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"Why does the other want to destroy me?": The Face of the Other, the Death Drive, and *Surplus Jouissance* in the Time of Late Capitalism

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I am of the opinion that there has been a break, and this is to be located at the advent of secular capitalist modernity... The crucial shift rendering modernity incommensurable with its own past consists in the emergence of the subject's self-understanding as "free." This consciousness is not unrelated... to the concomitant, overarching shift, on which this work focuses, from spirit to value.¹

[I]f there is one thing that gives a completely different sense to what Hegel proposed, it is what Freud had nevertheless discovered..., which he characterized... as the death [drive], namely the radical character of repetition, this repetition that insists, and which characterizes the psychic reality, if there is such a thing, of this being inscribed in language.²

I.

In the conclusion of her first book, *surplus: Spinoza, Lacan*, A. Kiarina Kordela poses the ambitious and timely question of whether an ethics of psychoanalysis could be formulated as a ground for political action that stresses the inherent contradictions and inequities of late capitalism. Her answer is yes, with a little help from Spinoza and Marx, and in this book she reveals how Lacanian ethics contrasts with ethical theories grounded in an "encounter with the neighbor," insofar as in such ethical models "(e.g., notably, Levinas's face-to-face encounter with the other)... a third term is missing, which would take into account the death drive."³ This means of formulating the distinction between ethical systems in itself demands admiration for its logical

elegance and clarity. But since Kordela's concern here is ultimately to formulate the political implications of this distinction in terms of the structure of "the gaze" under modern capitalism — as soon as capitalism turns surplus into "surplus-enjoyment," as she puts it, the subject is compelled to embody its "internal opposition" objectively in the gaze — she is led to evade (implicitly in the conclusion and explicitly in a lengthy footnote) the direct correlation implied here, albeit a fascinating but initially disconcerting one, *between ethics and the death drive*.⁴ Although this correlation may seem in some ways paradoxical, it is in fact strongly suggested by the logic of Kordela's argument, and, I will argue, more faithful to Lacan, who points repeatedly to the nature of the drive as itself far from straightforward, in fact, as paradoxical in essence. Therefore, I would like to take this opportunity to pause over this ambiguity and consider at length precisely whether and in what way the death drive introduces a "third term" into the ethical relation between the subject and the other, and further, whether this ethical structure is in some way a function of capitalism.

Kordela's innovation of framing her analysis of the ethics of psychoanalysis in terms of Spinoza's philosophy, which allows her to address modern secular capitalism's surplus enjoyment more specifically by drawing an elegant structural homology between psychoanalysis and Marxism, is quite compelling and deserves, it seems to me, serious consideration. I will try to sketch out in some detail what I think are the most relevant aspects of Kordela's position in order to raise a pivotal question about the way in which she formulates Lacanian ethics and the problem of the death drive. But ultimately, to state the underlying ethical aporia here at the outset, the most significant advantage of Kordela's approach seems to be that it allows her to circumvent the dilemma of the traditional dichotomy between immanent and transcendent ethical systems, inasmuch as Spinoza's "immanent causality," which Kordela sees as grounding psychoanalysis in the form of "transferential knowledge," avoids this dilemma by explaining Being in terms of a "differential substance" whose immanent effects, that is, its "surplus," paradoxically produce its original cause.⁵ This surplus marks the convergence of three fundamental concepts in the various discourses: *God* for Spinoza, *surplus-value* for Marx, and *surplus-enjoyment* for Lacan. Psychoanalysis, however, provides a fundamental concept that inscribes this very convergence in the single term, that of "the gaze," which Kordela argues is the immanent cause of being and therefore of the subjects' reference to good and evil. To quote from Kordela:

In secular capitalist modernity, Being, as follows from Spinoza's immanent causality, is the first cause, insofar as it is lacking. Or, what amounts to the same, Being, as follows from Marx's analysis of capital, is surplus, insofar as it is not given to experience. The surplus in question is conceived as surplus-value in economy, and, as surplus-enjoyment on the level of the signifier and the subject.... Surplus-enjoyment is the first cause, which

is nothing other than the gaze, “not as such but in so far as it is lacking,” and it is always lacking since “the gaze I encounter... is not a seen gaze, but a gaze as imagined by me in the field of the Other.”⁶

This model holds immense promise in its very concise navigation between Marx’s analysis of capitalism and Freud/Lacan’s analysis of the (capitalist) subject elegantly condensed in the single concept of the gaze (which also paves the way for Kordela, especially in her later work, to incorporate biopolitics into her thought as well).

Understandably, then, Kordela’s book is far more concerned with the concept of the gaze, as a term that disrupts traditional systems of ethics, than with the ethical function of the death drive as such, and, as I will explore below, the two terms tend to structurally merge in her book. More specifically, by illustrating the way in which the Lacanian gaze objectifies Spinoza’s radical re-conceptualization of Truth as a modernist break with the past, Kordela manages to foreground the frequently neglected ethical and ontological dimensions of Lacan’s concept. Reading Spinoza “psychoanalytically” against himself, in contrast with Neo-Spinozists, Kordela shows how Spinoza marks the radical modernist shift from truth grounded in “spirit” or God to one grounded in “objective knowledge,” within which, however, truth enters into a value-system.⁷ Thus “objective knowledge” is not to be taken, as the neo-Spinozists seem to do, as a body of unshakable scientific facts, because for Kordela “Spinozian metaphysics is of value only insofar as one understands, against Spinoza’s intentions, the function of fiction in history (discourse) following from the Spinozian conception of truth as the standard of both itself and fiction.”⁸ The fact that truth and fiction are mutually constitutive, coupled with the fact that Being is introduced into the secular world of beings as its immanent cause or surplus (the effect of its own effect), means that the structure of modernity is characterized by a lack in the Other (God/Truth), or “‘the universality of the signifier’ without a Master-Signifier grounding it,” that is at once its ethical potential and its ethical bind.⁹ And here is where Spinoza supplements Lacan so well in grounding and explaining a convergence between modern ontology and ideology, insofar as Being’s status as surplus and its integral relation to a truth/fiction dialectic means that the *telos* of Being must always already be unconsciously provided by the subject; that is, Lacan “adopts the Spinozian conception of history as aimless, and supplements it, according to the Spinozian conception of truth, with a willful and intentional gaze (and, hence, aim) which, however, is ‘a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other.’”¹⁰

