POTENTIALITY AFTER THE (F)ACT:
The Act Between Agency and Love

by

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ABSTRACT

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the moment which designates the appearance of an authentic ethico-political Act is fraught with competing potentialities; because this Act materializes 'as if' from nowhere, an Act's conditions of appearance are often only available to us retroactively. Critics and philosophers such as Slavoj Žižek have attempted to account for these retroactive appearances in both culture and politics. While I acknowledge Žižek's contribution to the Act's contemporary recrudescence, certain problematic fissures in Žižek's theorization of the Act nonetheless require address. Primarily, while Žižek conceives of the subject as necessary to the Act's performance, he formulates the Act as either perpetually abstracted or entirely possible; this contentiously obliges the acting subject to vacillate between potentiality (the endless horizon of abstraction) and actualization (that space of free action in which he can effectively 'change everything').

Using these Žižekian horizons of potentiality and actualization to guide my analysis, I attempt in this project to engineer a condition of possibility for the acting subject which simultaneously accounts for the Act's miraculous materialization and the acting subject's constitutive 'subjection' to Otherness. In a series of structural transpositions, I explore the subject's relationship with the Act apropos of aphanisis (subject self-erasure), Christian love, and the Benjaminian recapitulation of past revolutionary potential. I contend throughout that the creation of a horizon of possibility for the Act is contingent on our primary recognition of the acting agent's relationship with the Act's dual impulses of destruction and renewal.
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INTRODUCTION

When one speaks of an Act in psychoanalysis, one is not merely denoting physical animation, performed behaviour, or even a particular variety of activity and its unconscious psychic progenitors, but rather indexing a complex and often unstable term which is more efficiently accessed via the route of what it is not than by any attempt at empirical definition. Distantly related to, but not to be confused with, the Freudian concept of 'acting out' in which the subject 'loses himself' in his unconscious fantasies and effectively "relives [them] in the present with a sensation of immediacy which is heightened by his refusal to recognize their source and their repetitive character" (Laplanche and Pontalis 4), the Act is primarily associated with the theories of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and particularly with his work on ethics. In this specifically Lacanian context, the Act is intended to displace the notion of the Sovereign Good (espoused in Aristotelian morality), which assumes that all desire is essentially the desire to 'do good' but cannot account for any desire which does not trace back to this apparently formative motivation. In countering this apperception of the Sovereign Good with something other than a 'quality' that is diametrically opposed to goodness (i.e., Evil), Lacan conceives of the Act in a space extrinsic to quality or disposition and, as such, designates the Act as a performance in which the subject "act[s] in conformity with the desire that is in [him]" (Lacan 1986 314) but does not remain mindful of the symbolically-erected boundaries which encompass goodness. In this respect, the Act is not constitutive of a rebellious and reactionary 'breaking of
the rules' which positions itself against the good and attempts to destroy it; rather, the Act for Lacan involves an outright rejection of the very symbolic contours which comprise this goodness. The Act as such is not positioned against goodness and the symbolic order, but rather beyond them, 'outside' of them. When an Act is performed, these symbolic coordinates are shaken and destabilized.

In the work which follows, I take up the notion of this ethical Act and its destabilization of the symbolic order through the work of contemporary Lacanian Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek, whom many consider to be a 'theorist of the Act.' Although Žižek's conceptual basis of the Act is derived from Lacan's work on ethics, Žižek's preoccupation with the Act's appearance is more widely disseminated than Lacan's; this quality bears witness to the fact that the Act - while certainly not a frequent occurrence - is nonetheless something which actually transpires and is not merely restricted to removed discussions of high theory. Furthermore, Žižek's combination of postmodernity with philosophical disciplines has led to the Act's reappropriation in the politico-ideological field, essentially ascribing it with a 'practical' significance which was not as apparent in Lacan's formulations.

The available scholarly material on the Act (both in its Lacanian and Žižekian manifestations) is not limited in availability but more-so in scope; the complexity and variability of the concept, as well as the general critical tendency to disagree over a given Act's authenticity, has tended to relegate the Act to mostly aphoristic discussions. Extensive analyses of the Act are rare and, while Žižek will never stand accused to
publishing too little, his engagements with the topic are characteristically scattered across his many books. Additionally, given the varying analytical contexts in which these invocations of the Act appear, Žižek’s approaches to and designations of the Act are often conflicting or self-contradictory, and this tendency can prove frustrating to the reader seeking a consolidated horizon against which to interpret the Act. As such, one of the tasks involved in both researching and writing this project was the consolidation of material appearing across a range of Žižek’s work which, when combined, often revealed itself to be structurally incommensurable with similar arguments. Particularly problematic in this respect is Žižek’s inability to present a unified theory of the acting subject - the agent responsible for the performance of the Act - and it is this particular methodological flaw which my project addresses.

The first chapter of the thesis introduces the psychoanalytic history of the Act and especially its Lacanian dimension. Addressing how the Act in Lacanian ethics is not opposed to goodness but necessarily beyond/extrinsic to it, I then take note of Žižek’s politico-ideological intervention into Lacan’s theory, and his emphasis on contingency over subjectivity. The differences between the two theorists (or, more precisely, Žižek’s extensive additions to the Lacanian Act) is illustrated through my recurrent invocation of the conclusion of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s 1969 film Medea, which I posit as a particularly evocative summation of the Act. This chapter also functions as an introduction to my objections to Žižek’s work on the Act, and highlights the inconsistency between
Žižek’s insistence on the actual existence of Acts (they ‘really happen’, it is possible to commit an Act, and so on), and his reluctance to account for the acting subject’s state of mind or the psychic operations which precede his performance of the Act. For Žižek, the exemplary acting subject always ‘ stops short of’, or relinquishes his utilitarian function to, the very Act he commits. I highlight the problematic methodology supporting such an argument by making reference to King Vidor’s film Stella Dallas (1937), and by positioning Žižek’s conception of the Act against feminist theorist Judith Butler’s humanist perspective: I assert that what requires address is the Act’s relation to the subject of psychoanalysis — a subject who is himself defined through the very symbolic fictions and orders of Otherness which his Act will subvert.

The second chapter takes up this renewed placement of the subject through the problematic issue of the Act’s identity as ‘anti-ideological.’ I address the work of political theorist Ernesto Laclau and particularly his criticism that Žižek’s advocation of the Act’s essential ‘meaninglessness’ constitutes a failure of global politics. Since — from Laclau’s perspective — the Act consists of the subject’s radical self-relating negativity, then any potential for positive political change is prematurely undermined. While defending Žižek’s position against Laclau’s objections on the basis of incommensurability (Laclau is seeking a concrete humanist politics of the Act while, for Žižek, the Act is a purely structural category), I do concede to the validity of Laclau’s complaints; I suggest again that the ‘horizon’ against which we perceive the Act be nothing less than the acting subject himself.
Since the subject (of psychoanalysis) is already pre-inscribed into Otherness, an Otherness which is effectively constitutive of his subjectivity, I argue for a 'total' awareness of the Act which accounts for the subject's radical Act apropos of his relation to the Other in the imaginary, symbolic, and Real realms. Using the conclusion of Frank Capra's 1944 film, Arsenic and Old Lace, I take up Žižek's assertion that the regulatory, tripartite structure of Otherness which we experience in everyday life is cast asunder in the performance of an Act. In the Act, Žižek contends, the subject only 'relates' with the Real Other, the 'monstrous' Other-as-Thing which the symbolic and imaginary fields conventionally pacify. In relating solely with this monstrous dimension, the acting subject exempts himself from the ideological bind of symbolic signification and its imaginary support. At the conclusion of the chapter, I introduce the psychoanalytic concept of aphanisia (subject self-erasure) to account for the subject's relationship or 'subjection' to Otherness in the Act and claim that, rather than viewing aphanisia as an effect of the Act, self-erasure should be conceived as a precondition of the Act's performance. The ideological ground of the subject's aphanisia preceding the Act is addressed in relation to Todd Haynes' 1995 film, Safe.

In the final chapter, I address the apparent nihilism of the Act, its initial appearance as a postmodern emissary of the dissolution of meaning. Objecting to this understanding of the Act, I claim the opposite to be true: the Act is a properly sublime occurrence which, while appearing destructive and nihilistic, is perpetually being re-read and redefined and, rather than barring potentiality, actually opens
Benjaminian 'future spaces' for action. Returning to the subject's performance of the Act and its precondition of *aphanisis*, I contend that this Benjaminian horizon of potentiality is only available to us via the route of Christian love, and that the only universal antecedent of an Act is in fact this very love. I discuss how love can engender *aphanisis* through analyses of Lars von Trier's *Dogville* (2003) and Michael Haneke's *The Seventh Continent* (1989), and conclude that, what occurs in the 'addition' of the subject to the matrix of the Act is a structure of double-sacrifice wherein the subject comes to recognize his own agalma, what is most precious to him simultaneously as that which has instituted his aphanisis and as something which must be destroyed to open a new horizon of action.
CHAPTER 1: THE ACT IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

"NOTHING IS POSSIBLE ANYMORE!": ENUNCIATING THE ACT

At the conclusion of Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1969 film Medea, Medea - having murdered her children to punish Jason, her husband, for his desertion - stands at the border of Corinth before the distraught Jason, who begs Medea to let him bury his children, or at least "touch their tender skin" for the last time (line 1673). Behind her, Medea's house is in flames, and dust and smoke billow around her, occasionally obscuring her from sight. As Jason's pleas are drowned out by clashing cymbals and discordant horns on the soundtrack, Pasolini frames Medea's scowling face in a tight close-up; she shouts to Jason, "Your words are wasted! Nothing is possible anymore!", whereupon the film abruptly ends with a "Fin" intertitle. It is essential to mention that, while Medea's penultimate admonishment of Jason originates in Euripides' play, the final words in the film ("Nothing is possible anymore!") are unique to Pasolini's adaptation. The statement itself, as well as the stylistically chaotic and precipitously truncated context of its utterance, not only figures as a fascinating renegotiation of the myth of Medea, but - more importantly -
introduces a vital interpretive dimension which retroactively derails the determinacy of Medea’s infanticide.

Anyone familiar with Euripides’ staged version of the myth is aware that it concludes with Medea, bearing the bodies of her two children, being spirited away on a chariot sent by her grandfather Hyperion, the sun-god. Contrasting this conclusion to the traumatic terminus of Pasolini’s ending, it initially appears that Euripides’ Medea certainly comes away with the better deal: rather than remaining irredeemably earth-bound and, as such, fettered to her earthly lawful obligations (in this case, punishment and pain for the murder of her children), the mythical Medea escapes Corinth and leaves Jason to his misery as originally intended. It therefore initially appears that these two versions set out to approach Medea’s ‘fated’ punishment and its reliance on systems of ideological support in entirely different ways: the difference is between the divine respite that allows one to escape or reject the field of ideological meaning (Euripides), and the secularized reality of lawful punishment, of being wholly inscribed in symbolic identification and its ideologico-imaginary support (Pasolini).

However, it is precisely this temptation to read Euripides’ redeemed and divine Medea against Pasolini’s nihilistically secular heroine that should be avoided, primarily because Pasolini’s conclusion is itself hardly lacking a ‘divine’ dimension. The statement, “Nothing is possible anymore” should here be interpreted literally, not only because the film text essentially conforms to the command and ends - thereby negating any further ‘possibilities’ - but because the statement complicates the
logical causality of earthly expectation (namely the spectator's premonition that Pasolini's earthly Medea will be punished for her deeds and will suffer for her losses). Unlike her mythical counterpart, the filmic Medea does not escape Corinth in a chariot and indeed appears beset by a variety of all-too human problems: two dead children, a confrontation with her husband (who swears revenge), a burning house, the wrath of Corinth's inhabitants, banishment or death. However, this earthly dimension of crime and punishment (Jason's revenge, Medea's persecution and surrender to the supremacy of the Law) is precluded by Medea's prophetic assertion: "nothing is possible anymore" means precisely that - Medea will neither ascend into the heavens on her grandfather's chariot nor be dealt her earthly comeuppance since both options are equally impossible, and imagining such extra-diegetic epilogues under either divine or earthly governance is one of the many potentialities vitiated by the film's final utterance. What remains is not possibility as a positive attribute or gesture in empirical reality, but total abyssal cessation. In Pasolini's adaptation, Medea does not escape the Law or suspend ideology, but rather casts them into the void along with everything else rejected by her statement's radical finitude: reconciliation, remorse, family, and subjectivity. In short, what occurs 'after' Medea's proclamation is not merely in opposition to, but incongruously outside the Law, not against ideology but beyond it, and not barring but in excess of symbolization: it is, precisely, 'nothing' - pure void.

As was previously mentioned, this concluding statement in Pasolini's film impacts our reading of its cause (Medea's murder of her children)
which retroactively acquires a traumatic presence in its erasure of all possibility. The implication of the statement "Nothing is possible anymore" - particularly the negative adverb 'anymore' - is clearly causal and, as such, one can interpret it to entail two varying degrees of traumatic inevitability: 'nothing is possible anymore because I have killed my children, who were precious to me, and their absence will make life unbearable', or 'nothing is possible anymore because I have effectively lost everything, all my symbolic support; I have rejected my family and my ancestral ties to Colchis, been estranged from my husband, exiled from Corinth, and murdered my children. In short, because I have killed my children, I am finally able to see that I cannot take refuge from this act in other worthwhile aspects of my life, since the murder has dissolved their symbolic consistency and efficacy.' The crucial (and no doubt contentious) distinction to be drawn here is between the relative worth of 'everything' qua the murder; it is not that Medea's life and symbolic ties (history, ancestry, erotic and familial love) were always irretrievably absent and 'impossible' and that infanticide was merely the condition that illuminated their relative meaninglessness, but rather that the murder was directly responsible for the symbolic dissolution of Medea's life. The murder has transformed the very symbolic contours in which it occurred, thereby 'de-ontologizing' everything that preceded it, casting Medea into the "void of self-relating negativity" (Zižek 2001 158 fn. 24), and retroactively reinscribing life, love, family, and history as meaningless and impossible.
Yet what is the greater significance of Medea's apocalyptic exclamation, and what is its purpose here as a starting-point (rather than a culmination) for analysis? Why can it never properly be approached 'on its own terms' but only against the background of some defining gesture (the murder of the children)? In the pages that follow, I intend to argue that what we have necessarily encountered in Medea's statement is the Lacanian Act as something that is fully realized and felt by its perpetrator; consequently, both the statement and the context of its utterance serve as the most effective elementary means of comprehending the Act and its relationship to symbolic determinants such as subjectivity and ideology. To avoid a premature misunderstanding: my aim in invoking the conclusion of Pasolini's Medea as analogous to the Lacanian Act is not intended to reduce the complexities of the Act to aphoristic universality, but rather to introduce the Act as an operative phenomenon, as something which can indeed 'happen.' As such, while the explanatory competence of Medea's statement is far from exhaustive and admittedly reductive, it nonetheless figures as an efficient means of apprehending the Lacanian Act, and one which the reader should consider a conceptual touchstone as our discussion of the Act develops.

WHAT IS A LACANIAN ACT?: MY GOODNESS, YOUR GOODNESS

The concept of the Act as it appears in this project is originally derived from the psychoanalytic theories espoused by Jacques Lacan, particularly in his extensive discussion of the ethical aspects of psychoanalytic treatment in Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis. For
Lacan, an essential quality of the Act involves the subject's antecedent readiness to accept responsibility for both the Act itself and its desirous progenitor, which elevates the gravity and significance of the Act above "mere behaviour" (which all animals exhibit), identifies it as a specifically "human act... since to our knowledge there is no other act but the human one" (Lacan 1981 50), and locates the Act within an ethical dimension. As Lacan clarifies, the responsibility the subject accepts is less for the appearance of some gesture in empirical reality (i.e., the killing of one's children), than for the unconscious desires that precipitated the enacted outcome; these unconscious desires may not always be, and indeed rarely are in accordance with, the Act committed by the subject. The often painful question posed to the subject post-Act is, "Have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you?" (Ibid 1986 314), which distributes the subject's unconscious desires, conscious choices, and performed behaviour on an ethical continuum that calls his motivation into question. The question can be rephrased as follows: does the resultant Act conform with your original desire and, if not, which psychic occurrence has bungled the transition from desire to outcome? In the scope of traditional Aristotelian ethics, this question would be precluded by the supremacy of the Sovereign Good, which is assumed as the pleasurable incentive regulating every gesture. If the outcome is itself 'good', then the subject's impetus for bringing about the outcome is - circuitously - nothing less than the pleasure of engendering goodness: why would one not experience intense pleasure in goodness and, by the logic of
this pleasurable guarantee, why would anyone strive to be anything but good?

