First as Tragedy, Then as Farce, Then as a Post-Apocalyptic Helicopter Flight with No Certain Prospect of a Safe Landing

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Prior to an American legislative measure that came to be known as the Nixon Shock, paper currency was anchored in a mass of gold named the ‘Federal Reserve.’ But, in 1971, a performative utterance closed, or, more precisely, shattered, the ‘gold window,’ annihilating the signifying dialectic between the American dollar and its material referent. As a result, the several European, and, by extension, colonized, currencies that had been tied to the American dollar were also unmoored, and operated thereafter as a system of free-floating signifiers guaranteed by the shifting discourses of national governments rather than by any direct relationship to an object-cause. These currencies continued to be exchanged against one another on a globalized market, but after this primal scene of late capitalism, the shocking and traumatic origin of the signifier of monetary value was irremediably lost. Nonetheless, this circuit of exchange continues to function as if money was ontologically linked to material production, becoming, in the absence of the gold standard, a fetish for the operation of reference itself.

George A. Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*, released seven years later, registers the automatic and mathematical set of economic exchanges symptomatic of late capitalism. The film’s establishing shots are organized as a montage that metaphorically yokes communication to biology: scenes of the radical disruption of circuits of broadcast media are interspersed with scenes of the radical disruption of the biological life-cycle of the subjects who inhere in this context. The signalling of check-in points by a local television station remains on the air continually, because it is held that to alter the information conveyed would require a momentary disruption of information flow. The static time of a repressed apocalypse is imposed upon the broadcast,
signalling the ascendancy of the form of dead air, one that is parasitical and yet, in the dialectic of media, rising, continually, again—an unlife caused by an automatic imperative to ‘continue to communicate, regardless of the content.’ Filmed in the station, filmed in this context, the film presents a mise-en-abyme in which an academic figure hysterically reports upon the unnatural nature of the behaviour of the undead: “The people it *kills* get up and *kill!*” That the film presents the cause of the disruption after its original manifestation calls attention to the structural mutation of circuits of signification under late capitalism: The representation of value precedes that which it claims as its origin.

Because they are the protagonists of this initial scene, Steven and Francine escape, joined at the moment of departure by Peter and Roger. In their search for fuel, the four locate themselves, with elegance, within a shopping mall—a centre of commodity consumption. What makes their subsequent engagement with the phantasmagoria with which they are confronted horrifying is their repetition, in acts, of a seemingly unthought desire to remain in the fortress of commodities. In this environment, the very idea of shopping becomes terrifying precisely because there is no reason to do so. And yet all four do, and all four enjoy it, quite happily. Well, until there is nothing left to do.¹

This horror is congealed, heartbreakingly, in the scene in which one protagonist succumbs to a viral imperative. During a tactical manoeuvre pursued at the shopping mall where our four brave survivors have established an uncanny domesticity, Roger is bitten, and infected, with undeath. While begging his friend Peter’s cooperation in realizing an end to life that will be a termination, Roger enacts a visceral repetition of his biological form precisely through his allusion to the automatic nature of the return to animation experienced by the “living dead.” “Don’t do it till you’re sure I am coming back. I’m gonna try not to. I’m gonna try not to come back. I’m gonna try not to,” he implores. This repetitious method of iterating his terminal desire manifests a recognition that this return is, precisely, a repetition. It acts as an incantation deployed to block the biological and extra-biological function that “coming back” entails.

Roger’s subsequent reanimation demonstrates a proposition that I will, eventually, return to: Incantations are a form of labour, and therefore do not work.² As Sigmund Freud,³ and those that follow the analytic laid out in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” observe, the compulsion to repeat is the substantive manifestation of the death drive. The repetitive cycle, or rather re-cycle, defining this temporality emerges most remarkably in an uncanny scenario. The scene in which Peter and Stephen engage in a game of blackjack in which they bet the currency they have lifted from the cash registers of the shopping mall is an exemplar of the automatism peculiar to this drive and to capitalism itself. Given that the contents of the mall itself are no longer on the
market as commodities, since they have, by virtue of economic collapse, been removed from any circuit of exchange, the use of monetary currency as a representation of value has no logical justification.

At the level of the particular and incidental, the game is still an exercise in capitalist relations, mimetic of Peter and Stephen’s economic-historical context. It involves little reference to its players, for the outcome of each serial round is a function of a recyclical structure that organizes synchronic dispersal of value while operating independently of any non-abstracted subject-position. Further, the interaction of the players is caught in a particular circuit, between the poles of the player(s) and the dealer. And, in the end, this circuit is determined by finitude. The goal is to hit, for a moment, the quite arbitrary value of twenty-one, making both the means and then end of the game an encounter with finitude. Crossing the line drawn between the values of twenty-one and twenty-two results in the abjection of the subject from the game—at least for that cycle. By virtue of metaphoric transposition, this game of blackjack can be understood as a schematization of modern subjectivity: “Modern man [sic]—that man assignable in his corporeal, laboring, and speaking existence, is possible only as a figure of finitude” (Foucault 318).