Unlike the gaze, however, the death drive in Kordela’s book is not so easily summarized or pinned down, and often seems to slip into ambiguity. It is first discussed in relation to Žižek’s position that the death drive is precisely the concept that eludes Spinoza’s philosophy: “What is unthinkable for [Spinoza],” as Žižek puts it, “is what Freud terms ‘death drive’: the idea that *conatus* is based on a fundamental act of self-sabotaging.”¹¹ Kordela counters Žižek by pointing out that since, according

to Spinoza, God exists only in and through beings in all their aspects, and since God is equally marked by a “radical absence of will or entelechy” then “beings too” will be marked by an opposition to the existential tendency to persist in being themselves, which is “precisely the death drive.” And moreover, “it is in fact only the introduction of a fiction (an end),” and therefore by her own logic a gaze, “that allows the one (the pleasure principle or the death drive) to outweigh the other.”¹² So we see that in this first instance, in objecting to Žižek’s objection, the death drive is contingent on the gaze as that which provides the fiction/truth of “one or the other,” pleasure principle or death drive. And yet no sooner is it introduced in this way than the death drive quickly becomes, like the gaze itself, something that is presupposed in the very distinction between truth and fiction. Thus, as a

being of the signifier,... even when the subject struggles to survive, this process is possible only because of the “foundation” of the death drive that allows the subject to construct a fiction that motivates it to survive. And one of the earliest and most succinct ways of articulating the relation between the pleasure principle and death drive is Spinoza’s ternary conception of truth, as the standard both of itself and of the false.¹³

Although the death drive appears at first to directly oppose *conatus*, or the pleasure principle, we quickly see that “self-interest” actually presupposes the death drive in the same way that “truth” presupposes a fiction of a second order (of a meaningful will or *telos*). In this way, the death drive holds an ethically ambivalent place in this structure, poised between, in the first case, a mechanism of interpellation for the subject (invisibly grounding ideological truths), and in the second, a *surplus* of the system attached in some way to the “third term” of ethics, the gaze.

However, this apparent ambiguity is by no means a self-contradiction in Kordela’s theory. Rather, it reflects the tricky, yet persuasive logic of immanent causality, which is only clearly worked out in another register, that of the gaze. Kordela best uses set theory to explain this tricky logic, a logic that is rooted in the historical break that defines modernity in terms of a system of (capitalist) value, which paradoxically includes infinity in its internal register in order to achieve a universal exchangeability. Kordela uses this “not all of set theory” to define the immanent causality of the gaze, which is at once part of and an exception to (as surplus) the “set” of beings: “Just as money is both inside and outside the set of all commodities, the gaze is both within the field of appearances [vision or representation] and not in it.”¹⁴ Kordela dubs this paradox, in Lacanese, *extimacy*, which “emerges on the level of set theory, and not on that of [Kantian] antinomies.”¹⁵ We will return to this concept of extimacy in relation to the death drive, but here it is important to note that Kordela uses it to explain what eludes Kantian logic, the apparent problem of an element of a system appearing to be at once interior to, and also logically prior to, that system, using the

death drive as her example (thus addressing the ambiguity sketched out above): “While for the dynamic antinomy the death drive is simply not homogenous with the pleasure principle, in terms of set theory it is both heterogeneous and homogenous, since it is both an exception to and a member of its field.”¹⁶ The death drive thus has this structural homology with the gaze, but is not identical to it since the “field” it serves as extimate to (at least here) is not representation (beings) in general but the pleasure principle (Spinoza’s *conatus*). We can only say at this point that the death drive is structurally consistent with, but subsidiary to or subsumed by, the gaze. This is presumably why Kordela claims, in her only straight-forward discussion of the relation between ethics and the death drive in the book, which occurs in a lengthy footnote objecting to Žižek’s objection to Spinoza, “[n]or is the distinction between the death drive and the ethical purely a matter of degree.... As we shall see in the discussion of ethics below, the distinction is genuinely structural.”¹⁷ Although Kordela never makes this structural “distinction” explicit, it seems, as I have explored here, something less than self-evident, although clearly the structural distinction to be made here is with the gaze, which as *the surplus to good and evil*, is not to be structurally distinguished from the ethical: “Paraphrasing Spinoza, we could say that the gaze is the standard of both good and evil. The gaze is the proper level of the ethical insofar as it is the precondition of good and evil.”¹⁸

This distinction comes into sharper focus, however, when Kordela considers more explicitly the significance of the death drive in relation to secular capitalism. The most interesting discussion of the death drive in relation to capitalism (however brief) occurs in support of an explanation of capitalist *jouissance*. Libido, Kordela explains, at first appears as a force belonging to Eros for “binding” members of a group, but it turns out upon closer analysis to do so in the service of the death drive, as a means of making all individual members of the group exchangeable, so that “libido is to subjects what value is to commodities.”¹⁹ Here is Kordela quoting and explicating Lacan in her explanation of why Lacan “eventually replaced the word libido with enjoyment [*jouissance*]” under secular capitalism (with Kordela’s own translations in brackets):

[I]t is “*jouissance* that Freud implies through the primary processes.” For ... [the libido is... organ] — in the sense of the organ insofar as it is lacking, that is, it is *objet a* or gaze — and... its true nature is that of the death drive — because of which the subject becomes “...[the object of the Other’s desire],” thereby yielding to the Other the access to enjoyment.²⁰

We will note that the death drive corresponds with the libido here in its function of binding the subject to an ontology of secular capitalism by transferring *jouissance* to the Other. The death drive, in this brief reference, is the “true nature” of both the *objet a* and the gaze (and by extension *jouissance*) whose action is to transform the

subject into the “object of the Other’s desire” precisely by transforming a fiction into an (epistemological) truth:

