of the kind of latrine that the prospective donor can choose to give to others. In other words, the toilet that 'we' are giving 'them' is framed not only as a toilet that will improve their condition, but also as a toilet that we would not want to use ourselves. In the bottom corner of the poster is the Toilet Twinning logo: a cartoon of a white male figure reading a newspaper on a Western toilet. Within an explicit message of salvation and equality, the poster therefore stages the inequality between 'our' toilet and the one that 'they' will receive.

Toilet Twinning thus functions ideologically by framing the anal drive with a disavowed fantasy of inequality, which promises to make the donor's bowel movement enjoyable. This is evident in the various products associated with the charity. As already mentioned, every person who twins their toilet receives a certificate with a picture of their twinned latrine. Crucially, this certificate comes with the explicit instruction to display it in the donor's bathroom.²³ The donor's use of their toilet is thus framed by a visual representation of the difference in quality and sophistication between it and the latrine of their imagined Third World counterpart. Donors can also purchase branded toilet paper, with photographs of a selection of twinned latrines printed on each individual sheet, allowing them to extend their enjoyment of inequality to one of the most intimate rituals of personal hygiene. A set of stickers is also offered.²⁴ Again, these stickers unambiguously stage the difference between the donor's toilet and the twinned latrine. Each sticker includes the phrase 'Welcome to the Toilet Deluxe', and is designed to be applied to a feature of the Western toilet that is missing from (the Western imaginary of) a Third World latrine: 'Door with lock!'; 'Working flush!'; 'A seat!' and so on. One sticker relies on the mere invocation of 'the dark continent' to convey the inequality between the donor's toilet and its twinned latrine: 'My other bog's in Africa!'

The list of businesses that partner with Toilet Twinning includes several manufacturers of up-market toilets and bathroom fittings, such as Thomas Crapper. On its website, Toilet Twinning celebrates this partnership with a further staging of the imagined gap between Western opulence and African squalor, noting that 'The

legendary sanitary-ware company Thomas Crapper has joined [the] global Toilet Twinning movement, linking three of its traditional high-quality loos with three latrines deep in the African bush'.²⁵ Another business partner is Toilet Yoga, an American company that produces books, apps, and other paraphernalia, based on a series of yoga exercises that have been adapted for performance while on the toilet, as a means of facilitating the speedy and pleasurable evacuation of one's bowels. Toilet Yoga donates ten percent of its profits to Toilet Twinning. In doing so it claims to offer purchasers of its products 'the opportunity to connect with others around the world as you share in the joy of relief and satisfaction'.²⁶ This 'tongue-in-cheek' gesture of harmony and egalitarianism is rendered even more disingenuous when we consider that Toilet Yoga is designed to be performed on a Western-style lavatory, and would be impossible for the 'African' squatting gratefully over a hole in the ground in their humble new latrine. Here again, the discourse of equality and the enjoyment of inequality are intertwined. In the words of Toilet Yoga, you 'Walk out feeling great' (quoted in Rognlin 2012).

Toilet Twinning thus provides a complex fantasy space within which its participants can organise their anal *jouissance* to deliver enjoyment, through the staging of the inequality between their sophisticated toilet experience and the imagined horrors of the Third World latrine. This fantasy space can be evoked by imagining the ideal subject of Toilet Twinning, who has bought all its related products and has dutifully followed its instructions: Splayed upon his Western toilet in a contorted yoga pose; surrounded by stickers reminding him of how 'deluxe' his toilet is in relation to the grim latrine of his imagined African counterpart; staring at an image of that very latrine on the certificate lovingly framed and hung upon his toilet door; and with images of a hundred more latrines ready to hand on the toilet paper beside him... at last, the committed Toilet Twinner can really enjoy his shit.

