

DID SOMEBODY SAY TOTALITARIANISM?

Five Interventions
in the (Mis)Use
of a Notion

**THE
ESSENTIAL
ŽIŽEK**

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK was born in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 1949, and is a professor at the European Graduate School, International Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities at the University of London, and a senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology, University of Ljubljana. He has been a visiting professor at Columbia University and the University of Paris VIII, as well as at a number of other prestigious institutions on both sides of the Atlantic.

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As well as providing original insights into psychoanalysis, philosophy and radical political theory, he has, through employing his extraordinary scholarship to the examination of popular entertainment, established himself as a witty and deeply moral cultural critic. He has been the subject of two feature-length documentaries, *Slavoj Žižek: The Reality of the Virtual* (2004) and *Žižek!* (2005). He also presented and wrote the three-part British TV documentary *A Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006).

His compelling, charismatic presence and puckish sense of the absurd have prompted the press to dub him 'the Elvis of cultural theory' and an 'intellectual rock star'. However, these jocular monikers belie a seriousness of purpose that has been nothing short of startling in an era marked by despondency and disengagement on the Left. More than an academic theorist, Žižek has the gravitas and drive of a breed once thought extinct: the revolutionary. He has made philosophy relevant again for a whole generation of politically committed readers.

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‘... and what are the destitute (totalitarians) for in a poetic time?’

Notes

Introduction: On Ideological Antioxidants

which, while providing the impetuous reader with a preview of the book's contents, explains why 'totalitarianism' is and was, from its very inception, a stopgap

On the 'Celestial Seasonings' green tea packet there is a short explanation of its benefits: 'Green tea is a natural source of antioxidants, which neutralize harmful molecules in the body known as free radicals. By taming free radicals, antioxidants help the body maintain its natural good health.' *Mutatis mutandis*, is not the notion of totalitarianism one of the main ideological antioxidants, whose function throughout its career was to tame free radicals, and thus to help the social body to maintain its politico-ideological good health?

No less than social life itself, today's self-professed 'radical' academia is permeated by unwritten rules and prohibitions – although such rules are never explicitly stated, disobedience can have dire consequences. One of these unwritten rules concerns the unquestioned ubiquity of the need to 'contextualize' or 'situate' one's position: the easiest way to score points automatically in a debate is to claim that the opponent's position is not properly 'situated' in a historical context: 'You talk about women – *which* women? There is no woman as such, so does not your generalized talk about women, in its apparent and encompassing neutrality, privilege certain specific figures of femininity and preclude others?

Why is such radical historicizing false, despite the obvious moment of truth it contains? Because today's (late capitalist global market) social reality itself is dominated by what Marx referred to as the power of 'real abstraction': the circulation of Capital is the force of radical 'deterritorialization' (to use Deleuze's term) which, in its very functioning, actively ignores specific conditions and cannot be 'rooted' in them. It is no longer, as in the standard ideology, the universality that occludes the twist of its partiality, of its privileging a particular content; rather, it is the very attempt to locate particular roots that ideologically occludes the social reality of the reign of 'real abstraction'.

Another of these rules, in the last decade, was the elevation of Hannah Arendt into an untouchable authority, a point of transference. Until two decades ago, Leftist radicals dismissed her as the perpetrator of the notion of 'totalitarianism', the key weapon of the West in the Cold War ideological struggle: if, at a Cultural Studies colloquium in the 1970s, one was asked innocently, 'Is your line of argumentation not similar to that of Arendt?', there was a sure sign that one was in deep trouble. Today, however, one is expected to treat her with respect – even academics whose basic orientation might seem to push them up against Arendt (psychoanalysts like Julia Kristeva, on account of Arendt's dismissal of psychoanalytic theory; Frankfurt School followers like Richard Bernstein, on account of Arendt's excessive animosity towards Adorno) engage in the impossible task of reconciling her with their fundamental theoretical commitment. This elevation of Arendt is perhaps the clearest sign of the theoretical defeat of the Left – of how the Left has accepted the basic co-ordinates of liberal democracy ('democracy' versus 'totalitarianism', etc.), and is now trying to redefine its (op)position *within* this space. The first thing to do, therefore, is fearlessly to violate the liberal taboos: *So what* if one is accused of being 'anti-democratic', 'totalitarian'....

Throughout its entire career, 'totalitarianism' was an ideological notion that sustained the

complex operation of ‘taming free radicals’, of guaranteeing the liberal-democratic hegemony by dismissing the Leftist critique of liberal democracy as the obverse, the ‘twin’, of the Rightist Fascist dictatorship. And it is useless to try to redeem ‘totalitarianism’ through division into subcategories (emphasizing the difference between the Fascist and the Communist variety) at the moment one accepts the notion of ‘totalitarianism’, one is firmly located within the liberal-democratic horizon.¹ The contention of this book is thus that the notion of ‘totalitarianism’, far from being an effective theoretical concept, is a kind of *stopgap*: instead of enabling us to think, forcing us to acquire a new insight into the historical reality it describes, it relieves us of the duty to think, or even actively *prevents* us from thinking.

Today, reference to the ‘totalitarian’ threat sustains a kind of unwritten *Denkverbot* (prohibition against thinking) similar to the infamous *Berufsverbot* (prohibition against being employed by any state institution) in late 1960s Germany – the moment one shows the slightest inclination to engage in political projects that aim seriously to challenge the existing order, the answer is immediately: ‘Benevolent as it is, this will necessarily end in a new Gulag!’ The ‘return to ethics’ in today’s political philosophy shamefully exploits the horrors of the Gulag or Holocaust as the ultimate bogey for blackmailing us into renouncing all serious radical engagement. In this way, conformist liberal scoundrels can find hypocritical satisfaction in their defence of the existing order: they know there is corruption, exploitation, and so on, but every attempt to change things is denounced as ethically dangerous and unacceptable, resuscitating the ghost of ‘totalitarianism’.

This book does not aim to provide yet another systematic exposition of the history of the notion of totalitarianism. Rather, it tries to follow the dialectical movement from one particular content of the universal notion to another, the movement constitutive of what Hegel called ‘concrete universality’. In *Why Do Women Write More Letters Than They Post* Darian Leader claims that when a woman says to a man ‘I love you’, she ultimately always means one of the following three things:

- *I have a lover* (as in ‘Yes, I had an affair with him, but that doesn’t mean anything, I still really love you!’);
- *I am bored with you* (as in ‘Yes, yes, I love you, everything is OK, just, please, leave me alone a bit, I want some peace!’);
- and, finally, a simple *I want sex!*²

These three meanings are interconnected as terms in the chain of reasoning: ‘I got a lover because I was bored with you, so if you want me to love you, give me better sex!’ Along the same lines, when – today, after the demise of the standard Cold War liberal rantings against Stalinism as the direct and necessary outcome of Marxism – theorists use the term ‘totalitarianism’ approvingly, they are taking one of five stances:

- ‘Totalitarianism’ is *modernism going awry*: it fills the gap opened up by the very modernist dissolution of all traditional organic social links. Traditionalist conservatives and postmodernists share this notion – the difference between them is more a matter of emphasis: for some, ‘totalitarianism’ is the *necessary* outcome of the modernist Enlightenment, inscribed in its very notion; while for others, it is more a threat which

consummates itself when the Enlightenment does not fully realize its potential.