[I]t is *no longer* [under secular capitalism] the subject, but the Other (“objective knowledge”) who enjoys, insofar as the subject’s unconditional, self-sacrificial devotion to the Other allows the inconsistent and arbitrary reasons offered by the Other to function as *if* they were necessary causes (truth).²¹

It is this counterfeit “*as if*” function (my italics) of propping up an objective “truth” with a contingent fiction, as the “true nature” of the death drive under capitalism, that I would like to pursue at length later, but for now let us focus on the relation between the death drive and capitalist *jouissance*. This crucial shift of the role of “enjoyment” from the subject onto the Other is for Kordela a cause/effect of the shift from spirit to value that characterizes the ontology of modern capitalism. For Lacan, “[w]ith the advent of secular capitalism” Kordela quotes, “the impotence of adjoining the surplus-enjoyment to the truth of the master... is suddenly voided.”²² This accounts for the paradoxical structure of the “noncoercive” hegemony of the “free” capitalist subject: just as “surplus-value adjoins itself to capital,” “although the Other’s enjoyment differentiates itself as enjoyment... from itself as surplus-enjoyment ..., surplus-enjoyment adjoins itself to the truth of the Master (Other), so that both become one — an objective cause, and no longer an arbitrary reason.”²³

So, if surplus *jouissance* accounts for the “hegemonic discipline” of secular capitalism insofar as the subject is interpolated within a system of semantic and economic values (signs and money), with the death drive representing the “true nature” of this capitalist shift in the gaze “because of which the subject becomes... [the object of the Other’s desire],” then this gives the death drive a central role in capitalist hegemony, but only *insofar as it is seen as bound to or ethically subsidiary to the gaze as the “proper level of the ethical.”* Moreover, from the point of view of the ethical encounter, this means that there is no framework within which to conceptualize the encounter with the little other as such, which means the “missing third term,” is still, in a sense, missing. As Kordela puts it:

[I]n short, in my encounter with the other, I am being placed under her gaze. Therefore, the encounter with the other is in truth directly an encounter with the Other, insofar as her desire and gaze are only imagined by me in the Other — which is why the whole encounter is precisely self-referential.²⁴

Thus, when Kordela comes to her conclusion, and puts the ethics of her model to the test, something interesting happens. For her system works impressively well

when the subject is considered in relation to the gaze of what Lacan calls the big Other (the symbolic Order, or its projection as God, the Law, and so on), but without structural recourse to exteriority as such, her theory seems to stumble upon the problem of the little other, the empirical other, or what she occasionally refers to as the “neighbor.” It is here, of course, that she contrasts an ethics of unmediated intersubjectivity with a Lacanian ethics that recognizes the presence of a third term, the gaze, and here that she gives Levinas (to whom we shall return presently) as a prime example of the former model which neglects the third term. But the death drive only functions in any ethical way for Kordela in the form of the gaze (of the big Other, or as “imagined by me in the field of the Other”), so that in terms of human relations, and to that extent political action, I would argue, her system only closes up on itself again and misses the point of the ethical encounter — and this, moreover, points to an aporia we find in many approaches to an ethics of psychoanalysis (in the form of “secondary narcissism,” for instance, or “imaginary intersubjectivity”). Thus Kordela insists that “[t]he everyday encounter with our neighbor, or the encounter with the random ‘neighbor’... are all encounters with oneself” that are projected as an “external opposition” onto the sphere of the big Other in the form of the gaze.²⁵ Moreover, this convergence of the other and the Other is given specifically in an explication of the structural homology between the capitalist and psychoanalytic conceptions of the subject: “[b]oth use-value or the ‘object,’ the appearance of being..., and exchange-value or the signifier [the subject] are the effects of an empirically not given surplus, that is, in psychoanalysis, of ‘*objet a*,’ and ‘the *objet a* in the field of the visible is the gaze.’”²⁶ So it seems that the structure of capitalism exploits a kind of ontological legerdemain (via a play on the internal/external opposition) in order to create the subject’s (misrecognized) position within it, a legerdemain which is also well defined by psychoanalytic theory. But it remains to be seen whether psychoanalysis provides a “meta” perspective of this legerdemain, a space for the ethical encounter that, even if unrealized, still remains a reference point for the ethics of the late capitalist subject.

II.

In order to address these larger issues I would like to turn for a moment to a discussion of one particular structure of the subject offered in Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis that might be just the one that would help explain the broader ethical function of the death drive and the problem of the little other under capitalism: the structure of *the pre-psychotic subject* and the function of what Lacan calls the “as if” mechanism. As is well known, Lacan explains the structure of the psychotic subject in terms of a “foreclosure” (“*Verwerfung*” is Freud’s term — note the economic allusion which Lacan plays on throughout the seminar on psychoses) on the “master signifier,” the *name-of-the-father*, that quilts the subject’s relation to the symbolic order, a key signifier in allowing the subject to escape from primary narcissism and encounter the otherness of others. This is why little others for Schreber (the subject of Freud’s

famous case study on psychosis, itself the subject of Lacan's seminar on the psychoses) appear as sham beings, or "cursory contraptions," as Schreber calls them. But this introduces a new challenge into Lacan's theoretical exposition by shifting the focus onto a seemingly subsidiary point: for if the subject lacks a quilting, or a grounding, in such a fundamental ontological structure (*langue* itself), how has he or she gone through life up until the point of the psychotic break functioning as a "normal" subject within society (Schreber's occupation as a judge being the most famous case in point)? Lacan's answer at this point, which draws on his dynamic distinction between the symbolic, the imaginary, and real, is as follows:

Here we obviously find the *as if* mechanism.... It's a mechanism of imaginary compensation — you can verify the usefulness of the distinction between the three registers [the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real] — for the absent Oedipus complex, which would have given him virility in the form, not of the paternal image, but of the signifier, the name of the father.²⁷

Whereas, according to the psychoanalytic/Lacanian structure, the subject requires the *primary repression* of a *signifier*, name-of-the-father, in order to "quilt" its relation to the symbolic, if it happens (as in psychosis) that this ontologically foundational signifier has been *foreclosed* instead of repressed, then the subject must substitute an *image*, the "paternal image," in place of a signifier, thereby changing the very structure of the subject such that the *ontological ground* of the subject in the symbolic is exchanged for the *specular ground* of the subject in the imaginary. This later model, the *as if* structure, I am proposing, provides a useful concept in clearing up some of the ambiguities mentioned above regarding the psychoanalytic insights into ethics and ontology under capitalism, particularly with respect to the relation of the other to the Other. For if the relation between the imaginary and the symbolic is structurally fractured, as the case of the psychotic demonstrates, the very nature of the identity of the little other is forfeited, that is, the very function of *particularity* becomes elided, *particular* people and things enter into a system of exchangeability, existing only as *if* they had particularity, despite their phantasmal lack of it.