The Phallic Stage: Sir Richard's Condoms

Sir Richard's Condoms is a California-based social enterprise that specialises in 'ethical' condoms. Its luxury condoms are made of 100 percent natural latex rubber, and are vegan and PETA-approved. Furthermore, for every condom that it sells, Sir Richard's Condoms donates one to a 'developing country'. The company aims to address the shortage of condoms in such countries, in order to combat unwanted

pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.²⁷ Its 'one-for-one' structure is identical to Table for Two and Toilet Twinning. Like Toilet Twinning, it adopts a playful and irreverent approach to its subject matter, in which the conditions of poverty and disease that it purports to address are reduced to opportunities for endless double entendre. The company markets its condoms with slogans such as 'A pleasure pack with a purpose'; 'Give back while getting it on'; and 'Doing good never felt better'.²⁸ This angle has proved popular with men's lifestyle websites. *Man of Many*, for example, points out that 'Sir Richard's has made getting laid into a charitable event',²⁹ while *Ethical Johnny* explains that 'Sir Richard's also donate one condom to charity for every one they sell. That's pretty hot in anyone's book'.³⁰

Like Table for Two and Toilet Twinning, Sir Richard's Condoms can be accused of depoliticizing development by promising an easy solution to highly complex socio-economic problems, based on the selective provision of a single material input. As with these other cases, it can also be criticised for replacing social struggle with an ethical gesture, underpinned by the sensual enjoyment of a specific bodily act. But as I have argued in these other cases, the common-sense understanding of the relationship between enjoyment and fantasy has to be reversed in order to grasp the way in which ideology is operating here. We have seen that the enjoyment of eating and defecating is not 'natural', but must be framed by specific fantasies to procure pleasure from the alien materiality of their related drives. In the same way, Lacanian theory insists that there is nothing inherently enjoyable about sex. The *jouissance* of an orgasm is not simply enjoyable 'in itself', but is an overwhelming physical event, which would be traumatic if it remained unmediated by fantasy:

Imagine a hypothetical human infant, isolated from all human society. In the unlikely event of its surviving, the manifestation of the erotic drive in its genitalia can be answered by masturbation. But it would be masturbation without any link to arousing imaginings: a purely physical response devoid of fantasy – perhaps not even a very pleasurable act' (Bailly 2009: 140).

The intensely relational dimension of sex adds a further traumatic element to the raw *jouissance* of the erotic drive. According to Lacan, 'There is no sexual relationship' (quoted in Žižek 1997: 7). We can only engage with each other sexually to the extent that we succeed in mapping our fantasies onto one another, in order to conceal the abyss of the Other's desire: 'Any contact with a real flesh-and-blood other, any sexual pleasure that we find in touching another human being, is not something evident but something inherently traumatic, and can be sustained only

insofar as this other enters the subject's fantasy frame' (Žižek 2006: 51). For these reasons, we should understand Sir Richard's Condoms, not as using sexual enjoyment to sell a charity product, but as using a charity product to provide the fantasy frame within which sexual enjoyment becomes possible.

Sir Richard's Condoms are marketed primarily to white heterosexual men. The marketing strategy promises to incite and sustain the purchaser's desire in the moment of the sexual act, and to arouse desire and provide satisfaction in his prospective female partners. In the words of one men's lifestyle website, 'When you're getting it on, you're probably not thinking of much outside of 'This is awesome'... Now while you're enjoying yourself... you can be thinking of all the good you are doing as well'.³¹ This blasé promise of phallic enjoyment betrays the necessarily phantasmatic dimension of the sexual act. If sex is self-evidently 'awesome', why would the ethical condom consumer need to think about 'all the good he is doing as well'? The erotic necessity of the fantasy frame is also evident in a poster campaign for the company: 'For every condom you purchase, one is donated to a developing country, which makes even bad sex, good sex'.³² The joke addresses sexual anxiety with the reassuring message that the ethical act of the condom's purchase will be sufficient to provide enjoyment, even if the act is not enjoyable 'in itself'. Another advertisement features a classic image of Marlon Brando in a tuxedo, with the caption 'I'm going to use condoms she can't refuse'.³³ This seemingly confident assertion of masculinity invites the male consumer to avoid the traumatic confrontation with the desire of the Other, by promising that the ethical condoms will morally oblige his prospective partner to sleep with him without having to arouse her desire. This message is reinforced by the company's advice to its customers to display their product in the bedroom: 'A 12 pack of Sir Richard's condoms would look great on anyone's nightstand. The design of the box attracts people's eye immediately. So why not have safe sex while donating to a developing country?'³⁴ Here again, the ethical dimension of the condom serves as a prop to mask the absence of a sexual relationship.