- The Holocaust as the ultimate, absolute crime, which cannot be analysed in terms of concrete political analysis, since such an approach already trivializes it.
- The neo-liberal claim that any radical emancipatory political project necessarily ends up in some version of totalitarian domination and control. Liberalism thus succeeds in bringing together new ethnic fundamentalisms *and* (whatever remains of) radical Left emancipatory projects, as if the two were somehow ‘deeply related’, two sides of the same coin, both aiming at ‘total control’ ... (this combination is the new form of the old liberal notion that Fascism and Communism are two forms of the same ‘totalitarian’ degeneration of democracy).
- Today’s postmodern claim (foreshadowed already in Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic Enlightenment*) that political totalitarianism is grounded in phallo-logocentric metaphysical closure: the only way to forestall totalitarian consequences is to insist on the radical gap, opening, displacement, that can never be contained within any closed ontological edifice.
- Finally, in a recent cognitivist backlash, postmodern Cultural Studies themselves are denounced as ‘totalitarian’, as the last island on which the Stalinist logic of unconditional obeying the Party line survived, impervious to any rational argumentation.

What is interesting to note here is how even the predominant ‘critical’ philosophical response to hegemonic liberalism, that of the postmodern deconstructionist Left, relies on the category of ‘totalitarianism’. The deconstructionist political doxa goes something like this: the social field of structural undecidability, it is marked by an irreducible gap or lack, forever condemned to non-identity with itself; and ‘totalitarianism’ is, at its most elementary, the closure of this undecidability – does not the postmodern Left here reformulate, in its own jargon, the old liberal wisdom of Isaiah Berlin, Robert Conquest & Co.? ‘Totalitarianism’ is thus elevated to the level of ontological confusion; it is conceived as a kind of Kantian paralogism of pure political reason, an inevitable ‘transcendental illusion’ which occurs whenever a positive political order is directly, in an illegitimate short circuit, identified with the impossible Otherness of Justice – *any* stance that does not endorse the mantra of contingency/displacement/finitude is dismissed as potentially ‘totalitarian’.

The philosophical notion of *totality* and the political notion of *totalitarianism* tend to overlap here, in a line that stretches from Karl Popper to Jean-François Lyotard: the Hegelian totality of Reason is perceived as the ultimate totalitarian edifice in philosophy. Rationality as such gets a bad press today: New Agers condemn it as Cartesian mechanistic/discursive ‘left-brain’ thinking; feminists reject it as the male-based stance which implicitly relies on its opposition to feminine emotionality; for postmodernists, rationality involves the metaphysical claim to ‘objectivity’, which obliterates the power and discourse mechanisms determining what counts as ‘rational’ and ‘objective’.... It is against this pseudo-Leftist irrationalism that one should recall the subtitle of Lacan’s *écrit* ‘The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious’: *ou la raison depuis Freud* – or Reason After Freud.

In 1991, after the anti-Ceaușescu coup staged by the *nomenklatura* itself, the Romanian secret police apparatus, of course, remained fully operative, pursuing its business as usual.

However, the effort of the secret police to project a new, kinder, image of itself, in step with the new 'democratic' times, resulted in some uncanny episodes. An American friend of mine who was in Bucharest on a Fulbright scholarship at the time, called home a week after his arrival and told his girlfriend that he was now in a poor but friendly country, where people were pleasant and eager to learn. After he hung up, the phone immediately rang; he picked up the receiver, and a voice told him in slightly awkward English that this was the secret police officer whose duty it was to listen to his phone conversation, and he wanted to thank him for the nice things he had said about Romania – he wished him a pleasant stay and said goodbye.

This book is dedicated to that anonymous Romanian secret police operative.

1 The Myth and Its Vicissitudes

in which the reader will be surprised to learn that myth is a secondary phenomenon which follows social comedy; as a bonus, he will also get to know the secret of the emergence of a beautiful woman

Back in the late 1960s and 1970s, in the heyday of Lacanian Marxism, a lot of Lacan's French followers were attracted by his anti-Americanism, discernible especially in his dismissal of the ego-psychological turn of psychoanalysis as the ideological expression of the 'American way of life'. Although these (mostly young Maoist) followers perceived Lacan's anti-Americanism as a sign of his 'anticapitalism', it is more appropriate to discern in it the traces of a standard conservative theme: in today's bourgeois, commercialized, 'Americanized' society, authentic tragedy is no longer possible; this is why great conservative writers like Claudel try to resuscitate the notion of tragedy in order to put dignity back into human existence.... It is precisely here, when Lacan endeavours to speak in favour of the last vestiges of an old authenticity which is barely discernible in today's superficial universe, that his words sound like (and *are*) a heap of ideological platitudes. However, although Lacan's anti-Americanism represents what is most 'false' and ideological in his work, there is nonetheless a 'rational kernel' in this ideological theme: the advent of modernism, in effect, undermines the traditional notion of tragedy and the concomitant notion of the mythical Fate which governs human destiny.

Hamlet before Oedipus

When we talk about myths in psychoanalysis, we are in fact talking about *one* myth, the Oedipus myth – all the other Freudian myths (the myth of the primordial father, Freud's version of the Moses myth) are variations of it, albeit *necessary* ones. With the Hamlet narrative, however, things become complicated. The standard, pre-Lacanian, 'naïve' psychoanalytic reading of *Hamlet*, of course, focuses on Hamlet's incestuous desire for his mother. Hamlet's shock at his father's death is thus explained as the traumatic impact of the fulfilment of an unconscious violent desire (in this case, for the father to die) has on the subject; the spectre of the dead father which appears to Hamlet is the projection of Hamlet's own guilt about his death-wish; his hatred of Claudius is an effect of narcissistic rivalry; Claudius, instead of Hamlet himself, got his mother; his disgust for Ophelia and womankind in general expresses his revulsion at sex in its suffocating incestuous modality, which arises from the lack of the paternal interdiction/sanction.... So, according to this standard reading, Hamlet as a modernized version of Oedipus bears witness to the strengthening of the Oedipal prohibition of incest in the passage from Antiquity to modernity: in the case of Oedipus, we are still dealing with incest; while in *Hamlet*, the incestuous wish is repressed and displaced. And it seems that the very designation of Hamlet as an obsessional neurotic points in the same direction: in contrast to hysteria, which is found throughout all (at least Western) history

obsessional neurosis is a distinctly *modern* phenomenon.