In order to illustrate the fundamentally ontological significance of the symbolic order, Lacan points out the function of certain sentence structures — such as "Thou art the one who..." or even the simple deictic, "that's it!" — which evoke the necessity of the signifier to call a person or thing out of its undifferentiated multiplicity into its particular structure of *being-towards*, unfurling a temporality before itself. Of course, in the psychoanalytic discourse, this coming into being of the subject is always already defined in terms of a split, introduced by the signifier, which Lacan situates between the imaginary and the symbolic registers, around the "lost object" of the "real"; it is in the gap between these two registers, in the fact of their being "quilted," to use Lacan's

term, by an arbitrary Master Signifier, that *Being* emerges as a lack, an (absent) “real” surplus or Gaze, that supports *jouissance as difference beyond* the enclosed abyss of the specular imaginary of primary narcissism. Lacan is unequivocal about the fact that it is the death drive (of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) that gives *jouissance* its ontological relation to the ego:

There’s no ambiguity here. It’s at the level of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that Freud strongly indicates that what in the end gives the specular image of the apparatus of the ego its real support, its consistency, is that it is sustained within by this lost object, which it merely dresses up, by which *jouissance* is introduced into the dimension of the subject’s being.²⁸

The real, existing for the subject only as *objet a*, an absence beyond representation, is precisely what provides the (split) subject with a beyond, and therefore, a place for the little other in the symbolic order, the big Other, since the little other originates only in the closed system of the mirror image, or the imaginary:

The former, the other with a small o, is the imaginary other, the otherness in a mirror image, which makes us depend upon the form of our counterpart. The latter, the absolute Other, is the one we address ourselves to beyond this counterpart, the one we are forced to admit beyond the relation of a mirage, the one who accepts or is refused opposite us... the one to whom we always address ourselves.²⁹

But by virtue of the ontological legerdemain of psychosis, the psychotic subject is structurally unable to address the Other (otherness/difference) of the other, except imaginarily; her system is altered, unhinged with respect to the Symbolic Order, although it functions as if it were not. Little others are only self-referential reflections caught up in a system of exchangeability; they lack ontological backing.

Similarly, this *as if* structure can be applied to the analysis of capitalism as well, as illustrated in Marx’s analysis of the structure of the commodity form and its internal contradiction. For Marx, the fetishistic aspect of the commodity (its specific relation to desire or *jouissance*) results from a foundational fiction, or concealed displacement, at the basis of the structure of capitalism whereby the relations between individuals (the forces of social production) appear *as if* they were the relations between things (the commodity market). Or, in Marx’s words, “the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labor as objective characteristics of the products of labor themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things.”³⁰ Furthermore, this illusion does not come without a price of its own, one aspect of which is that the object now has a double role to play, at once to function like a *particular* object within a social structure and to fulfill the effective *form* of that structure itself; the commodity,

that is, is split between two heterogeneous registers, use-value and exchange-value. Since the exchange-value doesn't properly belong to it, but is a surplus imposed on it through a concealed displacement of the structure itself, the object acquires the uncanny effect of having a "fantastic" and "supra-sensible" character that is distinct from its materiality:

The commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labor within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material [*dinglich*] relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relations between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the *fantastic* form of a relation between things.³¹

But if we return this question of the ontological causality of commodity fetishism to the context of Lacan's imaginary/symbolic/real dynamic, and the psychoanalytic articulation of the pre-psychotic *as if* structure, we will see that the internal contradiction of the commodity is itself a concealed displacement (experienced subjectively as fetishism) of the contradiction concealed within the false totality of the social structure that gives it its "as if" imaginary status (its surplus enjoyment). That is, since labor is by definition *social* rather than private, and therefore the sum total of labor of any society is the sum total of its *social* product, this labor-production-product network is in fact the economic expression of the social structure's *symbolic form*. But since under capitalism a constitutive element of the symbolic form, its social nature, must drop out of the equation in order to sustain the constitutive fiction of the Master (that is, that commodities are the "products of labor of private individuals who work independently of each other") this lost or foreclosed symbolic element must return somewhere else in the system, which it does in the form of the imaginary "real" surplus value of the commodity itself.³² As the symbolic social relation between producers must now be displaced onto the level of commodities that interact, as if independently, in a system of exchange, which is *surplus* or transference itself, *exchangeability* now becomes the paradoxical "*objective*" *form* of the social structure — and the commodity fetish becomes its material embodiment, its fictional *as if* cause of desire and objectivity. Finally, the money-form "universalizes," or "externalizes," this "naturalized" but invisible contradiction in the commodity-form, materializing exchangeability itself, which therefore structures, according to this *as if* function, the totality of the social system as a whole around the repressed irrational or antonymic truth of the Other, the "social character of private labor."³³ Or, as Marx puts it:

[W]hat appears to happen is not that a particular commodity becomes money because all other commodities express their value in it, but, on the contrary, that all other commodities universally express their values

in a particular commodity because it is money.³⁴

Lacan’s dynamic allows us to add: money, the imaginary object *par excellence*, sutures the now fractured relation between imaginary desire (commodity fetishism) and symbolic form (exchange value in place of social production) by being at once a commodity and the commodity form, a particular and a universal. Money, a product of the *as if* structure, creates the possibility of the *as if* structure of capitalism. Kordela seems to forget the implicit sleight of hand or projection that occurs between the heterogeneous registers of social and libidinal energy here: that the repression of *social* labor and its projection as *private* surplus value is necessary for the transformation of *material* social production into the “*fantastic form*” of commodity fetishism.