Although Lacan does not refute this particular ethical position and reassures his audience that he is not advocating an anarchistic alternative, he nonetheless claims that Aristotelian morality is "wholly founded on an order that is no doubt a tidied-up, ideal order... created for the virtues of the master and linked to the order of powers" (Ibid 315). In stressing 'good behaviour' and deference to "the service of goods" - the organization and execution of a multitude of different 'goods' which strive for the singular Sovereign Good - Aristotle's morality prematurely evacuates the field of desire by gentrifying it or "cleaning [it] up" in favour of "modesty, temperateness, [and] the middle path we see articulated so remarkably in Aristotle" (Ibid 314). When one encounters desire in such a situation, the proper response apropos of goodness is to reject it through perpetual deferral, saying, "As far as desires are concerned, come back later. Make them wait" (Ibid 315). Evidently, such traditional ethics are incommensurable with and limited by the psychoanalytic ethic, which views the illusory ideal of goodness as an impediment to (recognizing) desire. As such, we can see how the recovery of the desire that is lost in or overshadowed by Aristotelian morality and the service of goods, becomes a crucial task in the psychoanalytic ethic.

Lacan likewise reminds us that we should not overlook the predicament of pairing goodness with pleasure - not only because the inherent goodness of any given object is properly incalculable (since such
belief casts the remaining ‘bad’ objects into unsignifying obscurity), but because pleasure is irrevocably bound to desire. It is therefore impossible to conceive of goodness as untouched by human indulgence, or operating in a divinely self-sufficient way outside the margins of “an essentially hedonist problematic” (Ibid 221). There is even a certain dimension to goodness that must remain unexplored - Lacan refers to it as “the good that mustn’t be touched” - since its realization will result in an unbearable surplus of such pleasure, the onslaught of jouissance (Ibid 237). In this sense, the activity of ‘doing good’ for its own sake becomes confused with the pleasure incurred by such behaviour, and the pure motivation of goodness is necessarily clouded by the desires with which it is associated. Suffice it to recall our healthy suspicion of celebrities engaged in philanthropic excesses; simply claiming that ‘one wants to do one’s part for the world’ is apparently insincere, since the other, less flattering desire (favourable publicity or the Other’s recognition, for example) is the unacknowledged surplus pleasure lurking beneath the veneer

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1 Here Lacan cites St. Augustine’s ruminations on the statement, “That everything that is, is good, because it is the work of God.” Augustine states, “And it was manifested unto me, that those things be good which are corrupted; which neither were they sovereignly good, nor unless they were good could be corrupted: for if sovereignly good, they were incorruptible, if not good at all, there was nothing in them to be corrupted. For corruption injures, but unless it diminished goodness, it could not injure. Either then corruption injures not, which cannot be; or which is more certain, all which is corrupted is deprived of good. But if they be deprived of good, they shall cease to be. For if they shall be, and can now no longer be corrupted, they shall be better than before, because they shall abide incorruptibly. And what more monstrous than to affirm things to become better by losing all their good?” (Book VII, Chapter XII. The Confessions of St. Augustine. Trans. Edward B. Pusey. New York: Touchstone, 1997. 107-108). Although, according to Lacan, we may greet Augustine’s angst with “an indulgent smile”, his confusion addresses the ethical remainder that is ‘left out’ of conceptions of universal goodness.
of piety. One can imagine the public outcry that would ensue if a celebrity were to respond to such accusations of solipsistic self-absorption with, “Yes! That is exactly what I am doing! The limit of my goodness is indeed my opportunistic self-interest!” Certainly such an admission would not make for a wise career-advancement strategy – yet despite its absurdity, this response could be construed as a Lacanian Act since, “at the limit of his own good, the subject reveals himself to the never entirely resolved mystery of the nature of his desire” (Ibid 237).

In other words, although the outcome may be in ‘the service of goods’ (whales are saved, orphans are adopted, worthy causes are promoted), the subject who counters a negative reproach with “Yes!” has both acted in conformity with, and accepted responsibility for, his desire – which is itself hardly ‘good.’

This will no doubt provoke some confusion. In the space of a few pages, I have tentatively identified as ‘Acts’ two performed gestures that couldn’t possibly have less in common: a traumatic infanticide that relegates all possibility into the void, and a celebrity’s admission that the public’s reproaches are justified, that his or her only authentically-felt ‘cause’ is him- or herself. If both these incidents can be equally

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2 The issue of the “false tolerance of liberal multiculturalism” (“Passion in the Era of Decaffeinated Belief.” Lacan.com http://www.lacan.com/passion.htm. par. 12) is a common thread throughout Žižek’s critique of Western capitalism. Although the celebrity exemplar never appears in Žižek’s work in the context of the Act (indeed, Žižek would likely disapprove of my decision to cast one of these ambassadors of democratic excess as an agent of the Act), the reader familiar with Žižek’s work will recognize the figure of the smug celebrity as a recurrent archetype in Žižek’s work on tolerance and sacrifice (“On Being Tolerant... and Smug”, “The Antinomies of Tolerant Reason: A Blood-Dimmed Tide is Loosed”), the difficulty of loving one’s neighbour (the chapter “Faith Without Belief” from On Belief and “Love Thy Neighbour? No, Thanks!” in The Plaque of Fantasies), and the cloying spirituality of Western gnosticism (“With or Without Passion” and the chapter “Gnosticism? No, Thanks!” in On Belief).
interpreted as Acts, then why does 'goodness' constitute the divining-line between traditional and psychoanalytic ethics for Lacan? Why, apart from its dismissal in the realm of Aristotelian ethics, does goodness merit address in a psychoanalytic context? The initial temptation to be avoided is to assume that the Act is something deliberately 'bad' conceived against the good, which of course implies a reactionary response to the very symbolic consistency of goodness - a 'breaking of the rules' intended to shake and displace the foundations of the Sovereign Good, but which nonetheless accepts these foundations as the authority against which the Act occurs. Conversely, in Lacan's account, the psychoanalytic ethic and the performance of the Act does not aim to elicit the subject's guilt because his desires may not be 'good', but rather systematically rejects the entire illusion of the Sovereign Good, beginning with its symbolic authority; it does not yield to the cumulative service of goods, and, in operating beyond the margins and limits of goodness, instigates a "radical repudiation of a certain ideal of the good" (Ibid 230). As evinced by my diagram below, goodness and the Lacanian Act do not intersect in the Act's 'breaking away' from goodness (Figure 1.1) so much as run parallel to one another, on separate planes (Figure 1.2):
This diagrammatic analogy is worthwhile because it concedes to the incommensurability between psychoanalytic ethics/the performance of the Act and the existence of goodness in Aristotelian morality without presupposing that the two fields are either ignorant of, or in opposition to, one another. As Lacan asserts, "One shouldn’t be contemptuous of the order of powers... one simply needs to know their limits with relation to our field of inquiry" (Ibid 315): the difference between the two is not a reactionary conflict but a purely structural semiosis.

Consequently, the trait unaire of both Medea’s infanticide and the celebrity’s honesty is their realignment of the symbolic coordinates from which notions of ‘the good’ emerge. Despite their varying traumatic intensities and consequences, both Acts reject the field of possibility - the symbolically mandated forced choices or ‘options’ with which we are presented - and opt for something entirely, radically different. In this context, Medea’s Act is the more comprehensible of the two; Medea does not attempt to prove her worth to Jason and orchestrate his return to his family, nor does she resign herself to life without him, or entertain the possibility of falling in love with another man. Instead, she murders her
own children, which certainly falls outside symbolic expectation or possibility and appears as an authentically, impossibly 'free' choice. As such, it is less a rejection of the other options available to her than a repudiation of the very concept of available options, a refusal of the entire field of (forced) choice. If, according to the logic of forced choice, we are barred from "touch[ing] the dimension of some impossible Real" (Žižek 2000a 121) by 'only wanting what's on the menu', then killing one's own children is tantamount to destroying the menu and setting the restaurant on fire.

My example of the celebrity who responds to accusations of insidious philanthropy and solipsistic self-immersion in the affirmative is somewhat more dubious. The reply, "Yes! That is exactly what I am doing!" certainly appears confined to the field of forced choice, since the two obvious responses to the reproach are either 'yes' or 'no.' What can be construed as radical in opting for a programmatic affirmation or negation within a given field? Would an authentic Act - heretofore defined, at least - not necessitate a more extreme abrogation of the symbolic universe, such as this fictitious celebrity's Medea-esque slaughter or his or her charitably adopted orphan children? The crucial point not to be missed in this understanding of the Act is its potential for subtlety; certainly an annihilative gesture can be easily construed as an Act since it performatively abandons the symbolic universe and its pre-inscribed choices, but an Act can also occur when we reject - or, more precisely, rephrase - the ethical horizon of these choices. In other words, the unexpected response of "Yes!" derails the very consistency of the initial
question or criticism, such that what we refuse is not the insubstantial content of the reproach, but "the underlying premiss that we hitherto shared with the opponent" (Ibid 122). Again, this does not amount to deliberately disobeying a symbolic mandate (since a simple transgression would still enchain us to the parameters of the reproach and would, in a sense, necessitate our belief in the infallibility of the goodness we are subverting), but rather "fully accept[ing] the reproach, changing the very terrain that made it unacceptable" (Ibid). Žižek summarizes this dimension of the Act as follows:

An act does not simply occur within the given horizon of what appears to be 'possible' - it redefines the very contours of what is possible (an act accomplishes what, within the given symbolic universe, appears to be 'impossible', yet it changes its conditions so that it creates retroactively the conditions of its own possibility (Ibid 121).

Rephrased, the response could be articulated as: "Yes! I am doing exactly what you accuse, but my goodness is now inaccessible to you, so you will simply have to assume that my goodness is as good as yours." In this example of the Act, the subject does not strike out blindly at the field of choice and possibility; instead, he removes himself from its very contingency so that - like the diagram of the parallel arrows (Figure 1.2) - he will never properly 'meet' his opponent.

WHAT IS A ŽIŽEKIAN ACT?: CONTINGENCY AND SUBJECTIVITY

Although there exists no school of thought in psychoanalysis exclusively devoted to examinations of its permutations, the Act has more recently been revivified in the work of Lacanian-Marxist philosopher
Slavoj Žižek. While indebted to Lacan’s original formulations of the psychoanalytic ethic, Žižek’s combined critique of postmodernism and a variety of philosophical sensibilities — particularly the Marxist, Hegelian, and Kantian overtones in his work — have engendered a new politico-ideological awareness of the Act which occupies a more centralized and multifarious position in Žižek’s oeuvre than it does in Lacan’s theory. Indeed, a number of scholars who are affiliated with the emerging field of ‘Žižek studies’ — including Sarah Kay (2003), Ian Parker (2004), and particularly Rex Butler (2005) — posit that the Act is a seminal and defining term in Žižek’s work, a prominent component in his contribution to original philosophical thought, and therefore uniquely ‘Žižekian.’ Accordingly, the various interrogations and applications of the Act which appear throughout this project function predominantly as responses to this distinctly Žižekian variant of the Act — a variant which, I contend, is characterized by problematic, although occasionally requisite, inconsistencies between its two dimensions: the narrative-descriptive and the philosophical-unnameable. The specific vicissitudes of the Žižekian Act as it relates to ideology and the global approach to politics will be taken up in the following chapter, while the Act as a facet in postmodernity and sublimation will be taken up in Chapter 3.

Žižek’s preferred method of approaching the Act in theory is via the route of example and identification (not unlike the analogy between Pasolini’s Medea and the Act which I have presented above). His books, essays, and lectures are littered with passing references to the Act which, given Žižek’s penchant for excitable analysis, are often
prematurely abandoned to accommodate other, increasingly complex
perversions generated by the Act's tendency to transform the symbolic
context in which it appears. Across Žižek's body of work, there exists no
single text devoted to an investigation of the Act, although his most
extensive dalliances with the topic appear in *The Indivisible Remainder:*
*An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (1996), *The Ticklish Subject:*
*The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (1999), and *Contingency, Hegemony,*
*Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (2000), the final text
being a conversational series of essays between Žižek, Judith Butler, and
Ernesto Laclau. However, despite the Act's more consolidated position in
these texts, the reader should be cautioned against relying on any single
book or essay for an explication of the Act since Žižek's formulations are
hardly stable. Indeed, reading from Žižek's introductory texts (1991's
*Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* and
most substantial work on postmodernism and choice (1997's *The Plague of*
*Fantasies*), to his treatises on theology (2001's *On Belief* and 2000's *The*
*Fragile Absolute: Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For*?), and
across his specifically politically-motivated texts (2002's *Did Somebody*
*Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions on the (Mis)use of a Notion* and
*The Ticklish Subject*), one will encounter a myriad of 'definitive
explanations' and countless 'examples par excellence' of the Act which -
suffice it to say - are rarely in agreement with one another. Narrative-
specific and often explicitly violent examples from film and literature
are presented alongside examples of positive polito-historical reform, but
all such exemplary agents are eventually abandoned for a properly philosophical dimension which stresses the 'impossible' irreduceability of the Act. The significance of the examples themselves often remain uninterrogated. Some of these examples include (but are certainly not limited to): Mel Gibson’s character in *Ransom* (Ron Howard, 1996) confronting his son’s kidnappers in a televised broadcast, offering the intended ransom moneys to anyone who can provide him with information on the kidnappers and announcing his intention to “pursue them to the end” - a gesture which shocks everyone since he is essentially putting his son’s life at risk (2000b 149). Not limited to gestures of explicit shock or brutality, the Act also appears in ‘Freudian slips’ - unwitting utterances or behaviours which belie an unconscious desire - such as the closeted and repressed schoolteacher Howard Brackett’s accidental exclamation of, “I’m gay!” in place of “I do” at his wedding ceremony in *In and Out* (Frank Oz, 1997) (2000a 122). A particularly ubiquitous example of the Act for Žižek is evinced in a sequence from *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995), wherein a legend relayed in flashback depicts the infamous criminal mastermind Keyser Soze resorting to “the radical gesture of shooting his wife and daughter themselves dead” (2000b 149-150) after apprehending members of a rival gang who are holding them hostage. The Act is also apparent in situations involving the subject’s disavowal of the ‘real state of things’, in his urge to perform the lethal gesture irrespective of its consequences - such as the film noir hero who is compelled to become entangled with the lethal *femme fatale*, despite his full awareness that the affair will ruin him (2002 14). Acts are naturally not delimited
to strictly narrative manifestations, but include positive political reforms which compromise the hegemony of global capitalism, ideally exemplified by the passing of divorce laws in the ardently Catholic Italy of the 1970’s and the abolition of the death penalty under Mitterand in France (1999a 134). According to Žižek, even Lacan himself committed an Act when he disbanded the École Freudienne de Paris before his death in 1979 (2000a 123), but then again, so did Mary Kay Letourneau - the schoolteacher whose "unconditional compulsion to accomplish something she knew very well was against her own Good" (1999a 386) led her to an affair with her 13-year-old student.