While one should not underestimate the strength of such a robust heroic Freudian reading of *Hamlet* as the modernized version of the Oedipus myth, the problem is how to harmonize it with the fact that although – in the Goetheian lineage – Hamlet may appear to be the model of the modern (introverted, brooding, indecisive) intellectual, the myth of Hamlet is *older* than that of Oedipus. The elementary skeleton of the narrative (the son avenges his father against the father's evil brother, who murdered him and took over his throne; the son survives the illegitimate rule of his uncle by playing the fool and making 'crazy' but truthful remarks) is a universal myth found everywhere, from old Nordic cultures through Ancient Egypt up to Iran and Polynesia. Furthermore, there is enough evidence to sustain the conclusion that the ultimate reference of this narrative concerns not family traumas, but celestial events: the ultimate 'meaning' of the Hamlet myth is the movement of stars and their precession – that is to say, the Hamlet myth threads into the family narrative highly articulated astronomical observations....³ However, this solution, convincing as it may appear, also immediately becomes entangled in its own impasse: the movement of stars is meaningless in itself, simply a fact of nature with no libidinal resonance, so why did people translate it metaphorize it in the guise of precisely such a family narrative, which generates tremendous libidinal involvement? In other words, the question of 'what means what?' is by no means decided by this reading: does the Hamlet narrative 'mean' stars, or do stars 'mean' Hamlet's narrative – that is to say, did the Ancients use their astronomical knowledge in order to encode insights into the fundamental libidinal deadlocks of the human race?

Nevertheless, one thing is clear: temporally and logically, the Hamlet narrative is *earlier* than the Oedipal myth. We are dealing here with the mechanism of the unconscious displacement well known to Freud: something that is logically *earlier* is perceptible (or becomes so, or inscribes itself in the texture) only as a later, secondary *distortion* of some allegedly 'original' narrative. That is the often misrecognized elementary matrix of the 'dream-work', which involves the distinction between the latent dream-thought and the unconscious desire articulated in the dream: in the dream-work, the latent thought is ciphered/displaced, but it is through this very displacement that the *other*, truly unconscious thought articulates itself.

So, in the case of Oedipus and Hamlet, instead of the linear/historicist reading of *Hamlet* as a secondary distortion of the Oedipal text, the Oedipus myth is (as Hegel had already claimed) the founding myth of Western Greek civilization (the suicidal leap of the Sphinx representing the disintegration of the old pre-Greek universe); and it is in Hamlet's 'distortion' of the Oedipus myth that its repressed content articulates itself – the proof being the fact that the Hamlet matrix is found everywhere in pre-Classic mythology, up to Ancient Egypt itself, whose spiritual defeat is signalled by the suicidal leap of the Sphinx. (And incidentally, what if the same goes even for Christianity: is it not Freud's thesis that the murder of God in the New Testament brings to light the 'disavowed' trauma of the Old Testament?) What, then, is the pre-Oedipal 'secret' of Hamlet? One should *retain* the insight that Oedipus is a proper 'myth', and that the Hamlet narrative is its 'modernizing' dislocation/corruption; the lesson is that the Oedipal 'myth' – and, perhaps, mythic 'naivete' itself – serves to obfuscate some prohibited *knowledge*, ultimately the knowledge about the father's obscenity.

How, then, are act and knowledge related in a tragic constellation? The basic opposition between Oedipus and Hamlet: Oedipus accomplishes the act (of killing his father) because he doesn't know what he is doing; in contrast to Oedipus, Hamlet knows and, for that very reason, is unable to go on to the act (of taking revenge for his father's death). Furthermore, as Lacan emphasizes, it is not only Hamlet who knows, it is also Hamlet's father who mysteriously *knows* that he is dead and even how he died, in contrast to the father in the Freudian dream, who doesn't know that he is dead – and it is this excessive knowledge that accounts for the minimal melodramatic *flair* of *Hamlet*. That is to say: in contrast to tragedy which is based on some misrecognition or ignorance, melodrama always involves some unexpected and excessive knowledge possessed not by the hero but by his or her other, the knowledge imparted to the hero at the very end, in the final melodramatic reversal.

Recall the eminently melodramatic final reversal of Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, in which the husband who for many years has harboured an illicit passionate love for Countess Olenska, learns that his young wife *knew* about his secret passion all the time. Perhaps this would also offer a way of redeeming the unfortunate *Bridges of Madison County*: if, at the end of the film, the dying Francesca were to learn that her allegedly simple-minded, down-to-earth husband knew all the time about his wife's brief passionate affair with the *National Geographic* photographer, and how much this meant to her, but kept silent about it in order not to hurt her. That is the enigma of knowledge: how is it possible that the whole psychic economy of a situation changes radically not when the hero learns something (some long-repressed secret) directly, but when he *gets to know that the other* (whom he thought of as ignorant) *also knew it all the time*, and just pretended not to know, to keep up appearances – there anything more humiliating than the situation of a husband who, after a long secret love affair, learns all of a sudden that his wife knew about it all the time, but kept silent out of politeness or – even worse – out of love for him?

In *Terms of Endearment*, Debra Winger, dying of cancer in a hospital bed, tells her son (who actively despises her for being abandoned by his father, her husband) that she is well aware of how much he really loves her – she knows that at some time in the future, after her death he will acknowledge this to himself; at that moment, he will feel guilty for his past hatred of his mother, so she is now letting him know that she is pardoning him in advance, and thus delivering him of the future burden of guilt ... this manipulation of the future guilt feeling is melodrama at its best; its very gesture of pardon makes the son guilty in advance. (There is in this attribution of guilt, in this imposition of a symbolic debt, through the very act of exoneration, lies the highest trick of Christianity.)

There is, however, a *third* formula to be added to this couple of 'He doesn't know it, although he does it' and 'He knows it, and therefore cannot do it': 'He knows very well what he is doing; none the less, he does it.' If the first formula covers the traditional hero and the second the early modern hero, the last, combining knowledge *and* act in an ambiguous way, accounts for the late modern – contemporary – hero. That is to say: this third formula allows for two thoroughly opposed readings – rather like Hegelian speculative judgement, in which the lowest and the highest coincide: on the one hand, 'He knows very well what he is doing, none the less, he does it' is the clearest expression of the cynical attitude of moral depravity: 'Yes, I am a scum, cheating and lying, so what? That's life!'; on the other hand, the same stance of 'He knows very well what he is doing; none the less, he does it' can also express the

most radical opposite of cynicism – the tragic awareness that although what I am about to do will have catastrophic consequences for my well-being and for the well-being of my nearest and dearest, none the less I simply *have* to do it, because of the inexorable ethical injunction. (Recall the paradigmatic attitude of the *noir* hero: he is fully aware that if he follows the call of the *femme fatale*, only doom awaits him, that what he is letting himself in for is a double trap, that the woman will surely betray him; none the less, he cannot resist, and does it all the same....)