This would mean that the subject of modern capitalism is grounded in the imaginary rather than the symbolic and therefore, as Marx noted, subject to the same exchangeability as the commodity. Lacan in fact describes the preconscious/preverbal realm of the imaginary in terms of a de-sublimated bodily repetition and exchangeability comparable to that of the commodity:

Everything of the order of this preverbal thus partakes of what we can call an intraworldly *Gestalt*, within which the subject is the infantile doll that he once was.... Universal equivalence is the law of this world, and it is even this that leaves us sufficiently uncertain whether any structure in it can be pinned down.³⁵

The ontological foreclosure that characterizes the pre-symbolic imaginary order gives it its specular, inert nature, marks its *lack-of-being-towards*, rooted as it is in a primary narcissism wherein the other is always already only the mirror-image of the subject and the subject a reflection of the other. Worst of all, this self-objectified specular subject of the imaginary order is defined by the capitalist inter-subjective cul-de-sac of competition, greed, and envy, precisely *in its relation to itself*: “The aggressive tension of either me or the other is entirely integrated into every kind of imaginary function in man.”³⁶ The realm of the unhinged imaginary, then, like capitalism, is marked by an erotic/aggressive competition that is *exclusively self-reflexive*; it is “in itself an incestuous and conflictual relation... doomed to conflict and ruin.”³⁷

Kordela does in fact also point out that the contradiction inherent in capitalism stems from a structural play between totality and exception, as discussed above, based on a paradoxical relation between part and whole expressed in commodity fetishism, but, of course, without reference to the *as if* structure or the imaginary/symbolic/real registers of Lacan. For Kordela, the “not all” of set theory suffices to explain this logical antinomy: “For the totality of the field of exchange-value to form itself, one commodity (money) must form the exception against which the exchange-value of any other commodity can be directly measured, without comparison to all

other (indefinitely many) commodities.”³⁸ For Kordela, however, this elusive set-theory logic (of the kind invisible from the perspective of the Kantian antinomy) of commodity fetishism reveals a structural identity between Being and Thought: “Commodity fetishism, therefore, is about how both Being and Thought are a Nothing that manifests itself as something either qua appearance or qua real appearance, or, conversely, that Being and Thought are the effect of the fact that the empirical world consists of appearances and real appearances, languages and bodies.”³⁹ Kordela points out here that what Kant considers a “‘transcendental subreption,’ that is, the false projection onto ‘objective reality’ of the ‘idea’ that ‘serves as a rule’ of reason,” is nothing other than a form of “category fetishism,” since what looks like an error from one perspective, actually works, “precisely because of commodity fetishism, that is, the fact that Thought and Being share the same structures. There is no projection, but identity between two structures.”⁴⁰ But by shifting from psychoanalysis and Spinozism to set theory to explain the structure of commodity fetishism, which Kordela calls “the key to both a secular epistemology and ontology,” Kordela, it seems to me, is limited in her explanation, since structural identity does not necessarily entail exchangeability, which leaves a blind spot from the perspective of a capitalist ontology.⁴¹ Thus Kordela draws the following conclusion from the “not all of set theory” explanation of the identity of Being and Thought:

In the era of secular reason and capitalist economy, the status of Being is that of the unconscious, that is, Being has no ontic existence, but only ontological (which is to also say, ethical). From the ontic perspective, Being is (non-)Being, or, by analogy to the unconscious, Un-Being. Something that has only ontological existence, like the unconscious, is a relation of function. *Being is, specifically, the function of self-referentiality.*⁴²

Being, under capitalism, is ontological without the ontic precisely because, in a Spinozian way, the Thought/Being split produces a surplus, as illustrated above. But isn't the move of reversing this logic to posit Being as ontological but not ontic akin to the example of reification Marx gives that “all other commodities universally express their values in a particular commodity because it is money”? If we accept the idea I'm putting forward here, then Kordela is only partly right in her conclusion here: Being under modern secular capitalism is not ontological or ontic, but rather imaginary, which gives it its apparent status of “*the function of self-referentiality.*” That is, set theory elides the fact that, from the perspective of capitalism, money is that *as if* element, taken from the field of the imaginary (the commodity) and projected onto the field of the symbolic (exchange-value). In the psychoanalytic sense this refers to the function of the gaze. Moreover, this *as if* function is precisely the *ethical character of the paradox of the gaze*, and it seems in a sense to have been latent in Kordela's theory all along:

To be sure, there would be no gaze that sees my good as good if it were not “a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other.” But as soon as it is imagined, it functions as if it were an external gaze, giving material consistency to the Other, which otherwise does not exist. The Other emerges as a reality with a set of values only under the precondition that I imagine a second degree Other, a gaze, which makes out of the Other a consistent whole or All. True, “there is no Other of the Other” but this is all the more why I must imagine it in the field of the Other in order to be able to say: “this is my good.”⁴³

As Kordela quite rightly explains, “beyond phenomenality, beyond the two modes of existence of value, there is pure value or the gaze, a Nothing that is Surplus.”⁴⁴ This pure nothing, we could also say, is the space of the pure nothing of inscription into the symbolic order, but what places the gaze in this “beyond,” in the symbolic network of the big Other? The gaze, as Kordela repeatedly confirms, is always “*imagined* by me in the field of the Other” — that is, like the repressed “social character of private labor,” it is the repressed *imaginary* character of the symbolic Other of modern-capitalism.

III.