Blackjack illustrates the retrograde temporality of modernity, which predicates its limits—its circuit—upon an origin that is only called into being as a retroactive effect of desire. The etymological origin of “cause” betrays its relationship to what might be translated, in Lacanian terms, as the desire of the Other. In old-timey Greek, arche is both a temporal and an imperative term. It can be translated as ‘origin,’ or, in its more substantified linguistic movement, as ‘originary cause;’ power; requirement. In blackjack, twenty-one is the arche, acting as the signifier that makes the game possible, which is precisely the observation that Lacan expresses when he states that the subject “depends upon the signifier and that signifier is first of all in the field of the Other” (Four Fundamental 205). Writing in these terms, cause gets tangled with subjectivity: the signifier “I” inheres in the space of the Other, the ‘reserve,’ who is the guarantor of the possibility for this signifier to hold meaning.

Games do not exist, per se, before they are engaged in, although they cannot be played until they exist. So when nominating herself as “I,” the subject must stabilize her subjectivity in the Other’s recognition—she is a player in this game. But, people believe in luck, in their ability to confront an automaton on subjective terms. And so, to place a bet on each round seems inevitable; but, that moment of luck, the twist that convinces the subject engaged in this mechanical process that she is the only one with a handle on it, makes manifest the desire that both marks and masks her understanding of the game. The screen of fantasy, that this game is something that can be won, supports the object of desire (here, luck). The impossibility of luck as a cause is dependent upon the interference of the unconscious, a subvening topography that
lurks in all its negativity with the energetic potency of a black hole, only visible in the effects it produces: The players keep betting.

The temporality of the commodity is also characterized by a particular relationship to finitude, expressed concisely in Marx’s deployment of the concept of ‘dead labour.’ Under the sign of surplus value, and as David McNally sums neatly, “living labour (the concrete activity of productive humans) becomes a mean of expanding dead labour (the means of production created by past activity)” (141). Thought in anthropological terms, the subject-form of capital, for McNally, inheres in a metaphoric substitution:

Capitalism thus involves ‘transubstantiation,’ a process in which a quality—in this case life—is transferred from one substance to another. In awakening past labour, living labour raises it from the dead, makes it undead. Indeed, only the vital activity of labour keeps capital from lapsing into a death state: ‘Living labour must seize upon these thing, awaken them from the dead.’ (161)

Since the decoupling of the gold standard from monetary capital and the concomitant expansion of the derivatives market, the temporality of the commodity, and consequently of the subject under capital, has become at least once removed from its originary anchor in biological finitude. Biological finitude, embedded as it is in the register of the natural, is correlated in the register of the commodity form to the notion of use-value; in our moment, both serve as the natural resource reserve where capitalism finds its new sites of exploitation. Parodically, just as the undead are driven in Romero’s film by “some kind of instinct. Memory? What they used to do?” to return to that shopping mall, the circuits of exchange determining the terrain of the unconscious in late-capital mimesis gives the memory of the now-original system of exchange as a referent. McNally diagnoses the presence of this repetition of temporality in the derivatives market:

Derivatives, or at least their proliferation in late capitalism, thus reflect a profound transformation in the form of money, in which currencies are no longer linked to a past labour (embodied in gold) but largely to future labour, to acts of production and exchange that are as yet unperformed. In this sense, they express a decisive mutation in the form of money in late capitalism. (161)

Derivatives, not unlike living labour in the moment of abstraction, are expressed in the grammar of the future perfect, the it-will-be. In this manner the derivatives market reiterates the primal scene of the commodity-form that Marx calls the process of valorization. Still, given that the valorization of derivatives takes place independently of the material congealing of abstract labour in a productive process, it seems a phenomenon analytically distinct from the commodity form itself, not unlike Lacan’s automaton, which functions without the necessity of the cogito’s implication.
II.

The real has died of the shock of value acquiring this fantastic autonomy.