This split is not only the split between the domain of the ‘pathological’ – of well-being, pleasure, profit ... and the ethical injunction: it can also be the split between the moral norm I usually follow and the unconditional injunction I feel obliged to obey – like the dilemma of Abraham who ‘knows very well what killing one’s own son means’, and none the less resolves to do it; or the Christian who is ready to commit a terrible sin (to sacrifice his eternal soul) for the higher goal of God’s glory. In short, the properly modern post- or meta-tragic situation occurs when a higher necessity compels me to betray the very ethical substance of my being.

The birth of beauty out of the abject

Of course, in our time, there is an abundance of catastrophic events whose horror probably surpasses that of the past – is it still possible, however, to call Auschwitz or the Stalinist camps a ‘tragedy’? Is not something more radical at work in the position of the victim of the Stalinist show trial, or of the Holocaust? Does not the term ‘tragedy’, at least in its classic use, still imply the logic of Fate, which is rendered ridiculous apropos of the Holocaust? To say that the annihilation of the Jews obeyed a hidden necessity of Fate is already to gild it. Lacan endeavours to unravel this deadlock in his stunning reading of Paul Claudel’s Coûfontaine trilogy.⁴

One of the clichés of psychoanalysis is that three generations are needed to produce a good psychotic; the starting point of Lacan’s analysis of the Coûfontaine trilogy is that three generations are also needed to bring about a (beautiful) object of desire. The feature shared by the Oedipus family myth and the Coûfontaine family saga is that, in both cases, the succession of three generations obeys the matrix of (1) the flawed symbolic exchange; (2) the position of a reject; and (3) the emergence of the sublime object of desire. The ‘original sin’ – the grandparental breach of the symbolic pact (Oedipus’ parents cast him out; Sygne de Coûfontaine renounces her true love and marries the despised Turelure) gives birth to an undesired outcast (Oedipus himself; Louis de Coûfontaine) whose offspring is a girl of breathtaking beauty, the ultimate object of desire (Antigone; the blind Pensée de Coûfontaine). The proof that we are dealing here with a deep structural necessity is provided by a third example which, precisely because it comes from the somewhat ‘lower’ culture of *France profonde*, displays this matrix in its pure, distilled form: Marcel Pagnol’s two novels *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources*, including their two cinema versions (first the two films by Pagnol himself, which precede his own novelization; then the big 1987 production by Claude Berri).

Here, then, is the outline of the story. In Provence in the early 1920s, the hunchback Jean de Florette, an educated city man (tax collector) who has learned about farming from books, suddenly inherits a little land from his mother Florette. So, together with his devoted wife

an ex-opera singer, and Manon, his delicate little daughter, Jean plans to settle on the farm and breed rabbits, not the usual local produce. Jean is a utopian figure, combining deep religious feeling and a yearning to live authentically in the country with the desire to explore the land in a scientific way. The idea of living an authentic country life as opposed to the corrupted city life is clearly denounced here as a city myth: the countrymen themselves, on the contrary, are, self-absorbed and reticent – the basic ethical rule of the community disrupted by Jean's arrival is *on ne s'occupe pas des affaires des autres*....

Misfortunes come thick and fast: Jean's neighbours, the prosperous old bachelor César and his simple-minded nephew Ugolin, the last of the mighty Soubeyran family, once the local potentates, have other plans for this piece of land – they want to grow carnations on it and sell them in the big city nearby. So the two hatch a careful plot to destroy Jean – César, who concocts it, is not simply evil and greedy; he justifies his acts on the basis of his values centred around the continuity of land and family, so that in his eyes, his plot is fully justified by the need to defend the land against the foreign intruder. Before Jean's arrival, César and Ugolin block up the spring on his land with cement. So when there is no rain, and the plants shrivel and the rabbits start to die, Jean and his family haul water from a faraway spring from morning till night to save their crop, unaware that there is an abundant spring under their very noses. This is the traumatic scene: the poor family taking the long walk and carrying water like mules, to the utmost point of exhaustion, while the entire village community is watching them, well aware that there is a spring on Jean's own land – but nobody budges to tell him so, since *on ne s'occupe pas des affaires des autres*.... Jean's will and persistence are unrelenting, and he finally dies in an explosion (during a desperate attempt to dig a well to reach water); his wife is forced to sell the farm to César and Ugolin, and move with Manon to a lonely cave in a nearby mountain; César and Ugolin, of course, soon 'discover' the spring and start to grow their carnations.

The second part takes place a decade later: Manon is now a beautiful shepherd girl, a kind of local fairy living mysteriously in the mountain and avoiding the company of the villagers. Two men have a love interest in her: the new young village schoolteacher and the unfortunate Ugolin, who falls passionately in love with her after he secretly observes her singing and dancing naked in the wilderness, and even puts birds and rabbits in her traps to help her. However, Manon, who even as a little girl was distrustful of Ugolin's apparent friendship with her family, makes two fateful discoveries: she not only learns that the spring on her father's land was blocked up by César and Ugolin, and that the whole village knew about it; while exploring underground mountain caves, she also accidentally discovers the source of water for the whole village. So now it's her turn to plot and execute her revenge: she cuts off the village water supply.

Things now start to move much faster. Ugolin half-admits his and César's crime against the dead Jean in public, and pathetically offers to marry Manon and take care of her to redeem himself for his past wrongdoings; after she publicly rebuffs him, Ugolin hangs himself, leaving all his fortune and land to Manon. Desperate for water, the villagers summon a specialist in water sources, who gives them a lot of complicated theories but no water; so the local priest suggests a procession around the main village well. In his sermon, he clearly hints that the stoppage of water is a punishment for a collective crime. Finally, the schoolteacher, whose love for Manon is reciprocated by her, and who also suspects that Manon knows the

secret of the sudden lack of water and is herself its cause – convinces her to pardon the villagers and restore the water. The two enter the cave together and unblock the spring so that the next day, during the procession and prayers, water starts to flow again. The teacher and Manon marry, and she gives birth to a lovely child with no hunchback, while the aged César learns from an old acquaintance, a blind woman spending her last days in the village, the secret of Jean's deformity.