At the level of its discursive articulation, Sir Richard's is based on the principle of harmony and equality: we are told that it is a '*buy-one give-one* initiative' and that its founders 'live by the simple motto, '*the power of business can help bring pleasure and health to the global community*'.³⁵ But as in the cases of Table for Two and Toilet Twinning, this message is underwritten by the mobilisation of a disavowed

enjoyment of relations of inequality. Like Table for Two, Sir Richard's Condoms emphasises the difference between the product consumed and the product donated. The consumer can select from a variety of condoms, each of which promises a distinct form of enjoyment, 'including Ultra Thin, Classic Ribbed, Pleasure Dots, and Extra Large'.³⁶ Needless to say, the recipient of the free condom in the 'developing country' is not offered an equivalent choice. Sites are selected on the basis of high rates of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, and beneficiaries receive a basic condom with simple instructions 'in the area's language, so the intended population can easily understand'.³⁷ Like Table for Two and Toilet Twinning, Sir Richard's Condoms therefore includes a disciplinary dimension: 'our' condoms are designed to enhance our enjoyment, while 'their' condoms are designed to control their behaviour. Sir Richard's evokes colonial images of excessive sexual activity in the 'developing countries' in which it operates, such as Haiti, which it claims 'has seen a spike in pregnancies following the 2009 earthquake... of 2391 women in 120 camps, almost 12 percent reported being pregnant' (quoted in Estrella 2012). Such representations depict their subjects 'in stereotypically racialized sexual terms, of being out of control of their sexuality and thus contributing to public health crises' (Richey and Ponte 2011: 96). They also recall the 'simultaneous desire and frustration' of the colonial administrator, who imagines that 'the colonized enjoy access to some hidden kernel of enjoyment' that must be brought under his control if he is to sustain his fantasy of domination (Lane 2002: 194).

This 'simultaneous desire and frustration' is further aroused by Sir Richard's collaboration with Product (RED), in which we are told that 'The worlds of fashion and condoms have finally collided'.³⁸ Product (RED) partners with many of the world's most iconic consumer brands, which donate a percentage of the profits from their (RED) products to the Global Fund to provide medical treatment for sufferers of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. In its promotional campaigns, Product (RED) represents Africa as the site of an excessive sexual enjoyment. In the words of its co-founder Bono, 'Africa is sexy, and people need to know that' (quoted in Richey and Ponte 2011: 184). Within the imaginary of Western consumer capitalism, the 'sexiness' of Africa lies in the enduring colonial trope of 'the dark continent' as 'erotically powerful... visceral and compelling... untamed, unknowable and evil' (Jarosz 1992: 107). As such, 'Africa' holds the symbolic position of the Lacanian

Thing: 'the material leftover, the materialization of the terrible, impossible *jouissance*... a kind of coagulated remnant of liquid *jouissance*... and as such an object that simultaneously attracts and repels us' (Žižek 1989: 71, 180). This threatening and alluring presence is further eroticised by its association with AIDS, given that 'much of the mythology surrounding African AIDS has been based on stereotypical neo-colonial depictions of the sexual savage' (Richey and Ponte 2008: 72). The twin invocation of 'Africa' and 'AIDS' thus evokes an excessive and horrifying *jouissance*, which Product (RED) domesticates in the framing its own products as objects of desire.³⁹ Sir Richard's (RED) condoms inform the consumer that '5% of net proceeds are donated to help eliminate AIDS in Africa'.⁴⁰ This donation infuses the brand with a surplus enjoyment derived from its symbolic association with Africa and AIDS, while contributing to its staging of the difference between 'our' healthy and desirable enjoyment and the unbearable *jouissance* of the abject Third World Other. Sir Richard's Condoms thus offer the compassionate consumers of Western societies a complex 'fantasy screen which enables [them] to sustain the Real of the sexual act' (Žižek 1997: 234).

Conclusion: the Desire of the Other

'What precedes fantasy is not reality but a hole in reality... what defines a 'world' is primarily not its positive features, but the way its structure relates to its own inherent point of impossibility' (Žižek 2008b: xiv-xv, emphasis in original).