While each of the examples presented above serves to individually clarify and contextualize Žižek’s surrounding theoretical engagements with the Act in their corresponding texts, they appear rather incongruous when divorced from the specific conditions they support. St. Paul and the Stalinist bureaucracy, murderous parents, former President Clinton’s proposed Medicare reforms, bipolar pedophiles, and the terrorist attacks of September 11th are all, according to Žižek, exemplary Acts or actors/agents. Although one would certainly demure from crudely requesting a universalized and reductive definition of the Act or a single ‘example par excellence’, the lack of consistency among Žižek’s aphoristic engagements can nonetheless prove frustrating, especially in regards to the mutable position of the subject in and preceding the Act. If it is possible to distinguish between an authentic and an inauthentic Act, can we similarly differentiate a legitimately ‘acting subject’ from one who fails to fulfill this criteria? As my earlier discussion of the Act and the
psychoanalytic ethic evinces, that which occurs after an Act is clear enough - it generates its own historical possibility after the fact, such that we are only able (from our present standpoint) to conceive its effects against the background of this Act that 'changed everything',\(^3\) in much the same way that Medea's infanticide in Pasolini's film retroactively dissolves the symbolic consistency of her life and renders everything 'impossible.' Yet addressing the subject himself who endeavours to Act, who makes this impossible, 'crazy' choice in the face of forced choice, or is irresistibly compelled to commit this Act for whatever reason, is a far more contentious undertaking. For although the Act involves the "radical gesture of subverting the very structuring principle of [a given] field" (2000a 121), Žižek's decision to engage the Act beyond abstraction, to identify its manifestations in ordinary empirical reality, requires a unique form of justification which accounts for the acting subject's state of mind.

According to Žižek, all acting subjects share a need to "renounce the transgressive fantasmatic supplement that attaches [them] to... the grip of existing social reality" (2000b 149) - much like the fictitious celebrity (discussed earlier) who realigns the symbolic coordinates of a

\(^3\) Žižek employs the concept of revolution and its presently-discernible causes to illustrate the Act's post-facto instigation of causality, retroactively organizing or laying out the historical conditions of an event which are only clarified because the Act effectively 'called them into being': "The engaged observer perceives positive historical occurrences as parts of the Event of the French Revolution only to the extent that he observes them from the unique engaged standpoint of Revolution - as Badiou puts it, an Event is self-referential in that it includes its own designation: the symbolic designation 'French Revolution' is part of the designated content itself, since, if we subtract this designation, the described content turns into a multitude of positive occurrences available to knowledge. In this precise sense, an Event involves subjectivity: the engaged 'subjective perspective' on the Event is part of the Event itself" (The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology. London: Verso, 1999a. pp. 136-137).
reproach by refusing to concede to its conditions. Yet the Act extends beyond semantic petulance, and such refusals or repudiations on the subject’s part are often injurious, striking at the very core of his being. Indeed, Žižek asserts that the radical difference of the Act, in its rejection of the field of possibility in favour of the ‘crazy’ choice, can be partially attributed to the subject’s decision to “strik[e] at himself, at what is most precious to himself” (2000a 122). In other words: this is not an exercise in praxis⁴, where the subject reaffirms his humanity and upholds the fundamental fantasy through some positive action, but rather a recognition of one’s own nothingness – a traversing of the fantasy – wherein the subject “accepts the void of his nonexistence” (1999a 281).

We can locate a particularly poignant variant of such excremental identification or concession to nonexistence in the famous conclusion to King Vidor’s 1937 film, Stella Dallas. Stella, the film’s protagonist, knows that her beloved daughter Lollie will benefit greatly from the wealth and prosperity offered by her fiance’s family; however, Stella also realizes that she must absent herself from Lollie’s life, inciting Lollie to abandon her so that Lollie can live happily and without the guilt of knowing that she abandoned a ‘good’ mother. Orchestrating a meeting with Lollie and her fiance, Stella feigns vulgarity – pretending to be drunk and carrying on an illicit affair – and Lollie, upset and disappointed, abandons her mother and marries her fiance in a lavish ceremony. Most

interpretations of the film’s conclusion emphasize the noble selflessness of Stella’s ‘beautiful sacrifice’ but question the necessity of her forfeiture; conversely, in Žižek’s reading of the film, Stella’s sacrifice is so extraordinary because it is one which “every good parent” should make out of love for his child (Rasmussin par. 42). However, the purpose of such a sacrifice is far from narcissistic self-commemoration, meaning that Stella’s Act is not motivated by the assumption that Lollie will eventually realize her mistake and marvel at Stella’s selflessness and nobility. Rather, Stella’s awareness that her daughter’s happiness is contingent on the dissolution of the maternal signifier compels a total erasure from her daughter’s life, deliberately engineered to never attain the dignity of a sacrificial gesture, even in remembrance. In this respect, Stella’s decision to ‘strike at that which is most precious to her’ (her loving relationship with her daughter) does not guarantee her place in history so much as her omission from it, much in the same way that the Act itself - due to its monumental impact on historical

5 In an article comparing Vidor’s 1937 version to John Erman’s 1990 remake Stella, Janet Maslin’s analysis of Stella’s enduring archetypal charm argues that the character’s “popularity as a soapsuds heroine is in no way compromised by the fact that she happens not to make any sense” (par. 3). Suspicious that Stella’s sacrificial motivations are contrary to her awareness of her own vulgarity, Maslin questions if “it is really necessary, in any version of this story, for Stella to step out of her daughter’s life for the sake of the young woman’s happiness? She could accomplish the very same thing by electing not to dress herself like a float at the Rose Bowl parade” (par. 4). (Maslin, Janet. “Shed a Tear for Stella, Still Noble but Senseless.” The New York Times. Sunday February 11, 1990. http://movies2.nytimes.com/mem/movies/review.html?_r=2&title1=STELLA%20DALLAS%20(MOVIE)&title2=&reviewer=Janet%20Maslin&pdate=&v_id=oref=login&oref=login).
It is via the route of Stella's conscious omission from history, of her certainty that the Act will never triumphantly 'belong' to her but unwittingly to the child for which the sacrifice was made, that we are now in a position to properly confront the filmic Medea's final assertion that "nothing is possible anymore." This position's relationship to Stella Dallas is hardly incidental, since Žižek's stipulation that Stella's sacrifice (an Act) should be carried out by every parent implicitly appends an injunction to the Act itself: just as one should only have children when one is prepared to sacrifice his own reputation for the child's happiness and - more drastically - devise the child's rejection of its own parent, one should similarly only commit an Act insofar as one is willing to say, "Nothing is possible anymore." This is precisely Žižek's point when he asserts that Medea's radicality is unique in its ability to "out-violence Power itself" or "out-universalize universal Power itself" (2001 158 fn. 24), but this total negation and upending of Aristotelian morality/the order of powers is likewise the background of every authentic Act: it is precisely the a-heroic dimension which

6 To do otherwise - that is, to fully acknowledge and celebrate the causal chain of Acts - would ensnare us in a fatalistic deadlock, or in a paradoxical 'service of Acts' which would necessitate our reaching ever further back into history to locate the generative Act which was somehow more authentic than the others. As such, while the Act may indeed 'change everything', it is a change that can rarely be acknowledged. The failure to write the originary gesture out of history is narratively exemplified in Tom Tykwer's Run Lola Run (1998), in which the life or death of Lola's boyfriend is determined by how quickly she runs down the stairs immediately after receiving his phonecall. In the chapters "Run, Isolde, Run" (Opera's Second Death) and "Run, Witek, Run" (The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-Theory), Žižek discusses this same film in the slightly different context of contingency and the 'new' postmodern attraction to hypertext as a form of narrative causality (Opera's Second Death. New York: Routledge, 2002. pp. 197-200 and The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-Theory. London: BFI, 2001. pp. 80-82).
evacuates any psychic logic the subject may ascribe to 'his' Act, effectively vitiating its identity as 'his' and relegating it to an invisible position of universality in history. It is this distinction which leads Žižek to identify Medea as the "anti-Antigone" (2001 158 fn. 24) and claim that "it is time, against the overblown celebration of Antigone, to reassert Medea, her uncanny, disturbing counterpart, as the subject of an authentic act" (2000b 152); despite Antigone's prominent place in philosophy as the emissary of the Act (this position will be discussed extensively in the section which follows), Žižek contends that Medea's destruction of everything in her life - even and especially the 'ties that bind' - does not merely position her against "the universality of the public space of State Power" (2001 158 fn. 24). This contrary stance is the one assumed by Antigone, whose Act appears in her defiant loyalty to "particular family roots" (Ibid), while Medea makes no such compromise and obliterates every symbolic determinant. In short, the 'risk' which the acting subject, like Medea, must always be prepared to take - which he or she in fact must actively undertake prior to committing the Act - is an exclusion from his or her own radical freedom.

**PLEASE DROP THE SUBJECT: IDENTITY AND NON-IDENTITY IN THE ACT**

In the midst of the many exemplary Acts and agents that can be identified in the supposedly apolitical convenience of narrative fictions, it is essential to bear in mind that the Act is a category which structurally supplements some Real or sublime missing content, but itself does not index or express a concrete humanist politics. Although these
issues of sublimation, politics, and ideology will be explored extensively in the following chapter, it is necessary at this point to distinguish the Act from the subject’s reassertion of his agency; in the latter gesture of praxis, the subject performs a portentous, life-altering gesture which affirms his selfhood in a positive way and allows him to ‘count his losses’ or measure his sacrifices apropos of their symbolic value (i.e., ‘the greater good’, at the behest of a particular minority contingent, and so on). Žižek characterizes this mistaken belief as a deception, where the subject’s reiteration of “‘Look, I suffer, therefore I am, I exist, I participate in the positive order of being’” (1999a 281), misses the point: it is not the content of the Act which the subject risks, the empirical objects that he sacrifices - these, like Medea’s children, are already dead and ‘lost’ after the Act. Rather, what the acting subject risks at every stage in the Act is his very existence, the realization that “beyond all social obligations, the very core of [his] being [is] at stake in it…” (Ibid 386). It is in this respect that ‘post-Marxist’ (Ernesto Laclau, 2000) and feminist (Judith Butler, 2000) critics of the Act and its realignment of contingency often err since, in their search for a concrete politics of the Act, they are unprepared to credit the subject’s excremental identification as a free choice.

The contention of these critics is as follows: If, according to the Lacanian assertion that there is no existence or ‘livable position’ beyond the symbolic, then this acting subject or agent must simply be retreading the locus of some hegemonic power structure, ‘acting’ (unwillingly) on its behalf, and risking his identity in service of a system that demands his
surrender to his own nothingness. This notion of the individuated subject in conflict with the oppressive authority of the Big Other is one of the arguments presented by feminist theorist Judith Butler in her analysis of Antigone - another woman of Greek mythology who is credited with radicalizing our conception of the authentic Act. In Sophocles' dramatization of the myth, Antigone deliberately defies an edict prohibiting her brother Polynices' burial, since he had led the Argive army in its attack on Thebes. Apprehended in the act of attempting to bury her brother, Antigone accepts her own death sentence in the face of traitorous accusations, but hangs herself before learning that King Creon has overturned the sentence and intends to both spare her life and afford Polynices a burial with full military honours. Contrary to Hegelian and Lacanian interpretations of Antigone's Act, Butler stresses the imbalance of power in psychoanalytic readings which causes 'purely theoretical' symbolic qualifiers to descend into practical applications of heterosexist social normativity. Since the distinction "between symbolic and social law cannot finally hold" (Butler 2000c 19), it becomes clear that, for Butler, what is 'lost' in this Lacanian Act - and crucially lost to the sociosymbolic order - is Antigone herself, and her death is "precisely a limit that requires to be read as that operation of political power that forecloses what forms of kinship will be intelligible, what kinds of lives can be countenanced as living" (Ibid 29). Disregarding the fact that Butler's positioning of the symbolic against the 'social law' incorrectly relies on a distinction that Lacan himself never makes (since all law - socially practiced and exclusionary or not - takes root in the symbolic),
the crux of Butler’s argument here amounts to little more than an adolescent rebuking of authority, a ‘who’s to say what’s ‘normal’?’ attitude, or a call for the subject’s self-affirming repudiation of the Act’s necessary erasures. And although there is a certain comfort in the subject’s belief in his own inherent radicality, his natural opposition to hegemonic systems of power that seek to devalue his worth and uniqueness, Butler’s project of locating “emancipatory struggle primarily in... marginal agents’ resistance against state regulatory mechanisms” (Žižek 2000a 313) problematically redefines the Act as a willful personal politic which ‘strikes out’ at injustice.

Butler’s position merits critique in this context because it unwittingly reinstates the subject’s deference to the ‘service of goods’ (itself an order of power) which, as was previously discussed, Lacan discredits as counterproductive. Furthermore, Butler’s focus on the sociosymbolic order’s propensity for corruption - which the Act apparently destabilizes, if only temporarily - again locates the subject on an ethical continuum that requires him to measure the relative value of ‘striking at that which is most precious to him’ against the humanitarian gains incurred by ‘striking out’ at injustice. However, as Žižek - apropos of Lacan - reminds us, the acting subject does not transform reality so much as add himself to it by “assuming responsibility for it” (1989 220), and, in risking absolutely everything, effectively positions himself as
contrary to nothing in particular. Consequently, in a scenario of selfless but necessarily unacknowledged/anonymous sacrifice such as the one described in *Stella Dallas*, we can see how Butler’s logic would impose a ruthless relativity onto the Act, positioning its actualization within an investment logic (losses versus gains) that would be disproportionate to the Act’s authentic character of ‘insanity’ or traumatic immediacy. In Butler’s terms, the Act cannot change history without inscribing itself within it, which – despite her claims to the contrary – unavoidably restricts this ‘Act’ to the very sociosymbolic parameters it seeks to disrupt, delimiting its social changes (however positive or ‘good’ they may be) to the symbolic universe of available forced choices: one either concedes to the limit or transgresses it, but can never properly reposition its very symbolic consistency. In other words, had Stella ‘acted’ according to Butler’s divisive terms, then her rebellion would involve a premeditated calculation of both the amount and the ‘cost’ of her immanent loss (some of her dignity and most of her daughter’s love), while Vidor’s Stella makes no such pedantic concessions. She is instead fully aware that she will lose everything at an insurmountable cost, and performs the sacrifice for these very reasons rather than despite them.

Although ascribing to Butler’s insistence that the Act should perform some positive social function (and, by extension, normalize its own radicality) is contrary to Lacan’s designation of the analyst’s desire —

7 When attempting to envision the acting subject’s position in relation to the order of powers, one should also recall Žižek’s comment that Medea’s Act “out-universalizes universal Power itself” (*On Belief*. London: Routledge, 2001. pp. 158 fn, 24). Contrary to Butler’s position on Antigone, which stresses the aberrant criminality of the Act (53), the Žižekian/Lacanian Act is always-already beyond criminality and transgression and therefore cannot properly be equated with them.
as "a non-desire to cure" (1986 219), the reader's curiosity over the status of the acting subject - his behaviours and transformations - is nonetheless inevitable. However, this inclination to 'stay with the individual subject' that is so overindulgent in Butler is precisely the dimension that is lacking in Žižek's discussions of the Act, given that the exemplary acting (narrative) subject for Žižek always stops short of, or relinquishes his utilitarian function to, the very Act he commits. This is partially a philosophical truism - albeit a frustrating one - since we know from Lacan that 'subject' is itself in the order of the symbolic and must therefore be abandoned if we wish to explore beyond its borders. Indeed, even identifying the Act in retrospect neutralizes its potency by relegating its essential characteristics of surprise and undecidability to symbolic determinism (i.e., an 'Act' only occurs when all the necessary conditions for its occurrence are in place). Although I have already addressed the dangers inherent in fatalistically attributing each Act to its categorical contingencies, Žižek's fluctuation between the so-called 'acting subject' and the Act independent of the subject is partially a defense against such historicism. This is why, for Žižek, the exemplary acting agent (Medea, Keyser Soze, Mary Kay Letourneau, and so on) is primarily a placeholder for the very idea of the Act, filling in the space which opens up between a synchronic performed gesture and its diachronic signification. With regards to the Act, the gap bridged by the subject in Žižek's work is, quite simply, between an (actual) Act and the (potential) Act (Figure 1.3):
Žižek asserts that,

The very emergence of a synchronous symbolic order implies a gap, a discontinuity in the diachronic causal chain that led up to it, a 'missing link' in the chain. Fantasy is an a contrario proof that the status of the subject is that of a 'missing link', of a void which, within the synchronous set, holds the place of its foreclosed diachronic genesis (1991a 198).

In this respect, it is certainly possible to read Žižek's 'abandonment' of the subject (or, more precisely, his transition in discussions of the Act from illustrative narrativized application to pure theory) constructively, since this strategy effectively 'breaks the chain' of historicist contingency.