Jean's mother Florette, a local beauty, was César's great love. After a night of love together, César left for Algeria to do his military service; Florette was too proud to acknowledge her love for him. Soon afterwards, however, she wrote to him in Algeria explaining that she was pregnant with his child and that she loved him – but unfortunately the letter never reached César. Florette, thinking that César did not want her, desperately tried to get rid of the fetus inside her, throwing herself down the stairs, and so on, but to no avail. So she went to the nearby village, quickly seduced the local blacksmith, married him, and gave birth to Jean, who was born a hunchback owing to her attempts to get rid of him. César thus learns that he plotted against and caused the death of his own only son, for whom he was longing so deeply in order to continue the family line. His time has come, and he decides to die: he writes a long letter to Manon, explaining to her that he is her grandfather, leaving her the entire Soubeyran fortune and asking her for forgiveness. Then he lies down and calmly dies.

The entire scope of the tragedy is thus encompassed by a letter (Florette's letter to César) which arrives at its destination too late, after the long detour of two further generations: the tragedy is set in motion when the letter fails to reach César in Algeria, and it reaches its conclusion when, finally, the letter does reach him, forcing him to confront the horrible fact that he has unwittingly destroyed his only son.

As in the Oedipus myth and in Claudel's Coûfontaine trilogy, the beautiful object (Manon) emerges as the offspring of an abject, of the unwanted child (Jean's hump, like Oedipus' limp) is literally the sign which registers this parental rejection of the offspring; Jean was born a hunchback because his unfortunate mother tried to terminate her pregnancy by throwing herself down stairs and steep paths). One is tempted to read this succession of three generations through the lenses of the inverted matrix of the three stages of logical time:⁵

- in the first generation, catastrophic events are set in motion by the fateful act of *fall* / *conclusion* (the alienating contract);
- what then follows is the 'time of understanding' (the time needed to grasp that, with the contract, I *lost everything*, that I was reduced to an abject – in short, what occurs here is the *separation* from the big Other, that is, I am deprived of my footing in the symbolic order);
- finally, there is the 'moment de voir' – to see what? The beautiful object, of course.⁶

The passage from the second moment to the third is equivalent to the passage from the repulsive *phobic* object to the elevated *fetish* – that is to say, we are dealing with the reversal of the subjective attitude with regard to the same object – not the usual reversal of 'treasure into shit', but the opposite reversal of 'shit into treasure', of the worthless abject into the precious gem. What lurks in the background is the mystery of the emergence of the beautiful (feminine) object: first, there is the 'original sin', the alienating act of exchange ('a letter

Florette's letter to César – did not reach its addressee', the love encounter failed, the couple was not reunited). This original catastrophe (César's blindness to the depth of Florette's love for him) is given its 'objective correlative' in the heinous deformity of their offspring; what then follows is the magic reversal of deformity into breathtaking beauty (Jean's daughter Manon).⁷ In Pagnol, the tragedy is *Oedipus reversed*: in contrast to Oedipus, the son who unwittingly kills his own father, César unwittingly destroys his son. César is not simply evil; he accomplishes his harmful acts by sticking to the traditional ethics of unconditional attachment to one's locale, of protecting it against foreign intruders at any price. And the community itself, in passively observing the prolonged suffering of Jean's family, is also simply following its rudimentary ethical motto: *on ne s'occupe pas des affaires des autres*, and its counterpart, *quand on parle, on parle trop*.

Each of the three central male figures is therefore tragic in his own way. César comes to realize that the enemy whom he destroyed was his own illegitimate son – a pure case of the closed loop of the tragic experience, in which the arrow destined to hit one's enemy returns to its dispatcher. At this moment, the circle of Fate is accomplished, and all that remains is for the subject to die, as old César does with dignity. Perhaps the most tragic figure in the story is Ugolin, who undoubtedly loves Manon more deeply than the rather superficial and flirtatious teacher Bertrand, and is driven to suicide by his guilt and unhappy love. Finally, there is a tragic aspect to Jean himself – when the clouds bringing the precious rain to the dry land pass over his farm, he turns to heaven and cries in a (slightly ridiculous) outburst of impotent rage: 'I'm a hunchback. It's difficult to be a hunchback. Is there nobody up there?' Jean stands for the paternal figure who follows his project to the end, relying on weather statistics, irrespective of the suffering his exploit causes to his family.⁸ What constitutes his tragedy is the utter *meaninglessness* of his effort: he mobilizes his entire family to carry water from a distant well for long hours, day after day, unaware that there is a rich source of water right on his land.

From comedy to tragedy

The standard relationship between the community and the tragic individual is thus reversed: in contrast to the classical form of tragedy, in which the individual offends the community, in Pagnol it is the community which offends the individual. In classical tragedy, the guilt is on the side of the transgressive hero-individual who is then pardoned and reintegrated into the community; while here, the basic guilt is that of the community itself: it lies not in what they did, but in the fact that they did *not* do anything – in the discrepancy between their knowledge and their action: they all knew about the spring, yet none of them was ready simply to tell the unfortunate Jean the truth about it.

If the paradigmatic case of classical tragedy is that of a hero who commits an act the consequences of which are beyond the scope of his knowledge – who unwittingly commits a crime by violating the sacred order of his community – in Pagnol, the hero is the community itself (the collective of villagers) – not with regard to what they did but with regard to *what they knew and did not do*: all they had to do, instead of just silently witnessing the family labour, was to impart their knowledge to Jean. Consequently, the tragic insight of Manon occurs when she gets to know not what others (the community) did, but what they *knew*. For

this reason, César is right when he retorts to the villagers who, towards the end of the story, start all of a sudden to reproach him for stopping up the spring that even if it is true that he and Ugolin did it, they all share in the complicity, since they all knew about this act... The guilt of the community is embodied in the fantasmatic image of the dead Jean, who appears as a spectre haunting the villagers, reproaching them for not telling him the truth about the spring. Manon, the mute child who cannot be deceived, sees and discerns everything although she can only silently observe the superhuman effort and fall of her father: her clumsy childish drawings of the whole family carrying water are the unbearable reminder of the community.