This paper has argued that compassionate consumerism operates ideologically through the production of specific fantasies that mobilise and regulate the Real of the bodily drives. The appeal of its charitable gestures lies not only in compliance with the ethical injunction to help those less fortunate than ourselves, but also in a disavowed enjoyment of relations of inequality between 'us' and 'them'. In the cases of Table for Two, Toilet Twinning, and Sir Richard's Condoms, I have shown how the libidinal economy of compassionate consumerism procures enjoyment through the production of fantasies that stage these relations of inequality 'between the lines' of an imaginary ethic of egalitarian harmony. In all three cases, this libidinal economy underpins a post-political consensus between businesses, charities, and lifestyle choices that legitimates existing relations of global inequality, and that reduces highly

complex problems of poverty and marginalization to simple issues to be resolved by the purchase of a single input. As such, it contributes to an immense ideological system that functions to guarantee the expanded reproduction of capital through an uneven geographical dialectic of ever-increasing consumption and never-ending impoverishment. In the words of Product (RED): 'Shop today and eliminate AIDS in Africa. *Shop now.*'⁴¹

This invocation of Africa is a common element of the cases considered here. Despite the fact that all three operate in countries outside sub-Saharan Africa, their promotional material consistently appeals to a colonial fantasy of 'Africa' as the site of an obscene and excessive enjoyment – as the perverted underside of the clean and desirable pleasures of Western consumer capitalism. As Žižek has argued, such fantasies of an alien enjoyment are crucial to sustaining the shared enjoyment that binds a community together (Žižek 1993: 201-205). The horrified fascination with the Other's *jouissance* is embodied in the evocation of African AIDS for Sir Richard's (Red) condoms; in the description of African foods in Table for Two International, and in Toilet Twinning's persistent representation of the uncontrolled defecation of Africans in places including 'fields, streams, rivers, railway lines, canal banks, roadsides, plastic bags, [and] squalid, disease-breeding buckets'.⁴² These depictions of an alien 'African' enjoyment are accompanied in all three cases by a disciplinary logic that reproduces the paternalistic attitude of the colonial administrator: the natives must be toilet trained and instructed in matters of good hygiene and safe sexual intercourse, and if they cannot grasp the value of education then they must be bribed with free school meals. As Achille Mbembe has argued, the underlying premise of such assumptions is that 'We can, through a process of domestication and training, bring the African to where he or she can enjoy a fully human life. In this perspective, Africa is essentially, for us, an object of experimentation' (Mbembe 2001: 2).

Ironically, the infantilisation of the 'African' in each of these cases is done in the name of development interventions that are child-like in their simplicity. The suggestion that global poverty can be meaningfully addressed through the provision of free school meals, the construction of latrines, or the distribution of condoms, based on the individual purchasing decisions of privileged Western consumers, cannot be taken seriously by anyone who pauses to think about it. At one level, of course, *not thinking about it* is precisely the point: critical thought is replaced with an

urgent ethical gesture (Žižek 1997: 24). But the ideology at work here cannot be reduced to the obscuring of actual social relations beneath a veil of charitable giving. The cases I have considered share a 'light-hearted' and 'ironic' attitude, and those participating in them would probably acknowledge that they are not really going to change anything through their actions. As Žižek has argued in another context, 'All this, of course, is meant in an ironic way; it is 'not to be taken literally' – *however it is precisely through such self-distance that postmodern 'cynical' ideology functions*' (Žižek 1997: 81, emphasis in original). According to Žižek, the consumers of 'advanced' capitalist societies are no longer trapped in false consciousness, but are fully aware of the lies and absurdities that they are participating in. Crucially, however, *they are still in ideology*. The ideological moment has simply shifted from the level of belief to the level of practice (Žižek 1989: 28-35). It is not necessary for the compassionate consumer to consciously believe that they are really transforming the world through their trivial actions. It is enough for these actions to be performed. Through its colonization of the mundane rituals of everyday life – eating, shitting, fucking – compassionate consumerism functions ideologically as an embodied dimension of lived experience without anyone having to actually believe in it.⁴³

But despite adopting a 'knowing' and 'ironic' attitude, the ethical consumer remains unaware of his disavowed enjoyment of relations of inequality. '*Inequality*' is the repressed signifier of compassionate consumerism. It is never once uttered by any of the social enterprises discussed in this paper. Yet they all circle ceaselessly around it, tracing its outline, and implicitly staging the gap between Western opulence and generosity and Third World poverty and helplessness, as the fantasy that sustains the Western consumer's enjoyment of their products.⁴⁴ As I have shown in all three cases, compassionate consumerism does not operate by harnessing our 'natural' pleasures in the service of the greater good. Instead, it stages specific fantasies of inequality that procure enjoyment through their framing of the alien materiality of the bodily drives. This disavowed enjoyment of inequality is dependent upon the imagined gaze of a Third World beneficiary. 'At Table for Two, you never eat alone', but are invited to think of yourself eating in the company of the African child you are feeding. Similarly, with Toilet Twinning, you never shit alone: the certificate of the twinned latrine in your bathroom reminds you that you are 'sharing the joy of relief and satisfaction'. Crucially, however, this intersubjectivity must remain at the level of the Imaginary for it to be operative, because *the desire of*