Yet despite its philosophical and structural credence, Žižek's strategy of absenting the acting subject from his analyses of the Act is not impervious to criticism. To avoid a misunderstanding: my contention is not that Žižek evacuates the subject entirely from his philosophical discussions of the Act (to do so would be impossible), but rather that the concrete (actual) narrative referents he identifies as 'examples par excellence' are often disavowed in favour of an abstracted (potential) subject and hermetically-sealed high theory: Keyser Soze gives way to Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History", Mary Kay
Letourneau yields to Alain Badiou's conception of the Event, and Kevin Kline's unwitting admission of his homosexuality in *In and Out* turns to discussions of Schelling's *Weltalter* drafts. Surely this vacillation between high theory and 'low' culture is characteristic of Žižek's entire oeuvre, but in the context of the Act it appears avoidant. As was previously mentioned, invoking the mutable position of the subject in and preceding the Act involves a very particular form of justification which accounts for the subject (in all his ordinary vulgarity) without taking Butlerian measures to humanistically legitimate him. As such, what must be addressed is the Act in relation to the subject of psychoanalysis - a subject who is himself paradoxically defined through the very 'orders' of Otherness which his Act will subvert. This is precisely the precarious territory that will be explored throughout the remainder of this project: the Act as a category of the subject, whose performance is contingent on the subject's free choice but which nonetheless remains beyond the grasp of his will, can never properly 'belong' to him or any ideological signification, and indeed can only endure when it is lost to him and severed from causality.
CHAPTER 2: THE ACTING SUBJECT AND THE OTHER OF IDEOLOGY

THAT SELF-INFRINGEMENT SHOT TO THE FOOT: PARTIAL SOLUTIONS

One question pertaining to the Act which is often implied (but generally elided) by its critics is why anyone would ever want to commit one. It certainly seems an unpleasant and often painfully fruitless ordeal of self-obliteration: excremental identification, concession to one's own nothingness or self-relating negativity, and a radical restructuring of the realm of possibility that one's present/acting self cannot survive or sustain. Concurrently, noteworthy agents of the Act demean themselves and others so brutally, furthering the social regression from "Bad to Worse" (Žižek 1999a 377) so utterly (your husband has abandoned you? Kill your children!), that one wonders how an Act could ever suspend its destructive impulses long enough to properly 'address' its ideological effects - 'ideological' here denoting less how the Act comes to change the world so much as our shared ability to acknowledge this change. This is precisely the intimation of political theorist Ernesto Laclau when he critiques Slavoj Žižek's position on the Act and its total structural...
involution as a failure of global politics. According to Laclau, Žižek's decision to oppose "partial solutions within a horizon to changes in the horizon as such" (198) reveals the abyssal futility of the Act; for Laclau, partial solutions are the individual conditions of a situation which render it worthwhile, while the horizon itself is purely structural and intangible. In ignoring the constitutive elements of a given horizon, one is undertaking a hopeless enterprise: there can be no concrete achievement/outcome of the Act, no authentic ideological potentiality in its performance, unless we can finally agree "about what a horizon is and about the logic of its constitution. Is it a ground of the social? Is it an imaginary construction totalizing a plurality of discrete struggles" (Ibid)? This response addresses Žižek's contention that the Act cannot be conceived as something which, as was mentioned in the previous chapter apropos of Judith Butler, 'strikes out' as a reactionary or curative response to an identifiable injustice. Such an approach to the Act would necessarily inspire in the reader a reaction of pragmatic evaluation and anchor the Act to some historicist impasse – i.e., infanticide as a retaliation against a husband's abandonment is surely 'overreacting.' What good would it do? Such evaluative ascriptions are inconsequential for both Lacan and Žižek, since the Act for them does not appear as a solution to a partial problem "within a given field", but rather subverts "the very structuring principle of the field" (Žižek 2000a

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8 Although Laclau is critical of much of Žižek's work, for our purposes his objections will be limited to three of his essays: "Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics" (44-89), "Structure, History, and the Political" (182-212), and "Constructing Universality" (281-307) in Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left. London: Verso, 2000a.
the Act is therefore perpetually out of joint with any curative or consequential impulses, and especially with humanist aspirations to 'solve problems.' Recall here Lacan's distinction in Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis between goodness (a symbolic condition) and the ethical Act's radical rejection of the symbolically-mandated margins of such goodness (218-240).

It therefore follows that any philosophical approach seeking a concrete humanism will, like Laclau, object to the Act as insular, 'anti-ideological', and 'apolitical' - at least within that faction of global politics where ethics are conceived against the horizon of the Good. For Laclau, the entire sphere of the Act and its relation to forced choice - "a choice that is motivated by no good" (Lacan 1986 240) - is nothing if not defeatist, willfully ignorant of its potential for positive historical change, and "a prescription for political quietism and sterility" (293).

The psychoanalytic claim that the Act restructures the very contours of ideology, possibility, and involvement (and can therefore never be 'against' them in the structural sense) is irrelevant to Laclau, since our inability to bridge the gap between (ethical) theory and (humanist) practice denotes a 'fated' and dangerous indifference which is apolitical in itself. In this respect, the 'radicality' of rejecting the pre-inscribed choices of the symbolic universe and refiguring the principles of a given horizon is far from inherent in or native to the Act, since there exists no consensus of what comprises this horizon.

This is certainly true in the sense that the Act escapes universal definition, but Laclau's objection also criticizes Žižek's vacillation
between locating the Act in like-minded revolutionary reform (the convergence of a multitude of individual wills) which is achieved as if by a theological 'miracle', and finding evidence of the the same impulses in comparatively petty individual gestures of brutal violence. An ideal example of the former variety of Act (positive ideological amalgamation) would be Žižek’s discussion in The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology of the Italian referendum on divorce in the 1970’s. Despite the widespread assumption that the people of Italy were “not yet mature enough, that they would be frightened by the intense Catholic propaganda” (1999a 134), a majority of 60% unified for ‘the greater good’ and voted for the right to divorce. The latter variety of Act is committed by a single individual irrespective of its catastrophic consequences “for [his] well-being and for the well-being of [his] nearest and dearest” (Ibid 2002 14), and its effects may not penetrate that horizon of possibility beyond the individual’s insular existence; such Acts can be recognized in Medea’s infanticide, Stella Dallas’ sacrifice of her reputation, and Keyser Soze’s murder of his wife and children. The properly humanist complaint expressed by Laclau over the absence of a unified ‘measure’ of radicality - the revolutionary goal towards which agents aspire yet ultimately subvert and redefine in their performance of the Act - can therefore be traced back to an evaluative position of goodness/justice which is incommensurable with Žižek’s identification of positive revolutionary reform and mercenary brutality as equally radical Acts. This harkens back to my earlier distinction in the previous chapter between Medea’s utterly destructive murder of her children and the
fictitious celebrity's somewhat less apocalyptic realignment of the symbolic coordinates of goodness implied in a reproach: they certainly appear as unequal exemplars of the Act's radicality, so why does one not 'count' for more than the other? If one can effectively 'change the world' or "bring about a global human emancipation" (Laclau 197) by means of an Act, how can anything less ever appear equal?

Particularly problematic in Laclau's insistence on a unified horizon of radicality is the implicit historicist limit it generates; granted, from Laclau's perspective this limit should be in place to prevent the hazardous transition from radicalism to anarchism, but it is also a limit which, by necessity, must remain unacknowledged by the Act. As was explained in the previous chapter, the 'crazy' dimension of free choice in which the Act is executed cannot sustain the symbolic arena of forced choices, including distinctions of extremity/degree; but rather than 'breaking away' from this symbolic limit and eschewing forced choices for deliberately transgressive 'bad choices', the Act - in all of its authentic freedom and insanity - is perpetually beyond the parameters of the symbolic. The historicist limit which Laclau aspires to establish with his unified horizon - a limit which he himself later ironically invalidates as generating an a priori restriction on "what is historically achievable through mass action" (2000a 293) - is therefore intended to 'protect' the safety of the Act's agents, ensuring that nothing in either variety of Act is unfairly devalued in favour of the resultant radical outcome. In Laclau's interpretation, Žižek's refusal to compare one Act against another (regardless of how politically monumental or insignificant
it may appear) always results in the totalizing degradation of whichever historical dimension the Act does not touch: the Italian referendum on divorce would, from Laclau’s perspective, depreciate "a plurality of discrete struggles" (Laclau 2000a 198), while Keyser Soze’s cold-blooded execution of his family would disparagingly cathect a "partial historical achievement with a symbolic significance far transcending [it]" (Ibid 197). Of course, what Laclau - in his endeavour to safeguard both the acting agent and his political motivation against degradation - absolutely cannot accept is the Act’s basis in the subject’s ‘self-degradation’, his acceptance of his own nothingness, or excremental identification. Since for Laclau, as for Judith Butler, the acting subject and his Act must remain ensconced in history or occupy a place in the historical record in order to make a (positive) contribution to global politics, the Act is tantamount to signification itself, but his formulation excludes the suspension and subversion of such signification.

Although Laclau’s objections are not particularly constructive to a psychoanalytic approach to the Act, Žižek’s subsequent response to these criticisms, and particularly his invocation of Laclau’s own terminology of ‘partial problems or solutions’, is illuminating. Since the Act does not endeavour to “solve a variety of partial problems’ within a given field” but rather makes “the more radical gesture of subverting the very structuring principle of this field” (Žižek 2000a 121), the reader is left wondering which problems are identified as ‘partial’ and therefore incidental to the Act. In this respect, Laclau makes a germane complaint when he contends that we must identify a consolidated horizon/field to
overthrow or subvert before we attribute various efforts as successful/
authentic or unsuccessful/inauthentic (since these are certainly
designations of Otherness), but his approach is deficient: can the same
not be said of the partial problems and solutions which the Act does not
encompass? The Act itself is always a free choice, it will always remain
somewhat elusive in its insanity (recall here Janet Maslin’s
characterization of Stella Dallas’ sacrifice as “senseless”) (par. 4), but
those elements that must be absented to ensure its authenticity are
accessible to us via the route of the Act’s agent - the subject. In other
words, we should not only question the specific conditions of an Act, but,
more crucially, the specific conditions of the subject which it excludes.

This problematic dimension of self-relating negativity in the acting
subject is partially addressed in an unpublished essay by Bruno Boostels
(“Badiou without Žižek”), which essentially extends Laclau’s argument for
positive political change to the Žižekian Act’s negative ramifications on
the agent of change. According to Boostels, Žižek’s emphasis on
excremental identification in the Act constitutes both an a priori
quashing of partial solutions and ideological potentiality (Laclau’s
position), as well as an abasement of the subject and his contributions:

What causes are there to be kept alive from a
psychoanalytical perspective, if for the latter the
most radical act consists in the subject’s defining
gesture of pure negativity that precedes and undermines
every one of the possible candidates?... Before any
inscription of a new truth even has a chance to take
place, actually blocking this process in advance by
virtue of a structural necessity, the death drive
always already has had to come first to wipe the slate
clean (Boostels quoted in Žižek 2006 64).
Responding to this interpretation, Žižek’s rejoinder that Boostels is conflating “two notions of negativity: 'pure' self-relating negativity and negativity as an ethico-practical failure, as a betrayal of a positive project” (Žižek 2006 64) can equally be levied against Laclau’s refusal to acknowledge that the entire horizon of possibility subverted by the Act includes every ‘partial solution.’ What the subject experiences in the Act is therefore not barred from contributing to some eventually-realized positive order, but the subject himself is barred from the knowledge of his own potentiality as an agent, his own ‘ideological’ dimension. Just as the Act itself has no place in the historical record and indeed must be omitted from it to ensure any retroactively-generated potency/potential, so must the subject be completely prostrated to his own radical gesture, renouncing the freedom he enjoys in merely ‘making a decision’ in favour of the blind compulsion of simply “hav[ing] to do it, because of the inexorable ethical injunction” (Ibid 2002 14). As with Butler, in Laclau and Boostels we again encounter the deadlock of acknowledging the acting subject, of indexing him as the performer of the Act - who, like all subjects, is perpetually undoing and redoing the deadlock of his constitutive Otherness - without relinquishing his radical negativity to the evaluative strategies of goodness and justice so endemic to humanist legitimation.

THE SUBJECT OF THE OTHER AND THE ACT THAT CHANGES THE WORLD

What was implied as a possibility in the conclusion of the previous chapter must now be clarified and assume its full presence in the context
of the subject's excluded partiality in, or submission to, the Act: what ultimately 'counts' in this formulation, and what Butler, Laclau, and Boostels neglect as decisive in the Žižekian Act (and its Lacanian progenitor), is whether or not one is prepared to take as its foundation the subject of psychoanalysis. And although this is not at all Laclau's intention when he demands a unified horizon of radicality against which to evaluate all Acts, the subject himself should be the very horizon which Laclau seeks. The fact that this disagreement between Laclau/Boostels and Žižek transpires in the arena of global politics and not in the minutiae of the subject who, in a single motion, effects and disappears from that very politic, prematurely vitiates any consensus on the Act's ideological ground. Recall that, for Lacan as well as for Žižek, the subject is always and can only be defined in relation to the symbolic order, and is a 'subject' only "by virtue of his subjection to the field of the Other" (Lacan 1988 188); in other words, until the subject appears in a symbolic context which precedes him and integrates himself into that order of Otherness, he remains essentially unenunciated, an acephalous pure drive.

Yet for Laclau, the Act's violent intrusion into the subject's 'partiality' - his need to address and rectify a given set of partial problems - is ultimately futile and politically counterproductive; the subject must be protected from the Act's totalizing tendency to derail "the social and cultural pluralism existing in a given society" (Laclau 293). However, the very notion of safeguarding the subject against his own negativity is absurd from a psychoanalytic perspective, since for Lacan it
is only in the moment of excremental identification that the subject loosens himself from primordial solipsism and takes up a lived position in relation to his Real-Symbolic-Imaginary Other, “the principle of his own disappearance” (Durand 863). As such, when we speak of the acting subject we include by necessity the subject’s founding disappearance into the symbolic fiction9, his ‘subjection’ to the field of Otherness; the acting subject’s gesture never denotes absolute freedom or total hegemonic enchainment, but a double-scansion of inevitability (I must act, regardless of the terrible consequences) and intentionality/responsibility which Žižek abridges as “I cannot do otherwise, yet I am none the less fully free in doing it” (1999a 376). The subject’s constitution in order of Otherness cannot be overlooked, and although the Act may certainly subvert the constellations of symbolization, this says little of the acting subject’s relationship to the order his performance casts asunder. The following pages will elucidate the subject’s varying positions of ‘activity’ in regards to the Other’s location in the symbolic, Real, and imaginary realms.

An example which accounts for the restructuring of the symbolic order through the subject’s dual submission to and freedom in the Act, appears in the conclusion to Frank Capra’s 1944 film, Arsenic and Old Lace. Upon discovering on his wedding day that his beloved elderly aunts Abby and Martha have murdered thirteen lonely bachelors and buried their

9 Žižek summarizes this moment as the one in which the subject rejects any infantile claims to uniqueness and irreducibility, and in which “I renounce the treasure within myself and fully admit my dependence on the externality of symbolic apparatuses - that is to say, fully assume the fact that my very self-experience of a subject who was already there prior to the external process of interpellation is a retrospective misrecognition brought about by the process of interpellation” (2000a 134 fn. 48).
bodies in the cellar, Mortimer Brewster spends a hectic night neglecting his new bride and attempting to conceal his aunts' homicidal secrets from the various visitors to the house. Despite their bubbly personalities and renown in the community as "two of the dearest, sweetest, kindest old ladies that ever walked the earth", Aunts Abby and Martha are both clearly insane, and steadfast in their shared belief that their victims were miserable men with "nothing left to live for." After a series of delightful Capra-esque capers and misunderstandings, the director of the local insane asylum arrives with the police lieutenant to commit Mortimer's cousin Teddy for reasons unrelated to the murders, whereupon the aunts unexpectedly protest: "Commit us too!" Mortimer, realizing that his aunts can escape punishment and incarceration for their murders in the insane asylum, is delighted by their surprising demand and agrees that his aunts belong in the asylum. The papers are signed, and by the time Aunts Abby and Martha begin to cheerfully relay the details of their murders to the director and the lieutenant, their confessions are overlooked as the wild imaginings of two insane women; the film concludes with the self-committed aunts and Teddy happily departing for the asylum while the bodies of their victims remain undiscovered in the cellar.