The opposition between Manon and the village community is, of course, in Lacanian terms the opposition between J and A, between the substance of *jouissance* and the big Other. Manon is 'of the sources', she stands for the Real of the Life Source (not only sexuality, but Life as such), which is why she is able to cut off the flow of life energy (water) and thus cause the waning of the community – when the community expel her, they unknowingly drain their own Life Substance. Once it is cut off from its substance, the community appears in its truth, as the impotent prattle of the symbolic machinery: the satirical high point of Pagnol's novel is undoubtedly the villagers' meeting with the representative of the state water authority, who masks his ignorance with an abundant pseudo-scientific oration about the possible causes of the drying up of the village fountain. One cannot fail to recall here the empty comic tittle-tattle of Freud's three doctor colleagues in the second part of his dream about Irma's injection, who enumerate the possible excuses which exonerate Freud of any guilt in his treatment of Irma. And, significantly, it is the local priest who intervenes as mediator, pointing the way to reconciliation by shifting the focus from scientific knowledge to subjective truth by reminding the villagers of their shared guilt. No wonder, then, that the final reconciliation is sealed by the marriage between Manon and the young teacher, with Manon's pregnancy attesting to the re-established harmony between the Real of the Life Substance and the symbolic 'big Other'. Is Manon not similar to Junta in Leni Riefenstahl's early masterpiece *The Blue Light* – the beautiful outcast, disenfranchised by the closed village community, who has access to the mystery of Life?

This intervention by the priest also displays the elementary mechanism of the emergence of ideological meaning: at the very point where causal explanation (of the state water supply specialist as to the causes of the blockage of the spring) fails, this void is filled by meaning that is to say, the priest changes the register and suggests that the members of the community consider the stoppage of water not simply as resulting from natural processes (changing pressures deep in the ground, drought, the underground water changing its course and finding a new river bed) but as signalling some ethical failure of the community (he himself draws the parallel with Thebes, where the cause of the plague was incest in the royal family). The 'miracle' then occurs in the midst of the religious procession of people praying for water: all of a sudden, the water starts to flow again (since Manon has unblocked the source). Are we dealing here with a simple deception? Where is the true religious faith? The priest is fully aware of what is at stake; his message to Manon is: 'I know that the miracle will not really be a miracle, that water will start to flow again because you will unblock the source – however true miracles are not external, but internal. The true miracle is that someone like you – who because of the wrongs done to your family, has every right to hate our community – gather

the strength to change her mind and accomplish a kind gesture. The true miracle is this inner conversion, by means of which the individual breaks out of the circle of revenge and accomplishes the act of pardon.' The true miracle resides in the retroactive undoing [*Ungeschehenmachen*] of crime and guilt.

What we encounter here is the ideological *je sais bien, mais quand même* at its purest although there is no physical miracle, there is none the less a miracle on another, 'deeper' 'inner' level. One can see here clearly the problematic intermediate position of Pagnol. On the one hand, he seems to rely on the premodern notion of the correspondence between external, material events and the 'inner' truth, the correspondence which found its ultimate expression in the myth of the Fisher King (the 'waste land' as the expression of the King's ethical failure); on the other hand, he reflexively takes into account the illusory character of this correspondence.

This intermediate position casts a shadow over what purports to be the closed mythical universe of tragic fate, in which all the dispersed threads find a common resolution in the ending. Such an epic tragedy seems wholly out of place today, in an epoch when, on the screen, events have to explode all the time to maintain our span of attention, the only admissible dialogue consists of more and more clever or funny one-liners, and the only acceptable overall plot is more and more a conspiracy narrative. In Pagnol, however, things move at a majestic pace, following their inexorable path over three generations, as in a Greek tragedy; there is no suspense, all motives are laid out in advance, and it is perfectly clear what is going to happen – but for that very reason, the horror which occurs when it actually happens is even more sinister.

However, is it not that, instead of relating an actual mythical experience, Pagnol provides a nostalgic *retro* version of such an experience? A close look at the three consecutive forms in which Pagnol's story was presented to the public (first his two films, then his later novelization of his own films, and finally Claude Berri's two films) reveals the disturbing fact that *the beginning is the least mythical*: it is only in Berri's 'postmodern' nostalgic version that we get the full contours of the closed universe of mythical fate. While it retains the traces of the 'authentic' French provincial community life in which people's acts follow old, quasi-pagan religious patterns, Pagnol's version also brings out the theatricality and comicalness of the action; Berri's two films, although they are shot more 'realistically', emphasize destiny and melodramatic excess (significantly, the main musical leitmotiv of the films is based on Verdi's *La forza del destino*).⁹ So, paradoxically, the closed ritualized premodern community implies theatrical comicalness and irony, while the modern 'realistic' rendering involves fate and melodramatic excess.¹⁰

Here again, do we not encounter the paradox of *Hamlet*: the 'mythical' form of the narrative content is not the starting point, but the end result of a complex process of displacements and condensations? In the three consecutive versions of Pagnol's masterpiece we thus observe the gradual ossification of the social comedy of mores into myth – in the reversal of the 'natural' order, the movement is *from comedy to tragedy*. The lesson is that it is not enough to say that today's myths are faked, unauthentic *retro* artefacts: the notion of faked imitation of the myth should be radicalized into the notion that *myth as such is a fake*.

The myth of postmodernity

This brings us back to the possibility of a mythical structure in modernity, when even philosophy itself becomes reflexive in two consecutive stages. First, with the Kantian critical turn, it loses its 'innocence' and incorporates the questioning of *its own* conditions of possibility. Then, with the 'postmodern' turn, philosophizing becomes 'experimental', no longer providing unconditional answers, but playing with different 'models', combining different approaches which take their own failure into account in advance – all we can properly formulate is the question, the enigma, while answers are simply failed attempts to fill in the gap of this enigma.

Perhaps the best illustration of the way this reflexivity affects our everyday experience of subjectivity is the universalized status of addiction: today, one can be 'addicted' to anything not only to alcohol or drugs, but also to food, smoking, sex, work... This universalization of addiction signifies the radical uncertainty of any subjective position today: there are no firm predetermined patterns, everything has to be (re)negotiated again and again. And this goes even as far as suicide. Albert Camus, in his otherwise hopelessly outdated *The Myth of Sisyphus*, is right to emphasize that suicide is the only real philosophical problem – *when*, however, does it become so? Only in modern reflexive society, when life itself no longer 'goes by itself', as a 'non-marked' feature (to use the term developed by Roman Jakobson) but is 'marked', has to be especially motivated (which is why euthanasia is becoming acceptable). Prior to modernity, suicide was simply a sign of some pathological malfunction of despair, misery. With reflexivization, however, suicide becomes an *existential* act, the outcome of a pure decision, irreducible to objective suffering or psychic pathology. This is the other side of Émile Durkheim's reduction of suicide to a social fact that can be quantified and predicted: the two moves, the objectivization/quantification of suicide and its transformation into a pure existential act, are strictly correlative.¹¹

How is myth affected by this process? It is perhaps more than a mere temporal coincidence that, at precisely the time when Sergei Eisenstein was developing (and practising) his notion of 'intellectual montage', of juxtaposing heterogeneous fragments in order to generate not a narrative continuum but a new meaning, T.S. Eliot did something quite similar in *The Waste Land*, juxtaposing fragments from different domains of common everyday life with fragments from old myths and works of art. *The Waste Land's* achievement was successfully to posit the 'objective correlative' of the metaphysical feeling/atmosphere of universal decline, of the disintegration of the world, the twilight of civilization, fragments of banal everyday middle class experience. These common fragments (pseudo-intellectual chitchat, pub conversation, the impression of a river, etc.) are suddenly 'transubstantiated' into the expression of metaphysical malaise at a state which resembles Heidegger's *das Man*.¹² Here Eliot is the opposite of Wagner, who told his story of the *Twilight of the Gods* through larger-than-life mythical figures: Eliot discovered that the same basic story can be told much more effectively through fragments from the most common bourgeois everyday life.