the Other is precisely the 'point of impossibility' that compassionate consumerism is structured to exclude. There is no African child at the other side of the Table for Two. And the Toilet Twinning certificates all depict empty latrines. The ethical consumer is alone in his *jouissance*. The imagined proximity of the helpless and grateful beneficiary is only a prop to sustain his enjoyment of inequality, and to *exclude* the abyssal gaze of the Third World Other in the fullness of her Real presence. This gaze expresses a desire that cannot be satisfied by a meal, a condom, or a latrine. It is a desire for *equality* that threatens the privilege on which compassionate consumerism is premised, and that must be excluded before it can be articulated as a political *demand*.

At its deepest level, Žižek argues, 'fantasy is the screen by means of which the subject avoids the radical opening of the enigma of the Other's desire' (Žižek 1997: 41). The psychoanalytic critique of ideology must therefore aim to 'generate the tension necessary to separate the subject from its fantasized relation to the Other's desire' (Fink 1995: xiii). In the case of compassionate consumerism, all that is required to shatter this fantasy-space is to *Realise* the imaginary position of the Other within it: A Davos delegate enjoys his braised chicken couscous, smiling charitably across the table at an African child eating a bowl of cornmeal porridge. A minor celebrity enjoys her deluxe Western toilet, grinning generously at a peasant woman squatting over a hole in the ground. A hipster couple enjoy their luxury vegan condom, leering philanthropically at an AIDS sufferer and his partner using their last free prophylactic. Suddenly the compassionate consumer sees himself through the eyes of the Other, and glimpses the same expression that Freud detected on the face of the Rat Man when confronted with the Real of his *jouissance*. It is an expression of '*horror at pleasure of his own of which he himself was unaware*'.⁴⁵

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Notes

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² Other examples of this literature include Lewis 2010; Richey and Ponte 2008, 2011; Shamir 2008; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Youde 2009.

³ The infant then enters a period of 'latency', after which the young adult organises the final, 'genital' phase of his or her psychosexual development. According to Freud, childhood experiences can cause adults to remain fixated on earlier stages of development, the enjoyment of which is repressed, leading to pleasure being taken in apparently unrelated activities, such as the meticulous organisation of the 'anal retentive.'

⁴ The advertising industry deliberately intervenes in the unconscious in the mobilisation of enjoyment. Indeed, it was Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays, who revolutionised the industry by shifting its focus from an appeal to rational utility maximisation towards the mobilisation of unconscious libidinal urges, in line with his uncle's theories (Stavrakakis 2007: 231).

⁵ Information compiled from various sources on the Table for Two website: <http://www.tablefor2.org/home> (accessed 26/04/2014).

⁶ Table for Two, 'Brochure', available at <http://www.tablefor2.org/documentdownload.axd?documentresourceid=40> (accessed 03/05/2014)

⁷ Table for Two, 'Impact', available at <http://www.tablefor2.org/impact> (accessed 16/04/2014)

⁸ Table for Two, 'Brochure', available at <http://www.tablefor2.org/documentdownload.axd?documentresourceid=40> (accessed 03/05/2014)

⁹ Table for Two, 'Impact', available at <http://www.tablefor2.org/impact> (accessed 16/04/2014). As is often the case in such campaigns, 'Africa' is repeatedly appealed to as an instantly recognisable symbol of poverty and abjection. In its 2012 Annual Report, for example, the Executive Director of Table for Two describes a visit to Ethiopia: 'I remember looking across a barren landscape with not a single tree... There were times in the past when children would sit in class, staring out into space from hunger. These same children greeted me in the courtyard with an Ethiopian dance' (Masa Kogure, in Table for Two International 2012: 2).