For Lacan, especially in *Seminar XVII*, where he develops his concept of surplus-*jouissance* in relation to capitalism, the death drive is both a function of and a presupposition of the symbolic, almost a kind of purely material writing at the level of ontology and the real (the “letter” is Serge Leclaire’s term for this). As a pure unconscious inscription of the subject as such into the “signifying chain,” the death drive, which insists on repetition as the return of this Nothingness beyond, thereby defines the very being of the subject: *a relation of nothing or lack to the desire of the Other*. This is why Serge Leclaire claims that “there is no subject conceivable except in this relation of annulment with *jouissance* and no *jouissance* one can speak of outside this relation of oscillation with the subject.”⁴⁵ And this explains precisely why *jouissance* is so important in considering the relation of ethics to the death drive, for “[f]rom a dynamic perspective, *jouissance* designates the immediacy of access to ‘pure difference’, which the unconscious structure prevents and accommodates at the same time.”⁴⁶ Exteriority is therefore inscribed in the Lacanian system only in a paradoxical way, as what he calls “extimacy,” and extimacy is inscription, the ground of the subject in its own annihilation as the “unary trait” and its instance on repetition:

Jouissance is very precisely correlated with the initial form of the entry into play of what I am calling the mark, the unary trait, which is a mark toward death, if you want to give it its meaning. Observe that nothing takes on any meaning except when death comes into play.⁴⁷

Repetition is strictly speaking this “entry into play” of the drive itself, the movement and directionality necessary for the symbolic to exist as such.

But the nature of *jouissance* changes under capitalism, where it becomes “calculable” surplus. As Lacan says in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*: “on a certain day *jouissance* became calculable, could be counted, totalized. This is where what is called accumulation of capital begins.”⁴⁸ And this change in the structure of the relation of the subject to *jouissance* allows for a particular change in the structural *relation to the death drive* that seems to have been overlooked by Kordela. For if the death drive is the beyond of the subject’s impossible encounter with *jouissance* as its point of annulment, the pure inscription of the symbolic structure antecedent to its subjectivization, this can only become manifest in the subject’s unconscious through the primary repression of a master signifier that retroactively names the unnamable inscription, yet under capitalism this master signifier is already foreclosed and introduced into the value system, leaving the subject structurally impotent in relation to the Master Signifier; as Lacan expresses it, “from that moment on [once *jouissance* is calculable]... the master signifier only appears even more unassailable, precisely in its impossibility. Where is it? How can it be named? How can it be located?”⁴⁹ *Jouissance*, potentially the only glimmer of ontological exteriority and the “drive” of the concept of “death drive” — “[f]or the path towards death... is nothing other than what is called *jouissance*” — now becomes the guarantor of sameness within closed totality, an imaginary sameness without repetition (in the Freudian sense), or universal exchangeability.⁵⁰

Therefore the inscription of the subject as death drive, by giving us a beyond of the pleasure principle, is the only gesture the subject has with which to open up the space of exteriority, even if grounded in pure lack, in paradoxical extimacy. To return to Kordela, here we should recall that in opposing the Lacanian third term (articulated variously as the gaze, surplus-*jouissance*, and the death drive) to more supposedly “naïve” ethics of intersubjectivity, Kordela refers to Levinas’s ethical concept of the face as an example of an immediate uncritical access to the other — her only reference to Levinas in the book. Thus, Kordela suggests, where psychoanalysis would see the immediate access to the little other as the structural sleight of hand of modern secular capitalism, a “naïve ethics,” exemplified by Levinas, would be completely besotted with this illusion. But considered more rigorously, and in contrast with some all-too-commonly received notions, Levinas’s concept of the face could be seen not as “naïve” at all, but rather as a useful means both of navigating the difficult aporia Kordela confronts between the Other and the other within psychoanalytic ethics, and of thinking through an ethics beyond the capitalist subject, insofar as Levinas, strictly speaking, defines “the face” *not* in terms of an *immediate encounter* with a little other, but rather in terms of a *lack in the symbolic* with respect to the particularity of this *encountered* other. That is, the concept of the face, for Levinas, does not in fact express the naïve immediacy of the neighbor; the face does not appeal to the I as the

expression of a direct relation (*here I am, face to face, a little other*) but rather as the expression of radical alterity as such (*there is no signifier for my otherness*). And this symbolic/ontological problem of particularity speaks directly to the problem of the enjoyment of the Other under capitalism (that is, its surplus-*jouissance*). The face of the other in the ethical sense, as it were, would stand in where the signifier, as symbolic value, fails in its particularity, and, in the ethical encounter, rather than being a place-holder of inescapable self-referentiality, would *repeat* the ungraspable annulment of a particular (un)signifier within a totality, *this face*, as the extimate *par excellence*. The face of the other is this repetition beyond the pleasure principle of the ego. In this way, reading Levinas in a Lacanian/psychoanalytic sense, Kordela could have found in the concept of the face the potential for a means of formulating the way in which the little other of the ethical encounter functions, under the gaze of the big Other, not as a function of the narcissistic image of the subject, but as a short-circuit of the subject’s imaginary system of mirrors, as the point at which the big Other’s *jouissance* can obliterate the narcissistic sameness between other and other in an act of *non-relation*, that is, “the true nature of the death drive.” The face of the other is (*potentially*) *the pure inscription of the symbolic subject*, both as a non-linguistic gesture of naming and in its essential failure to express anything beyond itself, and hence, as the little other’s “nothingness,” or death-in-the-symbolic, as its “justification before the [big] Other.” As Levinas expresses it,

The absolute gap of separation which transcendence implies could not be better expressed than by the term creation, in which kinship among beings themselves is affirmed, but at the same time, their radical heterogeneity also, *their reciprocal exteriority coming from nothingness*. One may speak of creation to characterize entities situated in the transcendence that does not close over into a totality. *In the face to face* the I has neither the privileged position of the subject *nor the position of the thing defined by its place in the system*; it is... *discourse of justification before the Other*.⁵¹