Perhaps this marks the shift from late Romanticism to modernism: late Romantics still thought that one must tell the big story of global decline in terms of larger-than-life heroic narrative, while modernism asserted the metaphysical potential of the most common and vulgar bits of our daily experience – and perhaps, postmodernism inverts modernism: one returns to big mythical themes, but they are deprived of their cosmic resonance and treated

like common fragments to be manipulated; in short, in modernism we have fragments of common daily life expressing global metaphysical vision, while in postmodernism we have larger-than-life figures treated as fragments of common life.

I have played for some time with the idea of writing a *Cliff Notes* volume (a brief plot summary, description of characters, author's biography, etc.) on a nonexistent 'classic' text. This playing with an absent centre is still modernism, like Cindy Sherman's famous stills from non-existent black-and-white films. Postmodernism proper would have been the opposite procedure: that of imagining the whole narrative behind the painting (or photo), then writing a play or shooting a film about it. Something along these lines did happen recently in New York: Lynn Rosen's play *Nighthawks*, which opened on Off-Broadway in February 2000, offered precisely what its title promises: a series of scenes which bring to life four Edward Hopper paintings (*Summertime*, *Conference at Night*, *Sunlight in a Cafeteria* and, of course, *Nighthawks* itself), trying to imagine what conversation went on in the depicted scenes, and what brought these people together: anomie, isolation, failed encounters, desperate dreams.... In its breathtaking simplicity, even vulgarity, this is postmodernism at its purest. This is not the same as the Spanish film from a couple of years ago which tried to re-create the circumstances of the production of Velázquez's *Las Meninas*: here, it is not the circumstances of Hopper's process of painting but the fictional reality of the scene depicted in the painting that is elaborated and 'brought to life'. The point is not to render the genesis of a masterpiece, but naively to accept its content as depicting some social reality, and then to offer a wider slice of this reality.

This brings us to what is perhaps the archetypal postmodern procedure: that of filling in the gaps in classic texts. If modernism uses the myth as the interpretative frame of reference for its contemporary narrative, postmodernism directly rewrites the myth itself by filling in its gaps. In his short story 'You Must Remember This', Robert Coover describes in great detail, and in X-rated terms, what went on during the fateful three-and-a-half second fade-in of *Casablanca*, which follows the passionate embrace between Bergman and Bogart.¹³ And today's reader-writer not exposed to the same temptation in Kleist's most famous short story 'The Marquise of O—', whose very first paragraph is shocking:

In M—, an important town in northern Italy, the widowed Marquise of O—, a lady of unblemished reputation and the mother of several well-brought-up children, inserted the following announcement in the newspapers: that she had, without knowledge of the cause, come to find herself in a certain situation; that she would like the father of the child she was expecting to disclose his identity to her; and that she was resolved, out of consideration for her family, to marry him.¹⁴

The obscene shock of these lines relies on the heroine's overidentification with the moral code: she takes her obedience to sexual propriety to its ridiculous extreme. The heroine has no remembrance whatsoever of the sexual intercourse: there are no neurotic symptoms that would indicate its repression (since, as we know from Lacan, repression and the return of the repressed are one and the same thing); more than simply repressed, the fact of the intercourse is foreclosed. In *Men in Black*, the secret agents fighting the aliens have a small pencil-like flash machine which they use when non-authorized people encounter aliens: the

flash this machine at them, and their memory of what happened to them in the past few minutes is completely erased (in order to spare them traumatic aftershocks). Is not something of the same order at work in the mechanism of *Verwerfung*? Is *Verwerfung* not a similar psychic machine? And is it not as if the Marquise of O— was submitted to a similar obliterating flash? This radical obliteration of the sexual intercourse is indicated by the famous dash in the middle of the sentence describing her ordeal: during the storming by Russian forces of a citadel commanded by her father, she has fallen into the hands of some ruffianly enemy troops who attempt to rape her; she is then rescued from them by the young Russian officer Count F— who, after saving her,

offered her his arm and led her into the other wing of the palace which the flames had not yet reached and where, having already been stricken speechless by her ordeal, she now collapsed in a dead faint. Then – the officer instructed the Marquise's frightened servant who presently arrived, to send for a doctor; he assured them that she would soon recover and replaced his hat and returned to the fighting.¹⁵

The dash between 'Then' and 'the officer', of course, plays exactly the same role as the three-and-a-half second shot of the airport tower at night, which follows Ilsa and Rick passionately embracing, and then dissolves back to a shot from outside the window of Rick's room. What happened (as is indicated already in this description by the curious detail of the Count 'replac[ing] his hat') is that the Count yielded to the sudden temptation offered by the Marquise's fainting fit. What follows the search through newspaper announcements is that the Count appears and offers to marry the Marquise, although she does not recognize in him her rapist, only her saviour. Later in the story, when his role in her pregnancy becomes clear, she still insists on marrying him, against the will of her parents, ready to recognize her saviour as the figure of her rapist – just as Hegel, at the end of his 'Preface' to *The Philosophy of Right* following Luther, advises us to recognize the Rose (of hope and salvation) in the bothersome Cross of the present. The message of the story is the 'truth' of patriarchal society, expressed in the Hegelian speculative judgement that posits the identity of the rapist with the saviour whose function is to protect the woman from the rape – or, again in Hegelese, asserts how, appearing to fighting an external force, the Subject struggles with itself, its own unrecognized Substance.

Where Kleist is already 'postmodern' is in his procedure of the ultra-orthodox subversion of the law through the very overidentification with it. The exemplary case, of course, is the long novella *Michael Kohlhaas*, based on real sixteenth-century events: after suffering a minor injustice (two of his horses are maltreated by a local nobleman, the corrupt Baron von Tronka), Kohlhaas, a respected Saxon horse-dealer, starts an obstinate pursuit of justice. When, due to corruption, he fails in the courts, he takes the law into his own hands, organizes an armed gang and attacks and burns a series of castles and towns in which he suspects Tronka has taken refuge – all the time, he insists that he wants nothing more than the rectification of his minor wrong.