¹⁰ Table for Two, 'Brochure', available at <http://www.tablefor2.org/documentdownload.axd?documentresourceid=40> (accessed 03/05/2014)

¹¹ See for example Table for Two, 'Brochure', available at <http://www.tablefor2.org/documentdownload.axd?documentresourceid=40> (accessed 03/05/2014)

¹² Table for Two, 'Brochure', available at <http://www.tablefor2.org/documentdownload.axd?documentresourceid=40> (accessed 03/05/2014); Table for Two, 'Implementation Guideline (restaurants)', available at <http://www.tablefor2.org/documentdownload.axd?documentresourceid=26> (accessed 03/05/2014)

¹³ 'New Footage from Ruhiira, Uganda!' available at <http://tablefor2usa.wordpress.com/2011/06/30/new-footage-from-ruhiira-uganda/> (accessed 03/05/2014). Other meals depicted 'on their side of the table' include 'a daily porridge (called Sosoma) and at least two eggs a week' for children in Rwanda (Table for Two 2013b), and 'bukulti' in Ethiopia, 'consisting of germinated beans and chickpea with fortified vegetable oil and iodized salt. A portion of fruit is added two days a week' (Table for Two 2014).

¹⁴ Table for Two, 'Table Tent 3', available at <http://www.tablefor2.org/documentdownload.axd?documentresourceid=31> (accessed 03/05/2014).

¹⁵ Table for Two, 'Table Tent 1', available at <http://www.tablefor2.org/documentdownload.axd?documentresourceid=38> (accessed 03/05/2014).

¹⁶ Similarly, in its 2012 Annual Report, Table For Two provides us with a fantasy frame in which to enjoy our meal on the basis of the inequality between our affluence and their insecurity: 'For the brief moment that you sit down to your healthy meal, you pause and think about how you are helping a child who worries where his or her next meal will come from. This pause allows us to appreciate what we have...' (Table for Two International 2012: 18).

¹⁷ This description refers to the way in which the bowl of beans and *posho* is represented by Table for Two, and is not a judgement on the food itself, which is widely enjoyed by people across East Africa, where it is structured by very different fantasies.

¹⁸ <http://www.toilettwinning.org/> (accessed 03/05/2014)

¹⁹ Toilet Twinning, 'Bangladesh', available at <http://www.toilettwinning.org/about-our-bogs/bangladesh> (accessed 03/05/2014)

²⁰ This colonial infantilisation of 'Third World' adults is further demonstrated by a report on training programmes offered by Toilet Twinning, which describes a 'defecation walk' at a school in England. Children are led through scenes in which fake excrement has been left next to food, toys, and water sources, in order to encourage them 'to consider the hazards of open defecation'. Similar training is offered to Third World adults: 'When Toilet Twinning gets alongside people in communities overseas where there is no proper sanitation, it invites them to question traditionally held beliefs and customs. There is no need for plastic poo for the defecation walks because there is plenty of the real thing. And flies a-go-go' (Toilet Twinning 2013b).

²¹ In a paper written in 1905 entitled 'Character and Anal Eroticism', Freud notes several 'connections between the complexes of interest in money and defecation', including 'common usage in speech, which calls a person who keeps too careful a hold on his money 'dirty' or 'filthy'', and the fact that 'even according to ancient Babylonian doctrine gold is 'the faeces of hell'' (quoted in Herbert 2002).

²² Toilet Twinning, 'Toilet Twinning A4 Poster', available at <http://www.toilettwinning.org/resources/> (accessed 03/05/2014)

²³ This instruction is repeated throughout the promotional literature for Toilet Twinning. Its full page advertisement in National Geographic features a photograph of a latrine in 'Ethiopia, Africa', and instructs the reader to 'Twin your toilet and you'll receive a certificate to display in your loo' (Toilet Twinning 2014).

²⁴ Toilet Twinning, 'Stickers', available at <http://www.toilettwinning.org/resources/> (accessed 03/05/2014).