The face is precisely this entity that, because of the pure difference of being “coming from nothingness,” holds the potential to elude the logic of capitalist Being as “*the function of self-referentiality*”: “Their reciprocal exteriority coming from nothingness” envisions a mutual extimacy of the face to face in an ethical encounter, not a pure immediacy — in fact, the “reciprocal exteriority” *constitutes* its ethical status. The death drive is thus also, in a paradoxical sense, *creation* (in Levinas’s sense), and even *creation ex nihilo*, for as the pre-psychotic subject shows us, to foreclose upon the extimate is to be cut off from meaning (“[o]bserve that nothing takes on any meaning except when death comes into play”) and therefore to be driven to identify oneself in the Other only through violence (“exteriorizing” my ontological contradiction), or conversely, to be driven to be valued by a totality that *effaces the lack* of the desire-of-

the-Other. Lacan explains the ethical paradox of the creation/destruction dialectic of the death drive best in his seminar on ethics, when he points out that the death drive “as such” is “destructive” only insofar as it is a compulsion to repeat “beyond the instinct” as a desire to “return to the state of equilibrium of the inanimate sphere.”⁵² “The inanimate,” Lacan elsewhere qualifies, is here nothing more than a “point on the horizon, an ideal point, a point that’s off the map.”⁵³ This “beyond,” this “pure difference,” is the very essence of the death drive, the “[w]ill to destruct. Will to make a fresh start. Will for an Other-thing, given that everything can be challenged from the perspective of the function of the signifier.”⁵⁴

To return to Kordela, if the little other, or neighbor, then, as she suggests, is counted under capitalism only “as object,” it is because of the very specific relation to the death drive the subject maintains under capitalism, according to which the function of the symbolic, where, let us say, the death drive is at home, is sustained only at the level of the *as if*.⁵⁵ Lacanian ethics gives us a means to articulate not only the position of the capitalist subject, but the subject-position of capitalism that is driven to foreclose on pure difference, whereby there is no “will for an Other-thing,” no ethical face-of-the-other *as such* (only *as if*). For if the death drive is the symbolic consistency of the gaze of the big Other, the face is the inscription of the lack of the little other under the gaze, or the little-other-as-lack-in-the-symbolic, that allows for the *potentiality* of an ethics of the encounter. Crucially, therefore, Levinas’s link between the face and infinity (Being) is paradoxically *grounded in an image of an unquantifiable, incommensurable surplus*:

The inexhaustible surplus of infinity overflows the actuality consciousness. The shimmer of infinity, the face, can no longer be stated in terms of consciousness, in metaphors referring to light and the sensible.... The consciousness of obligation is no longer a consciousness, since it tears consciousness up from its center, submitting it to the Other.⁵⁶

The “creation” that allows for the ethical existence of the face is precisely this paradoxically “destructive” drive from within/without, this surplus that exceeds and therefore “tears” open the closed system of consciousness as self-presence within a totality: it is Spinozist immanent causality with a tear in it, an irrational death drive. While Levinas lacks a theoretical language for this “third term” that is not grounded, however guardedly, in transcendental metaphysics, his concept of the face, read in a Lacanian sense, “against himself” to the extent that the transcendental be supplanted by (torn) Spinozian immanent causality, provides our reference point for addressing the ethical problem of the death drive under late capitalism.

III. i.

It should be noted that Kordela’s ontological analysis doesn’t draw particular attention

to any kind of “stages” of capitalism, however compelling her brief discussions of postmodernism and postcolonialism. While it isn’t within the scope of this paper to provide such a historical analysis, I will take a brief digression here to suggest that Bernard Stiegler’s analysis of the “three limits” that define the historical movement of capitalism may be helpful in this regard. To summarize briefly, Stiegler describes the original limit of a “capitalist system of production” (the industrial revolution) as “the tendency of diminishing returns” on production itself; the result was that “the American way of life invented the figure of the consumer whose libido is systematically put to work to counter the problems of excess production.”⁵⁷ But then, after the transition to a consumerist economy,

This canalization of the libido operated by the capture of attention ends up by liquidating the expertise in living [*savoir-vivre*] of consumers, by the massive development of societies of services which let them off the hook of their own existences, that is, of their diverse responsibilities as adults having reached their legal maturity.⁵⁸

The limit of this second phase is an *internal limit* of the “psyche”; it is overcome by the capitalization of “care” or attention (the ability to project into the long term future) and “primary identification” between subject and other, so that in the third limit “the process of primary identification is short-circuited by psychopower through the psychotechnologies.”⁵⁹

This way of phrasing the third limit as the “question of libidinal energy” has some interesting implications here. Stiegler uses psychoanalytic terms — the libido, the drive, sublimation — consistently but in his own context (only loosely related to psychoanalysis). But I am tempted to correlate the idea that I am putting forward here, with regards to the *as if* structure of late capitalism, with his conception that the *libido* (which is explicitly correlated with *jouissance* and death drive by Lacan) has been exploited by the second phase of capitalism until, in the third limit, the “drives it contained, as Pandora’s box enclosing every evil, henceforth are at the helm of beings devoid of attention, and incapable of taking care of their world.”⁶⁰ The unbound “drives it contained,” which engender a “drive-driven” economy, could here be compared to an imaginary “*as if* drive” rather than a symbolic one, what Lacan calls an “imaginary capture.”⁶¹ This mode of capitalism reigns under an essentially speculative economy, as the “spectator” is one who “pays no attention” and “takes no care” of the object of speculation, thereby creating a consciousness “enclosed... *in the short term*.”⁶² In the same way that the subject of the psychotic “*as if*” construction cannot establish a proper symbolic “being towards” and assume a signifier of responsibility, the subject of speculative psychotechnical capitalism for Stiegler can no longer assume “diverse responsibilities as adults having reached their legal maturity” because its libidinal desire has been liquidated into an egoic drive to consume. As Stiegler puts it:

The third limit of capitalism is not only the destruction of the reserves of fossil fuel, but the limit constituted by the drive to destruction of all objects in general by consumption, insofar as they have become the objects of drives, and not objects of desire and attention.⁶³

That is, *consumption*, as the subject's drive to incorporate the object into itself, thereby depleting it, in fact *overrides the death drive*, which is rather "repetition directed at *jouissance*" or nothing other than "the radical nature of repetition," that is, the symbolic drive of the subject to repeat something *beyond* the narcissistic imaginary at the expense of the ego itself.⁶⁴

IV.