This conclusion (which, despite its moral bankruptcy, is clearly coded as a 'happy ending') can be read via the route of two ascending 'levels' of Lacanian interpretation qua the Act. In the first level we have the symbolic order, the domain of the Law and the Big Other 'going about its business' as it does - the police lieutenant and the director of the asylum arrive at the Brewster home in an attempt to restore the peace.
What eventually transpires, however, is far from conventional justice: order is indeed restored (the Brewster sisters cannot add to their collection of dead bachelors), but the considerable detour through which this order passes initially appears to demean its efficacy. Essentially, the Brewster sisters are committed because they are perceived as two doddery old women, but the fact that their penchant for serial killing remains unaddressed by the Public Symbolic Law does not retract from the film’s happy ending. Why is this? In ‘doing the right thing for the wrong reasons’, the symbolic order here evinces that such happy endings are always contingent on the smooth regulation of its own self-deception; what the Public Symbolic Law absolutely cannot sustain is the very ‘whole truth and nothing but the truth’ which it demands of its subjects (to confront it directly would be too disruptive), so it circumvents the truth and, in taking this detour, eventually arrives at some equally valid truth-event. This is a variable outcome what Žižek has termed ‘the inherent transgression’, wherein the system of symbolic domination generates its own obscene supplements and perverse by-products as a means of maintaining its stability and supremacy (2000c 6,7). As such, when the subject positions himself against the symbolic order and attempts to destabilize it by transgressing its boundaries, the Big Other has more than anticipated this attack – it has, in fact, preinscribed the disturbance into its very constitution, and offers the transgression to the subject as a forced choice. In Arsenic and Old Lace, where the truth revealed by the Brewster sisters is mistaken for delusional insanity, murder is simply an
inherent transgression which supports propriety, or the long detour one takes to eventually arrive at a happy, orderly outcome.

The crucial point not to be missed in this restrictive symbolic strategy is that one can effectively break away from it, but only insofar as one is prepared to commit an Act. As was previously discussed, this Act rejects the forced choices or available transgressions offered as symbolic fictions and, more radically, derails the very concept of choice by opting for free action in all its insanity. In the context of this example, it is the Brewster sisters' decision to commit themselves to an asylum for reasons unrelated to their psychosis that appears as an authentic Act. The Big Other, here poorly disguised as a literal agent of the Law (lieutenant and asylum director), effectively presents Aunts Abby and Martha with the option to either confess their crimes and suffer the appropriate punishment or to remain silent and continue on as before. Unexpectedly, the Brewster sisters demand incarceration without punishment, a choice which the Law does not proffer, but which also does not appear to disturb the smooth operation of the symbolic order (the film ends 'happily', the Brewster sisters escape persecution, the lieutenant and the asylum director have restored order but remain blissfully unaware of its misguided path): in other words, the Act has cut through symbolic determinism, but the Big Other remarkably seems to remain unscathed. This

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10 Their primary reason for demanding to go to the asylum is to accompany their nephew Teddy, but later while signing their own commitment papers they comment that the asylum will be a nice change of pace, that they are dissatisfied with their current neighbourhood since it has "changed so much", and that it will be a welcome change to not be responsible for the upkeep of a house.
appearance denotes the second level of Lacanian interpretation apropos of the Act.

In my diagram above, the Act is depicted as intersecting the two ascending levels of the inherent transgression and the 'positive' outcome which, when undisturbed, bear witness to the efficiency of symbolic fictions (i.e., despite any number of transgressions, the system's initiation/regulation of these infractions ensures a codified outcome). Yet the Act's radical intervention does not preclude the likelihood of a 'happy ending', even in its retroactive reconfiguration of this very condition of possibility. Furthermore, the appearance of the positive outcome as a triumph of the symbolic order certainly seems to suggest that the Act has effected little more than a minor, inconsequential disturbance — after all, order has been restored, the Brewster sisters are safely locked away, and the Law's success in self-deception is not undermined by its means of arriving at the 'wrong truth.' However, the reader must be cautioned against approaching the Act as such a disturbance, even and especially if the symbolic order appears to 'regain' its consistency and return to 'business as usual' following the Act's performance. What is at
stake here is a total structural involution which pivots or turns on the Act, in the sense that the symbolic order does not simply give ground to sanctioning a rebellious display, but is thoroughly duped into a sense of supremacy. The Act does not designate the dissolution of the symbolic dominion in the conventional sense, where some assertion of anti-authoritarian autonomy or Leftist-utopic insurgency would appear as a 'shock to the system' - and nor does the symbolic order work tirelessly to neutralize the harmful effects of the Act or integrate its unsettling subversion into the system the way that political spin-doctors gentrify and clarify the excessive anti-PC blunders of politicians. Rather, despite the fact that the Act is a successful performance in every respect, despite our inability to approach the symbolic order from the same perspective after the Act has repositioned its coordinates, the system of symbolic domination must remain ignorant of the Act's effects: we can therefore see how the operation works both ways, since the Act occurs beyond the arena of forced symbolic choices and the Public Symbolic Law cannot retaliate against and normalize an Act with the preinscribed efficiency afforded the inherent transgression. Simply stated, what the Act achieves is not a momentary suspension of the hegemonic order to initiate some temporary, imminently threatened change, but rather a subversion of the symbolic order which is so irreversible that the order itself remains unaware and unable to predict/preinscribe the reformation - it is limited instead to historically absorbing the Act's effects as a matter of course (Figure 2.1). In this sense, when the Brewster sisters demand to be committed to the asylum with Teddy, they 'change everything'
and effectively turn the symbolic order on its head, but the film ends happily because the Big Other is protected from the damning awareness that it has been upended. As Žižek contends, "the point is not to tell the whole Truth but, precisely, to append to the (official) Whole the uneasy supplement which denounces its falsity" (2005 168). And is this not also a fundamental impasse in Ernesto Laclau’s contention that self-relating negativity or ‘desubjectivization’ is synonymous with dehumanization - something which we, as concerned global citizens, must oppose at every level? Indeed, it is not the subject who must be shielded from the totalizing degradation of the Act (its erasure of his gesture and his person from the historical record), but rather the order which is constitutive of the subject that requires protection from the knowledge that the subject can - and occasionally does - return this gesture of constitution.

In Arsenic and Old Lace, the very insanity of Aunts Abby and Martha serves as an adequate metaphor for the Act’s relationship to the order of power it rewrites: by the time the world is prepared to accept the Brewster sisters as insane, the truth behind their insanity (the murders) remains unacknowledged and absent from the record - what we witness instead is a semblance of truth which arrives at a similar symbolic destination via a circuitous route, such that some measure of order or truth is achieved, but only by means of a bungled parapraxis. Consequently, the Brewster sisters’ confession of the murders - the ‘real order of things’ - is already too late since the Big Other has accepted their self-diagnosed insanity and its subsequent restructuring of the
symbolic field; simply by virtue of its occurrence, the confession has lost any imaginary or phantasmatic support and cannot now or ever be read to have transpired otherwise. Similarly, by the time we are able to conceive of the Act in its original historical context and question its 'undecideability' and potentiality, we are effectively caught in the bind of always-already conceiving this potentiality against the background of the Act - that is, we think differently qua the Act.

THE THING THAT ACTS: MONSTROSITY AND APHANISIS IN THE ACT

At the conclusion of the previous chapter I alluded to a certain deficiency in Žižek's discussions of the Act, suggesting that his tendency to abandon his exemplary acting agents (Keyser Soze, Mary Kay Letourneau, and so on) in favour of removed philosophical treatises, often appears to exclude the 'all too human' achievements of master criminals, scorned child-killing women, and libidinal schoolteachers. This methodological flaw can be partially attributed to high theory's 'natural' reliance on lofty absolutes and coincident resistance to exception, but it is more problematically imputed to Žižek's often unclear position on the acting subject's relationship to the Other. In certain accounts (Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left), Žižek's arguments suggest that the acting subject himself - and not merely the Act he commits - is an exceptional revolutionary figure who effectively 'escapes' or even triumphs over the system of symbolic domination, and "finds himself... by cutting himself loose from the precious object through
whose possession the enemy kept him in check" (2000a 122). In other writings (The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology), Žižek's position is similar to the one outlined above, as he asserts that the Big Other "retreats" in the face of the Act but does not disappear entirely (1999a 369). And finally - and most perplexingly - Žižek occasionally contends that the Act is nothing but a violent suspension of the status quo in which the Other 'speaks through' the acting subject, essentially dramatizing the Derridian concept of "the Other's decision in me" (Derrida 87). It is, however, in the context of this particular (post) structuralist position that Žižek presents what is likely his most cogent explication of the acting subject's interrelation with Otherness. I have included a diagrammatical representation of my conception of this interaction to which I will refer throughout.

\[ \left( \begin{array}{c} O^R \\ O^I \\ O^S \end{array} \right) \]

\[ \left( \begin{array}{c} O^R \\ O^I \\ O^S \end{array} \right) \]

*Figure 2.2*  
*Figure 2.3*

In the subject's standard or day-to-day interactions with an Other (*Figure 2.2*) which simultaneously exists within him (as a precondition of

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11 The 'object' to which Žižek refers in this context is the precious object which the subject sacrifices in opting for free action (Stella Dallas' reputation and loving relationship with her daughter, Medea's children, and so on).
his subjectivity) and radically external to him, the Other itself is positioned on three interdependent levels: the symbolic Big Other (OS), which was previously discussed as a social substance, the domain of the Public Symbolic Law; the imaginary Other (OI), which manifests itself in other people with whom the subject interacts - the people "'like [him]', [his] fellow human beings with whom [he is] engaged in the mirror-like relationships of competition, mutual recognition, and so on" (2002 163); and the Real Other or Other as Thing (OR), the "'inhuman partner', the Other with whom no symmetrical dialogue, mediated by the symbolic order, is possible" (Ibid). All of these various facets of Otherness, distinct as they may be, materialize in every interaction but are always in counterpoint to one another, each essentially pacifying the other's effects to ensure against an unbearable excess of relativity. For example, one's relationship with a lover simultaneously accounts for the imaginary support of the relationship itself, for symbolic signification (the very titles which designate the parameters of one's identity, such as 'lover', 'couple', 'snookums', and so on), and for a monstrous, unfathomable, and traumatic Real Otherness that must be gentrified by the "impersonal symbolic order" (Ibid 165) so as to retain some minimum of distance or cognate humanity. The interrelatedness of the three dimensions simply illustrates the fact that, beneath the lover as social symptom, there always exists an "unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, of a monstrous Thing that cannot be 'gentrified'" (Ibid 164-165) - but also that, beyond

12 The mathematical construction of the diagram uses brackets to represent the field of Otherness as both a 'given set' and one against which the subject must be 'counted' or multiplied.
the lover's impenetrable actuality as Thing, there exists a "'normal fellow human'" (Ibid 165) who is illuminated by the symbolic order.

However, in the performance of an Act, this regulatory tripartite semblance of the subject qua Other dissolves, leaving only the radical dimension of the 'Other of the Real Thing' (Figure 2.3). The difference which makes this encounter so extraordinary and "unprecedented", Žižek asserts, is that in the insane free choice of the Act, the subject does not merely position or define himself against the Other - the basis is not in relativity, as it is in his everyday interactions - but rather in an absolute, fully-assumed monstrosity in which, "for a brief, passing moment... [he] directly is the Thing" (Ibid 163). While the symbolic (Big) Other eventually - and, as previously discussed, tardily - 'responds' to this Act precisely by misrecognizing it, this secondary dimension exists only as divisible by the subject's direct identification with the Thing (Figure 2.3). This total, traumatic identification with the Thing therefore exempts the subject from symbolic regulations and allows him to Act 'as if' from nowhere, "without reflection [or]... deliberation" (Ibid 162). The Act as such is not at all "pathologically motivated" (Žižek 1992 36), since its agent's reconstitution in absolute monstrosity (the Other-Thing) temporarily precludes symbolic identification and imaginary/phantasmatic support\(^\text{13}\), and effectively 'opens the space' for a total "empty set" (Ibid) - a Real event "which occurs ex nihilo" (Žižek 1999a, 374). Not only does this formulation account for the Big Other's ignorance

\(^{13}\) As illustrated by Figure 2.3, these conditions are only made available successively, essentially as 'divisible by the Real.'
of its own subversion in the Act (its unawareness can be attributed to a structural disconnect given that the subject as Other-Thing excludes the symbolic register from 'involvement), but it likewise justifies the Act's 'identity' as anti-ideological. It is not that the Act - as Ernesto Laclau would have us believe - appears in response to ideology, deliberately and terroristically 'dehumanizing' or 'apoliticizing' everything in its wake, but rather that ideology always implies an Other that is 'caught up' in the imaginary and symbolic fields. Conversely, the Other as Thing is aligned with the absolute void of the Act, its resistance to imaginary support and symbolic gentrification, and its status as the point at which "every 'foundation' of acts in 'words', in ideology, fails: this 'foundation' simply falls short of the abyss announced in it" (Žižek 1992 35).

Although this explanatory passage in Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions on the (Mis)use of a Notion certainly clarifies Žižek's position on the specific Other-identity to whom the subject is 'subjected' in the Act (i.e., neither the Big Other of symbolic domination/state-imposed control nor the linguistically-construed Other of structuralism14), Žižek's reasoning nonetheless appears somewhat circuitous upon further inspection. How can one commit an Act? By fully assuming a position as the Other-Thing. How can one fully assume a position as the Other-Thing? By committing an Act. It is my contention

14 Žižek rebukes this structuralist position in a particularly colourful way, insisting that his conception of the Act as the 'other's decision in me' "does not refer to the old structuralist jargonized phrases about how 'it is not I, the subject, who is speaking, it is the Big Other, the symbolic order itself, which speaks through me, so that I am spoken by it', and other similar babble" (Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism: Five Interventions on the (Mis)use of a Notion. London: Verso, 2002. pp. 162-163).
that such obliqueness institutes a premature short-circuit between the Act and its ideological ground, since something is evidently 'lost' in the imaginary space between the two diffuse repetitions of a tautology. In this sense, what is required to 'fill the gap' is a third agency which falls between the Other-Thing and the Act's occurrence, between impossibility and politicization, and which recovers this missing dimension by addressing the subject at the level of his original (primordial) subjectivization.

Žižek hints at the presence of this apparently "irreducible" gap when he claims that the Act's primary, traumatic impasse is located in our shared inability to actively conceive it:

> what is so difficult to accept is not the fact that the true act in which noumenal and phenomenal dimensions coincide is forever out of our reach; the true trauma lies in the opposite awareness that there are acts, that they do occur, and that we have to come to terms with them.

(1999a 375).

Although the practical ramifications of this statement will be taken up in the following chapter, the implication of the subject's aptitude to act is a significant component of the aforementioned third agency of subjectivization. And while Žižek's statement is certainly true in the context of the Act's perpetually surprising/unexpected appearance 'as if from nowhere', the above citation also represents a rare Žižekian suspension of the strico senso Act - the Act as absolutely phenomenal at the expense of its noumenal auxiliary components - in favour of addressing the more elusive dimension of the subject's potential as an agent of the
Act: the term which I should like to invoke to indicate such potentiality in the subject is *aphanisis*.