In a paradigmatic dialectical reversal, Kohlhaas's very unconditional sticking to the rule of his *law-preserving violence*, turns into *law-making violence* (to use Walter Benjamin's classic opposition¹⁶): here the standard sequence is reversed – it is not the law-founding violence

which, once its rule is established, becomes law-preserving; on the contrary, it is the very law-preserving violence which, brought to its extreme, turns into the violent founding of new law. Once he becomes convinced that the very existing legal structure is corrupt, unable to stick to its own rules, he sends the symbolic register in an almost paranoiac direction, proclaiming his intention to create a new 'world government' as the representative of Archangel Michael, and calling all good Christians to support his cause. (Although this story was written in 1810, a couple of years after Hegel's *Phenomenology*, it actually seems as if Kohlhaas, much more than Schiller's heroes, is the paradigmatic case of the Hegelian 'law of the heart and the frenzy of self-conceit'.)

At the end of the story, a strange reconciliation is achieved: Kohlhaas is sentenced to death, yet he accepts it calmly, because he has achieved his apparently trifling goal: the two horses are returned to him in full health and glory, and Baron von Tronka is also sentenced to two years in prison.... This story of an excessive pursuit of justice by a 'stickler for the rules' with no understanding of the unwritten rules which qualify the application of the law, ends in crime: in a kind of legal equivalent to the so-called butterfly effect, a trifling trespass sets in motion the course of events which inflicts disproportionate damage on the whole country. No wonder Ernst Bloch characterized Kohlhaas as 'the Immanuel Kant of jurisprudence'.¹⁷

The James Bond films provide a symmetrical reversal of Kleist's two texts. On the one hand, most of them close with the same strangely utopian scene of the sexual act which is at the same time intimate and a shared collective experience: while Bond, finally alone and united with the woman, makes love to her, the couple's activity is observed (listened to or registered in some other – say, digital – way) by the big Other, embodied here by Bond's professional community (M, Miss Money Penny, Q, etc.); in the latest Bond film, Apted's *The World Is Not Enough* (1999), this act is nicely rendered as the warm blot on the satellite image – Q's replacement (John Cleese) discreetly turns off the computer screen, preventing others from satisfying their curiosity. Bond, who otherwise serves as the big Other (the ideologically presupposed witness) for the Big Criminal, is here himself in need of the big Other: it is only these witnesses who 'make his sexual activity exist'. (Such a utopia of the sexual act, acknowledged by the big Other of the community is evoked even by Adorno in *Minimale Moralia*: Adorno reads the proverbial scene of the rich man who displays his young mistress in public, although he does not have sex with her, as a fantasy of fully emancipated sex.¹⁸) On the other hand, this very ending opens up a gap that calls for a postmodern rewriting. That is to say: the enigma of James Bond films is what happens in between, between this final bliss and the beginning of the *next* film, in which Bond is again called on by M to accomplish his mission? Perhaps *this* would be the postmodernist Bond film, a kind of boring existentialist drama of a relationship in decay: Bond gradually getting bored with his girl, small fights erupting; the girl wants marriage, while Bond is against it, and so on, so that Bond is finally relieved when the call from M enables him to escape a relationship that was becoming more and more suffocating.

Yet another way to conceptualize the opposition between modernism and postmodernism would be via the tension between myth and the 'narrative of a real story'. The paradigmatic modernist gesture is to stage a common everyday event in such a way that some mythic narrative resonates in it (the other obvious example, apart from *The Waste Land*, is, of course, Joyce's *Ulysses*); in popular literature, the same case can be made for the best Sherlock

Holmes stories – they all contain clear mythical resonances.¹⁹ The postmodernist gesture would be the exact opposite: to stage the mythical narrative itself as an ordinary occurrence. So – either one recognizes, beneath what purports to be a straight realist narrative, the contours of a mythical frame (in recent cinema, the exemplary case is Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter*, with its references to the Pied Piper myth of the seducer of children), or one reads myth itself as a 'real story'.

This postmodern procedure, however, is very risky – Peter Schaffer's play *Equus* (later filmed with Richard Burton) provides what is perhaps the supreme example of the falsity I am trying to denounce. The narrator of the drama, an elderly cynical psychiatrist who is interested in Ancient Greek myths, takes in treatment a young man who, in a desperate *passage à l'acte* by means of which he tried to resolve the deadlock of his libidinal situation, is blinded with a sickle four highly prized racehorses he was taking care of as part of his job. The great moment of insight and truth occurs when the psychiatrist becomes aware of how, while he indulges in aseptic intellectual admiration of old Greek myths, there is before him in every eyes a person whose present living experience enacts the compulsive sacrificial rituals that are the stuff of great myths – fascinated by old myths, he was blind to the actuality of the person whose everyday life *is* the sacred mythical experience. Why is this allegedly authentic insight false? Is it because it involves a kind of retroactive perspective illusion? Because there is never is the full experience of the myth in the present – myth, a mythical framework, always by definition, emerges as a memory, as the retroactive reconstitution of something which, when it 'actually took place', was simply a common vulgar play of passions?

The actual reasons for the falsity of *Equus* are to be found elsewhere. *Equus* is a variation on the old topic of how, in our 'dry', alienated, 'disenchanted' contemporary lives, we have lost the full magic of the mythical experience of life. One of the fundamental features of artistic modernism proper, however, is to discern in the very process of modernization, in its violence, the return of barbaric, pre-civilized mythic patterns – in his reaction to the 1928 London performance of *The Rite of Spring*, T.S. Eliot praised Stravinsky's music for the way it metamorphosed 'the rhythm of the steppes into the scream of the motor horn, the rattle of machinery, the grind of wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway, and other barbaric cries of modern life'.²⁰ In short, the underlying notion here is not that of the clash or gap between ancient rituals and myths and disenchanted modern behaviour, but the continuity between primitive barbarism and modernity. The idea is that industrial modernization, the chaotic crowd movements in big modern cities, and so on, are these features that symbolize the disintegration of the 'civilized' aristocratic or early bourgeois universe of refined customs, the dissolution of traditional links, harbinger a violent mythopoeic potential of their own – as is well known, the celebration of the return of barbaric mythopoeic violence in the process of modernization was one of the main themes of conservative modernism in the arts. The rise of the chaotic modern city crowds was perceived as undermining the hegemony of early bourgeois liberal-rationalist individualism in favour of a renewed barbaric religious aestheticization of social life – new sacred mass rituals are asserting themselves, enacting new forms of barbaric sacrifice.

The standard Marxist attitude to this process is double: on the one hand, it is easy for a Marxist to interpret this 'barbarization' as inherent to the capitalist violent dissolution of traditional 'civilized' organic links – the idea that, because of the disintegrative, social

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