Towards the end of her book, Kordela tests her hypotheses about applying a psychoanalytically-informed ethics to a late capitalist culture by referring to the more traditional ethical dilemma that poses the question "whether one should risk one's life to save another" (for instance from drowning) even if that other ends up killing me to save himself.⁶⁵ This question quickly leads to the more "timely" question of my relation to the other who, perhaps, *must* kill me in order to sustain his own survival, which immediately transforms what was in the first case a "moral impunity" into a "radical evil," or what we frequently call terrorism.⁶⁶ This symbolic transformation of the gaze of the other(/Other) from one of impassive survival to one of malevolent intent is a good example of transference causality, since for Kordela,

[i]n my encounter with the other, I (i.e., it, the unconscious) provide(s) the gaze that interprets the other's signs as to his or her desire. And this desire, although it should precede the other's signs as their intention, will always already have caused their emergence only after my interpretation.⁶⁷

This is a powerful and persuasive interpretive maneuver by Kordela, but I believe at this point in our analysis we can go a little further and ask why this transference of causality of the will to destroy onto the gaze of the other(/Other), or why is it so characteristic of our particular cultural moment? And here it becomes apparent how theorizing the *relation* to the death drive in a social structure is decisive as a means to analyze the ethics of late capitalism. Having capitalized on *jouissance* or desire *precisely by foreclosing on the death drive*, the subject of late capitalism finds in the *face* of the other, not an encounter with otherness grounded in her own incalculable *jouissance*, in the lack that calls her to responsibility for her own finitude, but only a *short-circuited* specular socio-psychic-ontic imaginary reflection with which the subject is subsumed under a gaze "doomed to conflict and ruin."

Thus when Kordela ends her book with a question addressed to the late-capitalist subject so beset by the radical evil that wants to destroy it, "*What and whose gaze is*

this, which desires so badly to be killed by the other?” the answer would *not* be the gaze of a culture saturated with the death drive, as a too literal-minded interpretation of the death drive might have it, but rather the gaze of a culture that has *foreclosed* on the death drive.⁶⁸ For if the face of the other for Levinas would represent the subject’s extimate relation to the nothingness of creation/death, then it is symbolically overdetermined that, in a late capitalist global world-order defined by the imaginary function’s “aggressive tension of either me or the other,” the most iconic image of our drive towards “stability” and “life” is *the image of the hooded other*, or the faceless terrorist detained in a camp designed to suspend and preempt otherness itself, which is in fact the imaginary mirror-reflection of the question we seem to have framed for our being, under the guise of the gaze, “why does the other want to destroy me?”⁶⁹

Notes

1. A. Kiarina Kordela, *\$urplus: Spinoza, Lacan* (New York: State U of New York) 58.
2. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007) 172.
3. Kordela, *\$urplus* 133.
4. *\$urplus* 134.
5. “Here the cause is itself an effect of its own effects. What enabled Spinoza to see this structure was the fact that... he conceived of nature, insofar as it is inhabited by human beings, as a system of signifiers. Far from being autonomous physical things with inherent qualities, signifiers are differential values. And differential values, by structural necessity, constitute a system of disequilibrium, that is, a system that always produces a surplus” (*\$urplus* 1).
6. *\$urplus* 42, quoting Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998) 103, 84.
7. *\$urplus* 58.
8. *\$urplus* 15.
9. Or, as Kordela translates it into Lacanese, the value of “‘the universality of the signifier’ without a Master-Signifier grounding it... lies in remaining for Lacan the ‘unique’ way of ‘resist[ing] succumbing’ to the ‘sacrifice... to which few subjects can resist,’ and of, consequently, being capable of acting, instead, ethically” (*\$urplus* 15, quoting Lacan, *Book XX. Encore, 1972-1973: On Feminine Sexuality; The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink [New York, W.W. Norton, 1998] 81).
10. Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality* 81, in *\$urplus* 17.
11. Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 34, in *\$urplus* 10.
12. *\$urplus* 10-11.
13. *\$urplus* 11.
14. *\$urplus* 102.
15. *ibid.*
16. *\$urplus* 103.
17. *\$urplus* 146n7.

18. *\$urplus* 68.
19. *\$urplus* 69.
20. Lacan, *Ecrit II* (Paris: Seuil, 1971) 215, in *\$urplus* 70.
21. *ibid.*, emphasis added.
22. Lacan, *Other Side* 207, in *\$urplus* 70.
23. *\$urplus* 71.
24. *\$urplus* 133.
25. *\$urplus* 138.
26. *\$urplus* 138, quoting *On Feminine Sexuality* 95, and *Four Fundamental Concepts* 105.
27. Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses 1955-1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993) 193.
28. *Other Side* 50.
29. Lacan, *The Psychoses* 252.
30. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990) 164-5.
31. Marx, *Capital* 65
32. *Capital* 165.
33. *Capital* 168.
34. *Capital* 187.
35. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and The Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991) 165.
36. Lacan, *The Ego* 95.
37. *The Ego* 96.
38. *\$urplus* 98.
39. *\$urplus* 106.
40. *\$urplus* 97.
41. *\$urplus* 93.
42. *\$urplus* 104.
43. *\$urplus* 67, quoting Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 81.
44. *\$urplus* 105.
45. Serge Leclaire, *Psychoanalyzing: On the Order of the Unconscious and the Practice of the Letter*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998) 97.
46. Leclaire, *Psychoanalyzing* 98.
47. *Other Side* 177.
48. *ibid.*
49. *Other Side* 178.
50. *Other Side* 18.
51. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Duquesne UP, 1969) 293, emphasis added.
52. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-60*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1986) 212.

53. *Other Side* 46.
54. Lacan, *Ethics* 212.
55. *\$urplus* 138.
56. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 207.
57. Bernard Stiegler, “Care: Within the limits of capitalism, economizing means taking care,” *Telemporphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, Volume 1, ed. Tom Cohen (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012) 110.
58. *ibid.*
59. *ibid.*
60. “Care” 114.
61. *Psychoses* 205.
62. “Care” 105.
63. “Care” 114.
64. *Other Side* 48, 172.
65. *\$urplus* 139.
66. *ibid.*
67. *\$urplus* 138.
68. *\$urplus* 139.
69. *The Ego* 95.