The term *aphanisis* has an extensive and somewhat controversial history in the psychoanalytic canon. Introduced by Ernest Jones in 1928 as a revisionment of Freud’s concept of primary anxiety, the term in the 1950’s developed a clinical association with schizophrenia, and was refined by Jacques Lacan in his seminars (1956-57 and 1964) to designate a psychic aporia which forces the subject to assume an absent position or undergo erasure while simultaneously and vitally ‘subjectifying’ him and shaping his relationship to desire. Also defined by Lacan as the necessary “fading” of the subject, his “manifest[ation] of himself in this movement of disappearance” (1981 208), one can certainly trace self-erasure’s relatedness to the Act, but the aphoristic potential of this ‘definition’ (and here it should be noted that Lacan often provides several - sometimes opposing - definitions of his psychoanalytic terminology) has resulted in the critical appropriation of *aphanisis* as a ‘condition’ - or, more specifically, an event or happening - which is synonymous with amnesia, mass annihilation (genocide, massacres), suicide, and rebirth. As such, the moment of *aphanisis* in contemporary literature and film analysis can equally designate a conditional absence or vanishing (Beckman 192), a specifically textual “pleasurable anxiety” (where withheld narrative information grants unexpected agency to the reader himself) (Sajé 167), or the “self-erasure of the subject when she approaches her fantasy too closely (Žižek 1997 175) - as well as a myriad of other symptoms and effects which concurrently signify disappearance and
subjectivization. Suffice it to say that the inconsistencies in definition surrounding *aphanisis* have yielded its dissemination across a range of scholarly fields, from clinical psychoanalysis and psychotherapy to narrative studies. Simultaneously existing as symptom, outcome, and structuring semblance, a psychic event and a narrative conceit, *aphanisis* belies and indeed often vitiates the delimited specificity of its definition as a symbolizing process through which the subject’s desire must pass in order to be sustained or solidified in the signifier. Indeed, the subject’s only ‘hope’ of “[setting himself] up as a subject, as something other than the product, the effect, of the signifying division” (Harari 247) is to essentially fade in the overwhelming presence of demand and in the face of the object (Lacan 1981 221). Ironically, then, what truly ‘counts’ in this process is the subject’s approach to, approximation of, or even his dangerous self-awareness of, his own fading.

While Žižek certainly makes frequent mention of *aphanisis* in a variety of conceptually discrete contexts (rape, death, the Stockholm Syndrome), his discussion of *aphanisis* apropos of the Act is comparatively minimal. For Žižek, *aphanisis* designates the moment that the subject approaches too closely that which is essentially resistant to symbolization in him - the phantasmatic kernel of his being - upon which he loses his symbolic consistency, “it disintegrates” (1999b 97). This conception differs substantially from the Act, in which the subject makes no initial ‘claim’ to the symbolic order, let alone a need for its regulating/normalizing effects, and Žižek clarifies this distinction between the Act and *aphanisis* by perceiving the latter only as a possible
outcome of the former. In this sense, when the subject approaches his Act too closely, he has no choice but to 'fade' in its overwhelming, irreducible presence, abandoning his own symbolic consistency and essentially integrating or 'losing himself' in the Act, becoming its cause. Žižek states that,

The standard subject's reaction to the act is that of aphanisis, of his/her self-obliteration, not of heroically assuming it: when the awareness of the full consequences of 'what I have just done' hits me, I want to disappear (1997 223).

However, is it not also possible to imagine aphanisis as a certain condition of possibility in the Act's authenticity, a mediator between (theoretical) impossibility and (actual) politicization? Considering that the true measure of an Act does not aim at some "momentary enthusiastic outburst" (1999 135) but at a total historical obliteration, the subject's ability to "accept and endorse his own 'second death', to 'erase himself totally from the picture'" (Ibid 379), it therefore follows that aphanisis is itself such an irreversible obliteration/erasure. Were the subject to experience aphanisis before his undertaking of the Act and not after it (as Žižek suggests), would he not essentially bypass the entire symbolic dimension of the inherent transgression and truly 'act' - in an unprecedented and truly anti-ideological fashion - from an empty place?

The familiar paradox involved in claiming an anti-ideological stance is that such an assertion is itself 'ideological' to its very core, such that any attempt at asserting free action prematurely 'overloads' the empty set of the Act with symbolic qualifiers. According to the position that ideology is inescapably 'everywhere', one can only assume a
legitimately anti-ideological stance in a state of ignorance, and this position confirms the relationship between an Act and the agent's 'forewarned' knowledge of it: namely, the agent's awareness of his potential for radicality will effectively preclude the successful performance of the Act. To invoke Žižek's example:

Oedipus didn't know what he was doing (killing his own father), yet he did it. Hamlet knew what he had to do, which is why he procrastinated and was unable to accomplish the act (1999a 386).

Yet is it at all possible to test this ideological hypothesis against an Act and, more specifically, against an instance of aphanisis? If a subject has already effectively 'disappeared', is he privy to the same dangerous knowledge/awareness, or does his self-erasure allow him to assume the space of free action precisely because he does not know?

This anti-ideological hypothesis is addressed in Todd Haynes' 1995 film Safe, which details the gradual deterioration of a blank and psychologically inaccessible San Fernando Valley housewife, Carol, to a mysterious illness. Finding herself increasingly unable to tolerate toxins and pollutants, Carol succumbs to what is eventually (and tenuously) identified as an 'environmental illness.' When her condition makes life in the city unbearable (seizures, nosebleeds, allergic reactions to her favourite foods, inability to breathe), Carol locates a healing centre which accommodates people with her condition, and leaves her husband and stepson for the Wrenwood Centre. This compound-like retreat inspires suspicion (one initially assumes that the staff of Wrenwood and its charismatic director Peter Dunning will be exposed as manipulative
swindlers) and a certain relief in the spectator - now that Carol is amongst fellow suffers and experts on 'environmental illnesses', perhaps an accurate diagnosis will finally be made? Haynes' narrative strategy, however, is patently uninterested in the medical aspect of Carol's illness - we are never explicitly informed as to why she became ill, and nor do we know what actually constitutes her illness - and instead focuses on the social dimension of the compound.

Initially, it appears that there is no particular directorial agenda pertaining to Wrenwood, and the absence of any 'position' on Haynes' part institutes a deeply unsettling feeling that itself occasionally 'fills in' the empty set that is the compound: what the spectator assumes is a sinister feature of Wrenwood, an empirically-present or positive condition subversively articulated by Haynes, is actually an absence of any articulation at all. The patients and staff are not malicious or ill-intentioned people, but are simply a community and, as such, intimate all the perverse component qualities entailed by such a designation (amalgamated identity, distressingly intense faith in their belonging, inspirational singalongs, and so on).

This lacking formal dimension is mimicked in the New Age gnosticism which regulates the lives of the patients and urges them to 'find themselves' and 'learn to love' their illnesses. Each patient is encouraged to designate for himself an empty space - necessarily spiritual but possibly physical - in which he can retreat to escape the overwhelming 'toxicity' of the world and be alone (with his illness). However, as Carol herself seeks out ever 'safer' spaces, we realize that there truly is
something sinister at work here; because these spaces have been emptied in advance, because they are intended as spaces in which the patient is entirely alone and unburdened by the troubles of the world - ultimately because and not despite of these reasons - the 'safe' spaces to which the patients flee from pollutants and toxins are ultimately not ideology-free zones. The result is not the subject's aphanized fading in the face of his illness (the New Age variant presented to the patients involves an 'emptying' of the self which opens the space for a redemptive new beginning), but rather an excess of symbolization, a total bombardment of the subject with the very symbolic coordinates he is attempting to escape. In other words, because these safe spaces position themselves as hospitable to some redemptive Act (in which the patient finally confronts himself and his illness in a state of total emptiness), they ensure in advance that this will never occur. And this is also the horizon against which we should read Haynes' direction, or that open presentation of his viewpoint as a neutral gaze which refuses to evaluate/reduce Carol or the inhabitants of Wrenwood: the very assumption of this anti-ideological stance already guarantees the triumph of ideology, and Haynes' deft formal traversal of the space between deliberation and an aphanistic emptiness coincides seamlessly with the film's equally duplicitous narrative content.

In this sense, it appears that one's assumption of an aphanized obliteration of self-conception is not an adequate means of evacuating that self-defeating 'knowledge' of his own potential to Act. Aphanisis is therefore not to be opposed to knowledge as such, since the erasure is
itself a 'forewarned' knowledge, an effective depreciation of revolutionary potential in favour of an insistent return to an ideological dimension. Yet if ideology stubbornly 'sticks' to every condition preceding the performance of an Act, how can the Act itself appear as anti-ideological an authentically political? This question will be addressed apropos of the Act's relationship to postmodernity in the following chapter - if an Act can occur, then evidently another dimension must precede or somehow encompass the subject's ability to self-erase in his Act.
CHAPTER 3: DESPERATELY SEEKING THE SUBLIME

FROM "NOTHING IS POSSIBLE ANYMORE!" TO MIRACLES, AND BACK

At this point, it is essential to clarify that what I am seeking in this study is some approximation of the sublime - in all its free action - that nonetheless accounts for the subject’s ‘subjection’ - that traces his relationship with Otherness and ideological potential while acknowledging his resultant Act as existing beyond these parameters. In the previous chapter, I made reference to the subject’s relationship to the tripartite structure of Otherness, illustrating how the subject’s primordial ‘fading’ or *aphanisis* imposes an imaginary codification of the Act’s performance. This operation of essentially ‘ordering’ the acting subject’s impulses, of instituting a precondition to the Act’s performance, is opposed to Žižek’s approach to the Act, which stresses the momentary suspension of the Lacanian subject as we know it/him (with all of his component preconditions of decentrement and alienation in the symbolic order) in favour of the subject’s total and ‘miraculous’ assumption of monstrosity in the dimension of the Other-Thing, his “posit[ing] of himself as his own cause” (1999a 375). As was mentioned earlier, the very fact that we are
unable to comprehend the Act, predict it or even analyze it (i.e., reify it by imposing upon it some psychological or ideological antecedent), is for Žižek one of the founding characteristics of the Act, and certainly indicative of its sublime dimension. In other words, the Act’s appearance is not restricted to some perpetually-cathected mythologized past which, from our current perspective, sanctioned the appearance of these Acts, was open to them or even ‘needed’ them as radical founding gestures; similarly, the Act is not precluded from appearing in the midst of our contemporary postmodern milieu, despite our tendency to sneer derisively at anything approximating some ‘absolute’ dimension. What Žižek therefore argues is that, irrespective of our acknowledgment, Acts are occurring, that the systematic advancements of historicity and contingency are constantly being destabilized by such Acts, and that the possibility of sublimation is newly articulated with each Act; these Acts occur despite the cynical position which stresses the political futility and existential impossibility of authentic radicality and posits that ‘nothing will ever change.’ The task as such for the contemporary philosopher is not the analytical confrontation and evaluation of each individual Act (why did it happen? Was it authentic?), but merely a concession to the very unreasonable idea of the Act, the awareness that “there are acts, that they do occur, and that we have to come to terms with them” (Ibid). The Act is essentially a divine occurrence - a miracle in the strictly

15 Žižek summarizes this position, which he identifies as “shameful ‘post-ideological realism’, as the belief that Acts are nothing more than “momentary enthusiastic outbursts occasionally disturbing the usual depressive/conformist/utilitarian run of things, only to be followed by an inexorable sobering disillusionment ‘the morning after’” (1999a 135).
theological sense - but also a 'miracle' of the psychoanalytic canon, since its refusal to index either the will of the subject or the symbolic regulation of the Big Other is certainly contrary to the psychoanalytic project. As such, the Act's divine dimension materializes less in its often underwhelming empirical content (referendums, infanticide, and so on) than in our response to it as properly overwhelming, intangible, irreducible, and absolute.

Despite the validity of these claims and the seductive elusiveness of the Act, I renew my objection to Žižek's relegation of the subject to a place of 'passive activity' where he functions as little more than a conduit for some otherworldly will. By opposing the acting subject's drive dimension, his 'unnatural' and 'miraculous' reduction to "an uncanny acephalous subject through which the act takes place" (Ibid 374-375) with the very 'natural' self-erasure of aphanisis that constitutes his subjectivity, Žižek evades the field of the subject by reducing his performance to psychic puppetry. Furthermore, Žižek's tendency to leave unsubstantiated statements that the Act's "radical gesture of 'striking at oneself' [is] constitutive of subjectivity as such" (2000a 122-123) actually amounts to ignoring the tacit implications of the subject's noumenal involvement or participation in the phenomenal occurrences of "posit[ing] himself as his own cause" (Ibid 375: emphasis mine), "(self-relating) negativity" (2006 64: emphasis mine), and responding to "the inexorable ethical injunction" (2002 14); what results is a conflation of the complex vicissitudes of the subject's inability to ever fully assume the Act with a quintessentially postmodern cynicism which stresses the
subject’s powerlessness, his identity as “an automaton” (2002 162). And is this conflation not also (one of the reasons) why critics such as Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau misinterpret Žižek’s position as one which supports hegemonic power systems and oppressive state-imposed control — because Žižek all too frequently falls victim to that tendency in postmodern criticism to confuse a lack of individual will (or an absence of strategic deliberation — neither of which are evinced in the Act) with total authoritarian enslavement?

It is worthwhile in this respect to clarify how the Act is antagonistic to the cynical generalizations of postmodernity, less to defend Žižek’s own critical predilections than to reposition the Act in relation to that sublime dimension in which “miracles do happen” (Žižek 1999a 135). Consider here a typically postmodern idiom such as ‘everything is impossible’ which — according to Žižek — is more or less the “fundamental lesson of postmodern politics” (Ibid) qua the Act. What is implied by the phrase is the impermanence of the Act, its status as a temporary disturbance which is later neutralized so as to uphold the belief that the Act is a “passing, illusory short circuit, a false identification to be dispelled sooner or later” (Ibid). Although the fallaciousness of this viewpoint was addressed in the previous chapter, it is interesting to note the apparent similarity between ‘everything is impossible’, the ‘motto’ of postmodern politics, and my earliest correlation of the Act with Medea’s despairing exclamation, “Nothing is possible anymore.” This phrase which appears at the conclusion of Pasolini’s film therefore merits further consideration from the
perspective of the Act in postmodernity, particularly since, despite its apparent nihilism, what is at stake in Medea’s cry is an absolutely miraculous dimension which aims directly at the sublime. Yet how is the position that one utterance denotes sublimation while the other suggests pessimistic renunciation at all defensible when the difference between them appears as little more than a syntactical ascription of improbability? Each utterance measures an absolute quality (everything or nothing) against a condition of (im)possibility which - disregarding the operative ‘anymore’ in Medea’s exclamation - designates the two phrases as identical. However, in the context of the Act the phrases are entirely antithetical, and here I will briefly invoke the temporal dimension of the Act discussed alongside Medea’s exclamation in Chapter 1.

In the first chapter, I evaluated the relative worth of ‘everything’ in Medea’s life against her infanticide to introduce the argument of the Act’s retroactive creation of its own possibility, its tendency to ‘write itself’ into the past and engineer its ‘inevitable’ occurrence into past conditions. It was, I argued, the infanticide itself which was directly responsible for the dissolution of Medea’s life; in its performance, everything changed in an instant, all of her symbolic ties were suddenly irreversibly severed, and the Act itself was overwhelming not because it was a disillusioned response to years of repressed resentment and hatred, but because the accumulated worth of everything suddenly fell away in a single gesture. Many critics - including Žižek in certain analytical contexts - would consider this position inaccurate given Medea’s archetypal designation as the ‘scorned woman’ whose murders are entirely
motivated by Jason's desertion. It certainly seems logical to assume that Medea would not have murdered her children had she and Jason continued to live happily, so evidently everything was already impossible for Medea since Jason's desertion and, what's more, she was fully aware of the fact that her life was ruined. As such, it can be asserted that the 'Act' itself did not 'de-ontologize' or invalidate everything that preceded it - these aspects were always-already worthless and irretrievable, and Medea's murder of her children simply designated that momentary 'breaking point' in which she decided to pursue impossibility to its end.