²⁵ Toilet Twinning, 'Thomas Crapper', available at <http://www.toilettwinning.org/fun-stuff/loominaries/corporations/thomas-crapper/> (accessed 02/04/2014)

²⁶ Toilet Yoga, reproduced in Holy Kaw!, 'Meditation on Evacuation: Toilet Yoga', available at <http://holykaw.alltop.com/meditation-on-evacuation-toilet-yoga> (accessed 03/05/2014)

²⁷ This 'ethical' gesture is central to the company's business strategy. In the words of its CEO, 'We're going to give up a little bit of profitability to do this and because of that it opens up a larger market, we believe, for us' (Jim Moscou, CEO of Sir Richard's Condoms, quoted in Strauss 2013)

²⁸ Sir Richard's Condoms, '(RED) Condoms' available at <http://www.sirrichards.com/red> (accessed 03/04/2014)

²⁹ Man of Many, 'Sir Richard's Condoms', available at <http://manofmany.com/lifestyle/sir-richards-condoms/> (accessed 05/04/2014)

³⁰ Ethical Johnny, 'Sir Richards condoms – hot or not?', available at <http://manofmany.com/lifestyle/sir-richards-condoms/> (accessed 05/04/2014)

³¹ Cool Material, 'Sir Richard's Condom Company', available at <http://coolmaterial.com/gear/sir-richards-condom-company/> (accessed 05/04/2014)

³² This poster can be viewed at http://carphotos.cardomain.com/story_images/1/2214/4841/5534920002_large.jpg (accessed 03/05/2014)

³³ This image can be viewed at <http://www.behance.net/gallery/Sir-Richards-Condom-Ads/12236529> (accessed 03/05/2014)

³⁴ Quoted in Style Forensics, 'Sir Richard's Condom Company', <http://styleforensics.com/2014/01/08/sir-richards-condom-company/> (accessed 03/05/2014)

³⁵ About.com Contraception, 'Sir Richard's Company', <http://contraception.about.com/od/malecondom/p/Sir-Richards-Company.htm> (accessed 03/05/2014)

³⁶ Sir Richard's Condoms, '(RED) Condoms', <http://www.sirrichards.com/red> (accessed 03/04/2014)

³⁷ About.com Contraception, 'Sir Richard's Company', available at <http://contraception.about.com/od/malecondom/p/Sir-Richards-Company.htm> (accessed 03/05/2014)

³⁸ Style Forensics, 'Sir Richard's Condom Company', <http://styleforensics.com/2014/01/08/sir-richards-condom-company/> (accessed 05/04/2014)

³⁹ The example of Gap (RED) is interesting in this regard. The range includes a series of red T-shirts printed with single words, many of which frame the wearer as the object of desire in

the eyes of another: 'Desi(RED)', 'Treasu(RED)', 'Admi(RED)', 'Ador(RED)', and so on. Product (RED) thus frames its products as what Lacan called *objet petit a*: 'the object of fantasy... that something in me more than myself on account of which I perceive myself as worthy of the Other's desire' (Žižek 1997: 9).

⁴⁰ An image of the packet can be seen at <http://www.sirrichards.com/media/catalog/product/cache/1/image/650x/040ec09b1e35df139433887a97daa66f/1/2/12-back-red.jpg> (accessed 03/05/2014)

⁴¹ This is from a Gap (RED) advertisement, which can be viewed at http://www.shoppersresource.com/consumer/images/gap_red.jpg (accessed 03/05/2014). In the advertisement, the phrase 'shop now' is underlined – hence the use of italics here.

⁴² Toilet Twinning, 'PowerPoint Presentation', available at <http://www.toilettwinning.org/resources/> (accessed 03/05/2014)

⁴³ It is through the daily performance of such acts that the compassionate consumer constructs his or her imagined identity as such, 'as a crystallization or sedimentation of ideal images, tantamount to a fixed, reified object' (Fink 1997: 36). This composite image of a low-calorie meal eating, Toilet Yoga performing, vegan condom using, affluent-but-caring Western consumer is instantly recognisable as a subspecies of the so-called creative class of bourgeois bohemian hipsters, which I am tempted to classify as the 'new age neoliberal'.

⁴⁴ Žižek argues that 'Whenever we have a symbolic structure it is structured around a certain void, it implies the foreclosure of a certain master-signifier' (Žižek 1989: 73). Fink similarly describes the Real as 'a centre of gravity around which the symbolic order is condemned to circle without ever being able to hit it'. The chain of signifiers 'is condemned to ceaselessly write something else or say something which keeps avoiding this point, as though this point were the truth of everything the chain produces as it beats around the bush. One could go as far as to say that what, of necessity, remains outside the chain *causes* what is inside' (Fink 1995: 28, 27).

⁴⁵ Sigmund Freud, quoted in Fink 1995: 60, emphasis in original.

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