If one were inclined to interpret Medea's final cry from the perspective of her motivations, the argument outlined above initially appears incontrovertible. However, given Medea's position as an acting subject, the strategy of appending a myriad of justifiable 'reasons' for her infanticide is tantamount to descending an endless chain of historicist progenitors which, with every successive step into the past, neutralize the Act with a rational causality. In the end, one may attribute Medea's infanticide to a fated comeuppance for her earlier murder of her brother, diagnose her as a hysteric, or blame Jason's infidelity, but in any case such readings obfuscate the Act itself, pacifying its insanity, freedom, and radicality. The solution apropos of the Act in Medea's situation is to approach its destabilization of the past in an anti-historicist, Benjaminian fashion and 'lay claim' to that uncharted space between the nihilistic exclamation and its miraculous dimension.
In Walter Benjamin’s famous essay, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, he closely approximates a conceptualization of the Act, and Žižek’s numerous commentaries on this essay testify to the fact that his own theory of the Act is indebted to Benjamin’s work. Ascribing an invisible theological impetus to dialectical materialism, in which the ‘forces’ (Acts) that permit us new access to the past are always necessarily “kept out of sight” (Benjamin 253), Benjamin’s position rejects the historicist claim to ‘the past as such.’ Our ability to successfully grasp events of the past, Benjamin argues, is not contingent on a present suspension of available knowledge, but neither should we make the erroneous assumption that every past occurrence has contributed in some positive way to the current order/situation. As such, when Benjamin states that, “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history” (254), he is superficially claiming that past events are always open to reinterpretation; however, the perspective from which this reinterpretation occurs is always a current/present one, meaning that, for Benjamin, an ‘Act’ (although it should be noted that he never uses the word in any portentous way) occurs when our present view changes the past, when something contributes in some way to the ‘rewriting’ of the historical coordinates. The crucial point not to be missed in this concept, however, is its project of opening a succession of future spaces from which we can recognize the mutability of the past, realizing that we are not doomed to a causal evolutionary fatalism which is regulated by our positive/empirical contributions to history, but rather that the past is perpetually in flux because certain things did not happen. Every present
will therefore 'pivot' on a new realization of "the crushed potentials for the future that were contained in the past" (2000b 90) and - rather than stagnating in causal determinism - will effectively open a new horizon which itself will be subject to the same rewriting.

And this is precisely the 'hidden' theological perspective from which we should approach the filmic Medea's exclamation of, "Nothing is possible anymore" - not as a harbinger of the cynical postmodern attitude which prematurely quashes revolutionary potential as 'impossible' along with 'everything else', but rather as a Benjaminian 'future anterior' upon which an entire horizon of potentiality pivots and which, in what it does not (actually) accomplish, penetrates linear historicism and the "closed continuity of 'progression'" (Žižek 1989 139) and creates a space for every (potential) Act. It is against this background of the theological miracle which the acting agent as such 'succeeds' every time, in each successive reappropriation of his potentiality.

EVERYTHING BUT THE KITCHEN SINK: THE FAMILY, APHANIZED

Yet how are we to conceive of this potentiality, the future open horizon of the Act and its agent, against the background of a subject who has undergone aphanisis and is now acting 'from an empty place'? A particularly explicit representation of aphanisis as the antecedent-guarator of, or condition of possibility for, an Act's performance occurs in the conclusion to Michael Haneke's 1989 film The Seventh Continent. This film, which superficially occupies a place in the postmodern
'traumatic tedium' canon\textsuperscript{16}, details the calm, orderly, and psychologically impenetrable self-destruction of a Viennese family. We are subjected to their monotonous daily routines in a claustrophobic aesthetic of tightly-framed medium shots which often record the repetitive activities of hands but crop heads and faces from the frame; we become familiar with a variety of soulless bourgeois features of their house, such as their generic art prints, enormous and glacial fish tank, and the television set which, when turned on, blares American hit parade programmes and fixates everyone’s attention - although we have no conception of the physical space of their home. When Georg (the father) and Anna (the mother) decide to kill themselves and their young daughter Eva, we are given no indication of motivation, but suspect that it involves a desperate retaliation against their azoic bourgeois existence. However, the standout feature of this film is its drawn-out conclusion - less for the family’s ugly suicide-by-poison that for the total destruction which precedes it. Totaling at approximately 17 minutes of footage, this extended sequence mimics the visual style of its monotonous forebears by consisting almost entirely of tightly-framed medium shots of hands as they methodically and efficiently destroy everything in sight: tearing and shredding piles of clothing, cutting photographs in two, snapping records, smashing furniture and appliances, and flushing money down the toilet.

\textsuperscript{16} Which is also inhabited by directors such as Bruno Dumont (2003’s \textit{Twentynine Palms} and 1999’s \textit{Humanity}), Catherine Breillat (2001’s \textit{Fat Girl}, 1999’s \textit{Romance}), and films such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s \textit{Why Does Herr R. Run Amok?} (1970) and Gaspar Noé’s \textit{Irreversible} (2002). These films typically call attention to the spectator’s perverse investment in (and desire for) the intrusion of brutality into otherwise monotonous routine. In all of the aforementioned films - including \textit{The Seventh Continent} - extreme but comparatively fleeting moments of violence punctuate an otherwise reified, complacent surface (usually at the end of the film) and aim to confront the spectator’s tedious tolerance with an unsettling sense of relief.
What fascinates about this sequence is its explicit presentation of a shared self-erasure, an *aphanisis* which 'infects' an entire family unit as a necessary precondition of their suicide. This *aphanisis* is necessary precisely in the sense that the family unit assumes the authentic (political) position of an absolute absence in their Act - a Schellingian *'ex nihilo'* which extends to even the acting agent - and 'opens a space' for the Act's performance through an antecedent erasure.\(^\text{17}\) Regardless of whether one elects to read either the family's eventual suicide or the smashing of their house and accouterments as the film's 'authentic' Act, it is self-erasure's double-scansion of fading and figuration which ultimately guarantees meaning 'over the family's dead bodies'\(^\text{18}\): that is, between the Act's impulses of impossibility and politicization, self-erasure's appearance heralds the subject's performance from "Another Space which can no longer be dismissed as a fantasmatic supplement to social reality" (2000b 158). Furthermore, this sequence of aphanistic destruction evinces the guarantee of permanence and irreversibility endemic to every authentic Act by efficiently accomplishing the total dissolution of symbolic consistency and instituting a zero-point, a second death, in advance. The destruction of the family photographs and the money are

\(^{17}\) Additionally, the aphanistic destruction distinguishes Haneke's film significantly from 'similar' postmodern fare such as *Twentynine Palms* or *Fat Girl*. Although the family's smashing-spree is initially a cathartic release from tightly-wound routine, its grueling temporal duration of 17 minutes (coupled with its insistently tight medium-shot aesthetic) eventually begins to take its toll. Unlike the brief but 'orgasmic' and relieving violence of Breillat and Dumont's films, the family's outburst in *The Seventh Continent* is as controlled and regulated as their daily lives, and the spectator is eventually left with the realization that things have gone - appropriately in the context of the Act - "from Bad to Worse" (Slavoj Žižek. *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London: Verso, 1999a. pp. 377).

particularly effective in this aim of preemptive obliteration, since the photographs are loaded symbolic and imaginary supports, the destruction of which is portentous (the family is being/has been eradicated, and so on), while the money has no personal significance. In other words, while most of the wrecked items can be ascribed some signification and can effectively aid in pathologizing the family's *aphanisis* and Act (i.e., the spectator's self-deception that everything was destroyed for a reason - the clock was a gift from Granny, etc), the object-money itself 'means' nothing to the family, and its destruction cannot be justified as retaliatory in the conventional sense. If indeed one of the objectives of the authentic Act is to enjoin in the subject an "accept[ance] and endorse [ment] of his own 'second death', to 'erase himself totally from the picture'" and to "obliterate the dead totally from historical memory" (*Ibid* 1999a 379), then the family's orderly attack on their earthly possessions aims precisely at this intent, but actually achieves it (with characteristically dispassionate efficiency) in advance of the Act: nothing can succeed the family after it finally self-destructs, and they leave no legacy - only a zero-point.

**ALL YOU NEED IS... LOVE?: THE ANTI-PATHOGEN**

In certain respects, Žižek's reluctance to associate *aphanisis* with the Act in any procedural capacity (i.e., not barring *aphanisis* as a consequence of the Act) is entirely logical given his assertion that the subject can never properly will the Act into existence. Were the subject to experience *aphanisis* prior to and in the Act, the performance of the

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gesture would be imbued with a certain premeditation, or what could at least be considered a deterministic impulse which - consciously assumed or not - could 'guide' the subject through the Act, effectively confirming it as his (since only he was capable of orchestrating the preliminary aphanesis), and ultimately creating a condition of possibility for the Act's appearance rather than relying on the Act to append this condition retroactively. As such, my contention at the conclusion of the previous chapter that self-erasure's absention of the subject from the "void of his nonexistence" (Žižek 1999a 281) allows him to truly 'act' from an empty place is at least temporally fallacious, meaning that aphanesis would essentially pre-occupy that place in the void which, in the Act, should be little more than an empty set. Considering this anticipated objection to my attempt to further integrate the subject into an Act that is never properly his, it appears that the analysis has encountered an either/or impasse: either the subject's self-obliteration (aphanesis) is the antecedent-guarantor of the Act's radicality, an 'Act within an Act' (i.e., the very performance of an Act is itself an ideological gesture and politicization is not merely appended in retrospect), or the Act occurs irrespective of the subject's will and is essentially 'without content' - but these two horizons are barred from ever truly interacting.

I accept this objection as entirely valid, but again remind the reader that my project throughout has involved the restoration of the subject to the Act, and away from the incidental margins of its performance where his inability to either (antecedently) will or (subsequently) own the Act typically tend to relegate him. In this
respect, it is clear that, as per Laclau's terminology, the condition of the subject's aphanisis only operates as a 'partial solution' to the multifarious horizon of the Act. Furthermore, I concede to the reality that there is no essentialist 'solution' to either the acting agent or the Act itself, no universal equation which can encompass and normalize them, least of all in the field of psychoanalysis (which conventionally applies subconscious desirous signification to deeds). For example, would Andrea Yates - the Texas mother who serially drowned her five children in 2001 - have been 'sublimated' as an exemplary acting agent or modern-day Medea had not a battery of valid psychological conditions (recurrent postpartum psychosis) been annexed to her Act?\footnote{Although his interpretation of the Yates case deviates considerably from the brief analysis I proffer, Žižek does indeed address this issue in "Afterword: Lenin's Choice" (Revolution at the Gates: Žižek on Lenin, the 1917 Writings. Ed. Slavoj Žižek. London: Verso, 2004, pp. 167-336).} There is certainly a necessary justice to Yates' recent (July 26, 2006) verdict of not guilty by reason of insanity, but her elevation as a cautionary paradigm of the horrors of untreated postpartum depression retract in a historicizing way from that 'other' horror which is best elided in polite company - her murder of her five children. Here we return again to Žižek's clarion call (apropos of Benjamin's historical materialism) to the contemporary philosopher to identify the Act amidst the clinical clamor surrounding and pacifying it, to essentially 'carve out' a space for the traumatic free action which our liberal democratic society is unprepared to accept: "the very capacity to act is brutally medicalized, treated as a manic outburst within the pattern of 'bipolar disorder', and as such to be submitted to biochemical treatment..." (1999a 387).
It is, however, this very argument which should be turned against Žižek apropos of aphanisis, and even in the context of the subject’s will: in the case of a deliberate self-erasure such as the lengthy destruction of every identificatory signifier which precedes the family’s suicide in The Seventh Continent, we cannot discount their Act as such simply because it required a modicum of premeditation, a certain forewarning of ‘this is it.’ One could just as easily follow the lead of Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, a practicing psychoanalyst, and diagnose Medea as the victim of some “ubiquitous unconscious fantasy” (identified by Leuzinger-Bohleber as frigidity) which results in a clinicized form of female destructiveness “in which intense wounds and humiliations culminate in boundless despair, rage, hate and revenge” (323-324) - and yet one would not neutralize that space of free action which only Medea’s authentic Act can approximate. Then what can one effectively do? On the one hand, the solution is patently clear: to avoid pathologizing the Act, one must simply accept it in all its elusive monstrosity, essentially allowing it to ‘self-identify’ and, in its potential for breaking away from an ideological deadlock, resign oneself to “accept[ing] the risk that a blind violent outburst will be followed by its proper politicization” (Žižek 2005 225). On the other hand, this solution is grossly deficient - not only because it forestalls any identification of the Act as authentic or inauthentic, but primarily because it obfuscates the (necessary) variable of the acting agent in favour of an intended outcome, neglecting the subject’s paradoxically simultaneous individuation-signification and assimilation-fading in the face of the body politic. What is therefore at stake in acknowledging this
very capacity to Act is a certain precondition of self-erasure which is itself a free choice - a properly sublime or divine supplement to (or unifying 'third agency' of) aphanisis which, when yoked to the subject's performance of the Act, is revolutionary to its very core. It is my contention that this unifying third agency is nothing less than Christian love.

In the context of radicality, this is not an unprecedented argument, especially for Žižek, whose entire oeuvre hinges on the assertion that the truly sublime dimension of the Christian legacy which "calls upon us to thoroughly reinvent ourselves" (2001 148) presents us with a means of willing some repressed content to (re)materialize as positive political action. Contrary to postmodernity's preference for a gnostic quietism which enjoins us to 'rediscover' the hidden beauty of our 'true selves' (regardless of how much we must strain and stretch to identify certain evidently spurious characteristics as 'beautiful'), Christianity calls forth for a radical new beginning - not a romanticized reminiscence of the true self in the abstract sense, but an active and properly politicized (and, in Žižek's estimation, a thoroughly Marxist20) change. 

This inclination to instigate change is enabled by the idiosyncratic feature in Christian love which stresses a "loving attachment to the Other's imperfection" (2001 147), a 'love without mercy' which targets the Other's lack, "his limitation, helplessness, ordinariness even" (Ibid). The project rejects the pacifying praxis of merely 'changing one's

perspective' and acquiring a reluctant tolerance of the Other's deficiencies, a world-view (for example) that other cultures and their customs are beautiful 'in their own way'; rather, Christian love involves loving precisely what is not there, moving beyond the magnanimous indulgence of flaws and advocating instead a fully-assumed love of such imperfection. And it is in this precise sense that God's sacrifice of His mortal (imperfect) son to redeem humanity is the ultimate example of an Act since, in the very execution of the crucifixion, the sacrifice itself is sublated, "giving birth to a new subject... [and offering] a glimpse of Another Space which can no longer be dismissed as a fantasmatic supplement to social reality" (2000b 158). In short, Christian love 'stands for' that very moment when the sublime dimension of 'love without mercy' - the love of what the Other does not have or cannot do - coincides with the Benjaminian 'future anterior' which, as was previously discussed, is the 'pivot' on which we turn to change an entire horizon, or the potentiality which opens a future space from which we can recognize that, because something did not happen in the past, its horizon will miraculously change again and again. Or, to put it rather crudely in Ernesto Laclau's terminology: if you can't/won't change the 'partial solution' that is the imperfect Other, change the entire horizon of your existence.

THE RADICAL 'YES!' OF LOVE: ANTI-IDEOLOGICAL POTENTIALITY

It must be emphasized that, while Žižek acknowledges both divine and 'authentically' passionate romantic love themselves as Acts, he has considerably less to say on the topic of love as the ex-imate kernel in
the Act. Based on the conceptualization of the Act which I have presented throughout this project, it is certainly possible to conceive of the wild abandon and prosaic insanity so often associated with romantic love as itself an Act, and it is indeed this very 'insane' dimension which Žižek seizes upon in his discussion of Mary Kay Letourneau’s 'Act' of love. Writing on the extensive coverage of the case which tended to either villainize Letourneau as an oversexed harpy or "take refuse in psychiatric mumbo jumbo... [and] brutally medicalize Mary Kay’s passion" (1999 386), Žižek criticizes the media’s misrecognition of Letourneau’s love – and all its component behaviours of dreaminess, stupidity, and the pursuit of the love object ‘against all odds’ – as the deterministic sympomatology of bipolar disorder. Although Žižek’s reactionary defense of Letourneau appears to perilously approximate Victorian-era misogyny in its dismissal of a woman’s legitimate illness as mere lovesickness (‘she’s only prone to rabid fits and fainting because she’s in love’), one must here bear in mind the gravity or explicit radicality which love assumes for Žižek. Claiming that the popular media essentially missed the point (or at least the irony) when they emphasized bipolar disorder as an illness which does not block the patient’s access to socially-sanctioned notions of right and wrong but rather materializes in manic episodes when the patient consciously suspends her “capacity of rational judgement which tells her what is right and good for her” (Ibid), Žižek contends that this (incorrectly pathologized) ‘insanity’ is the very background against which the Act “of being truly in love” transpires (Ibid).
However, what figures only briefly in Žižek's work, and what is indeed a fundamental caveat which remains underexplored in his formulation of the Act, is love as an antecedent of the Act - or, more precisely, love as the antecedent of every Act. If, as I have stressed throughout, the conception of the authentic Act which acknowledges its agent-performer as less than incidental (or essentially recognizes him as 'equally authentic' to the Act he performs) is contingent on a series of (pre)conditions and potentialities, then love itself is the condition which determines the relative worth of the acting subject's agalma or 'precious object' and absents it from ideological inscription, elevating it above all other objects. With the comparative value of this object ascertained, the subject is now free - in the literal sense of being in a space of free action - to reject or destroy this object, effectively striking at himself by, in a Benjaminian way, involuntarily 'choosing' one path over another and inscribing the unchosen alternatives into potentiality.

A particularly effective actualization of this assertion can be identified in Lars von Trier's 2003 film Dogville, which dramatizes an outsider-figure's disastrous relationship with a community. The outsider, Grace, arrives in the isolated mountain township of Dogville seeking asylum, claiming that she is being pursued by a gang of ruthless gangsters who want her dead. The townsfolk are extremely wary of Grace and the threat she poses to their peaceful community, but one of Dogville's citizens - an idealistic aspiring philosopher named Thomas Edison, Jr. - sees in Grace an opportunity to teach his fellow citizens an important lesson about acceptance and community. Having entreated the townsfolk
earlier to his hypothesis that acceptance strengthens community, Tom decides to offer Grace as a 'gift' to Dogville which, under his guidance, he hopes the townsfolk will (eventually) accept. The process reveals itself to be somewhat slow-going, and as Grace's perceived threat to the community continues to escalate, Tom suggests that Grace offer her services (manual labour, tutoring some local children, companionship to a lonely blind man) to the townsfolk to further endear herself to them. Grace, who hints occasionally at a disreputable past, devotedly loves the town and is eager to improve her character by any means necessary, but finds herself increasingly abused by her rescuers, eventually to the point of being enslaved, imprisoned, and enchained. When the gangsters who were pursuing Grace finally arrive in Dogville, the townsfolk decide to hand her over to them and claim the reward money, but are unaware of the fact that the head gangster is Grace's father, or of the fact that she has no intention of killing his daughter but simply wants her to return home. Grace initially resists, maintaining that a life free of wealth and excess has curbed her arrogance, and insisting that she does not hold the people of Dogville responsible for her abuse. However, upon further consideration and some discussion with her father, Grace deliberates the matter via an extra-diegetic narrator's voice-over:

How could she ever hate them for what was at bottom merely their weakness? She would probably have done things like those befallen her if she had lived in one of these houses... Would she not, in all honesty, have done the same as Chuck and Vera and Ben and Mrs. Henson and Tom and all these people in their houses? Grace paused. [...] And all of a sudden she knew the answer to her question all too well. If she had acted like them she could not have defended a single one of her actions
and could not have condemned them harshly enough. It was as if her sorrow and pain finally assumed their rightful place. No. What they had done was not good enough. And if one had the power to put it to right, it was one’s duty to do so— for the sake of other towns, for the sake of humanity. And not least for the sake of the human being that was Grace herself.

Grace returns to her father and orders the town destroyed and all of its inhabitants killed.

The crucial caveat of this scenario, and that which cannot be adequately conveyed in a brief plot summary, is Grace’s intense love of the town and its horrible citizens, and her genuine belief throughout the majority of the film that Dogville’s subtle exploitation and explicit abuse of her is a form of loving reciprocity. Yet in relation to her eventual Act of annihilating the entire town, it is particularly pertinent that Grace’s very adoration of Dogville is the condition of her subjection and degradation; the narrator, Grace’s primary focalizer, emphasizes several times that it is ‘only out of love’ and ‘only for Dogville’ that she “undermines the very base of [her] identity” (Žižek 1999c 97) and sacrifices her self-conception but—apropos of Žižek’s defense of Mary Kay Letourneau— is this self-erasure not itself the very result of taking one’s love of the Other’s imperfections ‘to the end’, to its most extreme polarity? As such, Grace’s situation illustrates that the conditional aphanisis which precedes an Act is equally prefaced by an intense love of the very object-cause of this self-obliteration— the precious object from which the subject eventually cuts himself loose (Ibid 2000a 122) and destroys in his performance of the Act. However, in Dogville, the cause of Grace’s aphanisis and the dissolution of her symbolic consistency is not
precipitated by her overproximity to the Act, by 'getting too close' to her unbearably traumatic identification with the Thing (as Žižek asserts), but rather by the fact that she approaches what she loves too closely. What therefore occurs in the 'addition' of the subject to the matrix of the Act, is a structure of double-sacrifice wherein the subject comes to recognize his own agalma, what is most precious to him, simultaneously as that which has consumed/appropriated his identity and as something which must be destroyed to open a new horizon of free action. Of course, the very paradox of the Act and the true measure of its independence from the subject's will, is the (death) drive dimension which institutes this double-sacrifice for a reason absolutely opposed to the subject's self-preservation; the subject does not destroy his precious object to regain the selfhood which was lost or aphanized in 'fading' to love (since 'taking back what was rightfully his' is certainly a symbolically-mandated forced choice) - rather, the subject opts to obliterate the loved object because this gesture of striking at himself is the only available free choice.

The perverse 'lesson' in this conceptualization of the Act qua subject is that the authentically free choice is certainly made available to the subject - insanity is always an option, albeit not a symbolically mandated one - but what distinguishes the authentically free Act from its mere semblance in frenetic activity is essentially the 'turn' we make when we fade to love, the 'direction in which we are facing' when our momentary performance of an (actual) Act creates an open and divine horizon of potentiality for the Act as such. To invoke an obvious visual metaphor,
the sequence in *The Fugitive* (Andrew Davis, 1993) depicting wanted
criminal Richard Kimble 'cornered' by U.S. Marshal Gerard at the precipice
of a towering dam, dramatizes what initially appears as a literal forced
choice: Kimble can either surrender or throw himself from the dam and risk
death. Reading more closely, however, what Kimble actually chooses is to
obliterate any hint of his (very real) innocence by continuing to run from
the law, effectively realigning the coordinates of his decreed guilt; he
opens the horizon of this free choice by 'taking the insane way out' and
jumping from the dam.

It therefore stands to reason that the only conceivable sphere of
possibility and politicization against which we can measure the relative
insanity of free choice, the subject’s contra-Žižekian obligation to “be
active with respect to its own passivity” (Agamben 1999 109), is the very
'sublime object' which is perpetually cathected to the Act. For example,
even when the horizon of Medea’s infanticide is reconstituted to address
what she herself, in the past (i.e., past interpretations) was not - a
hysteric, a victim of bipolar disorder or postpartum psychosis - the link
between her Act and its loved object (her children) nonetheless remains
indissoluble. It is my contention that Žižek’s analysis of the Act
evacuates this dimension of the loved object and its cathexis because it
would retract from his insistence on the subject’s blind compulsion and
(re)inscribe the subject with an excess of agency. And yet - to briefly
return to Žižek’s analysis of the Mary Kay Letourneau case - it is only
this cathexis of loved object to Act which can justify the radical
uniqueness of the performance, its “absolute idiosyncrasy” (Žižek 1999a
in rejecting and restructuring symbolic fictions and, more crucially, the anti-ideological basis which posits that "such an act involves its own inherent normativity which 'makes it right'" (Ibid). Indeed, it is only in this reading of the Letourneau case that Žižek suspends entirely his emphasis on the subject's unwilled automatism in the Act and instead 'forces' the acting subject to bear the full burden of her free choice - her lethal, self-destructive love of an Other who is both 'miraculously' lacking/imperfect and abysally monstrous.

As an attempt at summation, I should like to refer to my diagram below (Figure 3.1), which categorizes and coalesces the multifarious dimensions of the Act's possibility (radicality and 'revolutionary potential') and its actualization in the subject (aphanisis and love), presenting throughout my discussion and particularly in the current chapter.

\[
\begin{pmatrix}
\$A & (aphanisis + loved object) \\
Actual Act & (potentiality + lack)
\end{pmatrix}^0
\]

Figure 3.1

The acting subject ($A$) is here 'counted against' or 'multiplied by' two distinct given sets which are themselves combined: closest to the acting subject is the set designating the actual Act, which is comprised of the precious loved object which, for the subject, always remains cathected to
the Act, and of *aphanisis* - the subject's self-erasure and symbolic dissolution in the face of the loved object. This set illustrates the psychic process which the acting subject fully assumes. To the right of this first set is the set of the possible Act, which couples the potentiality of a new/open Benjaminian horizon in which the absences or omissions of the past are rewritten as 'new' Acts, with the Christian love of the Other's imperfections which calls forth a radical new beginning. In this set, we are presented with the means to will a repressed content to materialize as positive political change. When combined, these three variables (acting subject, potential Act, actual Act) result in an authentic ethico-political Act which, by historical necessity, is obliterated from the historical record as a condition of the record's constitution. The Act has, nonetheless, effected a monumental change to the symbolic order, and following it a "new age will start" (Žižek 1999a 379). The exponent which surrounds the variables is therefore marked as zero to denotate the Act as simultaneously 'not there' and as the 'zero-point' from which a new horizon emerges.

Finally, it is necessary to return to my reading of Todd Haynes' *Safe* which closed the previous chapter. In this interpretation, I made the assertion that the physical, spiritual, and psychic spaces in the film - and particularly those in the Wrenwood compound, were falsely engineered as spaces of Act(ion). The construction of an 'ideology-free zone' intended as hospitable territory for the performance of an Act is, in its very combatative/reactionary structure, always precluded by the inevitable recrudescence of ideology; this, I argued, is precisely why Wrenwood's
agglomerate of ‘safe spaces’ constitutes a premature failure of the Act, but it is also how the film itself - through its extra-filmic social and political signification and its insistence that the elusive ‘environmental illness’ is itself a radical ethico-political Act - actually fails to approximate any Act. However, despite my insistence that Safe’s incessant (and deliberate) return to ideological excess forestalls the Act, the film does indeed bear witness to a single, absolutely overwhelming performance of an Act: in the film’s final shot, the desiccated Carol stands before a mirror in her barren porcelain ‘safe house’ and - insistently, but with great difficulty - repeats to her reflection, “I love you, I love you, I love you.”
CONCLUSION: THE GLOBAL ACT

In the conclusion of *The Coming Community*, a text which explores the shifting linguistic boundaries of a given social set and its opponents of 'immutable' state-imposed control, philosopher Giorgio Agamben sets forth the argument that the 'active absence' of any identity in a subject is precisely that which cannot be endured by the State: "What the State cannot tolerate in any way... is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging" (1993 86). Differentiating identity (a social bond which ensures belonging) from singularity as such (which, for Agamben, needs not constitute an identity), Agamben makes two claims which are relevant to a discussion of the Act qua its agent: primarily, he insists that "a being radically devoid of any representable identity" is nothing less than a enemy of the State (*Ibid*), someone who essentially remains radically impervious to symbolic reduction and, by extension, the oppression of the State. Concurrently, the sphere of contemporary politics designates for Agamben a revolutionary undoing which "empties traditions and beliefs, ideologies and religions, identities and communities" (*Ibid* 83).
While this formulation may strike one as somewhat nihilistic in its apparent enjoinder of the reader to thwart the State by dissolving his own symbolic consistency (however 'illusory' it may be), this nihilism is - in a sense - constitutive of Agamben's very project to approximate a political language (*experimentum linguæ*) with which we can finally 'reveal nothing' or "reveal the nothingness of all things" (*Ibid* 82). For Agamben, what truly 'counts' in contemporary politics is a self-consciousness in speech which, in "bringing language to language" (*Ibid* 83), takes nihilism to its endpoint or "carries it to completion", but crucially does so "without allowing what reveals to remain veiled in the nothingness that reveals" (*Ibid*). Those subjects who are capable of making a 'turn' in language in such a way to engineer the condition of its transformation from futile defeatism into a 'constructive' or self-conscious nihilism, will be "the first citizens of a community with neither presuppositions nor a State" (*Ibid*). Agamben's position is not explicitly Lacanian, and he does not index the Act in any concrete way, but his statements in this global linguistic context certainly recall the Act's propensity for retroactive transformation - as is evinced by Medea's cry in Pasolini's film, which changes its horizon of potentiality from a denotation of impossibility to a condition of absolute possibility. It is particularly Agamben's encouragement to pursue this 'nihilism' or global variant of "Nothing is possible anymore!" to its end which is striking since - like the Act - this *experimentum linguæ* only reveals its potentiality in that moment of 'ending', or, more precisely, in that moment where it retroactively 'becomes' something else/new entirely.
The notion of the Act as a harbinger of positive political change is certainly not a dazzling new epigram, especially since historical Acts of the past are always being revisited and (re)inscribed into political consciousness - but my project throughout this particular document has aimed less at the identification of Acts than at the very background against which we are always recreating the conditions of an Act's appearance. In this respect, I have not set forth a model of 'how to successfully commit an Act' or how to become a meaningfully radical global citizen via the Act, but have rather proposed a structural horizon of agency which acknowledges the subject in his capacity to Act, while also accounting for his subjection to this Act. What I would like to caution against in this sense is an overly effusive, sentimentally humanist approach to the Act's agent which posits him as an imperiled iconoclast who is goaded into rebelling against the symbolic order. This, I believe, is the same position which would inspire the assertion that we 'need' the Act today more than ever (i.e., in our current age of totalitarian 'anti-terrorist' measures, fear-mongering, the complacency and alienation of cyberspace, etc). Rather, acknowledging from an ethico-political perspective that we 'need' the Act in our current global climate is contingent on our realization that the Act has always been necessary, but never at any point has it been 'more necessary' than ever before. Such a position ignores the reality that the Act's past is incontrovertibly unstable to ensure this very 'future' condition of necessity.

A fascinating and contentious dimension which this project has left unexplored is the Act's appearance in artwork as a wholly representational
entity. Beyond its significance as a narrative and thematic 'trope', the Act's visual manifestation remains largely uncharted philosophical territory, and its relationship to the traumatic materialization of jouissance (an excess of unbearable pleasure) is certainly contiguous but far from identical. When the Real penetrates the phantasmatic dimension - that necessary normalizing psychic 'distance' which prevents the uninhibited onslaught of jouissance - the effect is immensely disconcerting, and more-so when such destabilization occurs in the visual field. Nonetheless, jouissance is not conventionally associated with the Act and aphanisis, and its 'degree' of trauma and symbolic dissolution does not account for the distended temporal range of the Act, nor for any positive potentiality. This relationship between the destructive appearance of the Real and the contingency of the Act in the visual field certainly merits further consideration and - while its exploration was not particularly commensurate with my project's methodology - it nonetheless constitutes another open space or horizon which the Act can fruitfully occupy and enhance.

My aim throughout this project has involved the restoration of subjectivity (and all its component paradoxes) to what is often perceived in psychoanalytic scholarship as the vacillating imbalance of supremacy between the structuring symbolic order and the unexpected radical Act which casts order as such asunder. Although Slavoj Žižek has contributed immensely to our comprehension of the Act through his identification of the Act's potentiality in popular culture and postmodernity - as well as in his ability to supplement Lacan's original figurations of the Act with
the work of philosophers such as Kant, Schelling, and Benjamin - it is nonetheless possible (and necessary) to recognize in Žižek’s analyses a fundamental impasse which excludes the acting agent from his own monumental gesture. My project has therefore attempted to account for these various fissures in Žižek’s interpretation - alternately accepting them as variations on the Act’s horizon of potentiality, and rejecting them as fallacious and invalid - without methodologically straying from the fundamental tenets of Lacanian psychoanalysis. It is my hope that the analysis I have presented here not only accounts for some of the inconsistencies in Žižek’s work on the Act, but offers workable alternatives which can be construed as a series of compromises between our occasionally opposed positions. The Act itself is a formative psychoanalytic concept against which we are able to perceive a gesture or event as portentous and influential, but also as paradoxically elusive. This Act equally functions as one of the cornerstones of Žižek’s philosophical oeuvre but, as I have endeavored to prove throughout, the Act’s potential for positive change requires a ‘regression’ into its agent and his impulses of loving attachment to, and self-erasure in the precious object which he will eventually destroy. By accounting for the psychic transformations and permutations of the acting subject, it is my contention that we can create a horizon of possibility for the Act, effectively guaranteeing its efficacy and recapitulated revolutionary potential with each successive future renewal.
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