Jean Baudrillard, Symbolic Exchange and Death, 7

This recent public service announcement was provided by HSBC, a major global banking concern. It represents an imaginary desire for the future-perfect subsumption of the “food chain” (nature, or, perhaps, use-value, that signifier of nature in the great capitalist chain of being), under the signifier of the supply chain. This event is represented ekphrastically through the agency of a bar code, which appears to have been genetically incorporated into the very body of the trout.8

The economy of signification within which binary codes circulate is profoundly non-human, a technique of incomprehensibly rapid exchange signals that could only be thought temporally as automatic. The messianic tilting of this method—the “in the future”—remarks a satisfaction in the accomplishment of what Baudrillard titled “The Perfect Crime”: “Today the law of value no longer lies so much in the exchangeability of every commodity under the sign of a general equivalent, as it does in a much more radical exchangeability of all the categories of political economy (and its critique) in accordance with the code” (Symbolic Exchange and Death 16). In this fantasy of valorization, the supply chain, undead, literally eats the food chain. To observe this is to encounter Lacan’s often misquoted observation that “it is the whole structure of language that psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious” (“Instance of the Letter” 139). In other words, valorization, the process that Marx discerned as that which makes value, emerges in the commodity-form, but is, illogically, precedent to it, as is exemplified by this photograph of an image of a trout.

Marx tells us that as bearers of exchange value, commodities are “crystals of this social substance which is common to them all,” identifying labour as the origin of value, as the “value-forming substance.” (129). This seemingly straightforward observation takes on a particular resonance when it is understood as one term of a Hegelian dialectic: The subject (here, value) acts upon its substantial predicate (here, labour) but only inasmuch as the predicate’s mediation of the subject posits that subject’s identity. If substance “is truly realized and actual only in the process of positing itself, or in mediating with its own self in its

Fig. 1: Taken at the Vancouver International airport in May 2013, mostly in response to the dread that it produced in me. (Image provided by author).

The Unrecyclable
transitions from one state or position to the opposite” (Hegel 80), then value and labour are two terms that exist only through their mediation with one another. In this sense, the valorization process can be thought of as analogous to an unconscious drive towards signification: “Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic” (Marx 167).

McNally reads Marx in Hegelian fashion, interpreting the negating movement of abstraction as a dialectical relationship between subject and substance: “The capitalist economy thus effects a real abstraction in which products become bearers of an invisible substance (value) and concrete labour only becomes the bearers of an invisible substance, labour in the abstract” (123). Accordingly, as Romero’s undead relentlessly enact their own inauguration in pursuit of their desire for the living, the subject of capital lends both impetus and the topographic lines of force to endless, compulsive repetition, whether she will or not:

By incorporating labour into their lifeless objectivity, the capitalist simultaneously transforms value, i.e. past labour in its objectified and lifeless form, into capital, value which can perform its own valorization process, an animated monster which begins to ‘work,’ ‘as if its body were by love possessed.’ (Marx 302)

The reference to the hysterical symptom (it’s quoted from a song in Goethe’s Faustus about a rat poisoned in a kitchen, delivered in response to two rather sardonic love ballads) presents a homology between the valorization process and the primal scene. The hysterical symptom is a physiological, that is, objectively discernable, phenomenon for which there is no discernable physiological cause. The cause for this symptom is, in psychoanalytical thought, that of a trauma that has been repressed, which, while inaugurating the symptom, emerges after the fact as its cause, and is thus an effect. The first grief was tragical, the second farcical, not unlike the image of an undead man fishing pennies from the fountain in his prospector gear (Romero). In late capitalism the process of valorization functions in exactly the same manner.

Marx describes exchange value “as the necessary mode of expression, of form of appearance of value” (128). In our moment, this takes on an intensification on several registers, including the scopic. Gruppe Krisis, critiquing the position of organized labour—and the fantasy that productive labour is the moral origin of value—remarks, “As a mirror image of labour, simulated by means of coercive measures imposed by labour administration authorities, a simulation of capital valorisation developed from the speculative uncoupling of the credit system and the equity market from the actual economy” (19). However, Gruppe Krisis here is making a misstep. At this historical juncture, there is no “actual economy,” no gold standard of
reference that can be traced back by virtue of the tracks of a metaphorical chain of substitutions. Late capital is, rather, organized along metonymic lines. At the level of the valorization process it seems entirely possible that what Baudrillard describes as the “structural law of value” is the Other to which subjects are now referred, in a recycling of the previous pluperfect tense—the it-will-be—of commodity production.

III.

On a beam which supports the ceiling of Brecht’s study are painted the words, ‘Truth is concrete.’ On a windowsill stands a small wooden donkey which can nod its head. Brecht has hung a little sign up around its neck on which he has written, ‘Even I must understand.’

Walter Benjamin, “Conversations with Brecht” 89

Brecht’s toy donkey has hung around its neck a particular albatross—an instrumental notion of linguistic value as and upon a sign. Just as the commodity bears its abstraction, so the donkey bears the demand for its proper negation by the signifier. A utilitarian approach to aesthetic praxis espoused by Brecht in his early years led him to insist on a politics of representation that, in the final analysis, was as much a form of interpellation as any other state apparatus precisely because it assumed the ontological status of the subjectivity of the proletariat. This tendency has been sharply criticized by Tiqqun, and by Gruppe Krisis. The latter describes the working-class movement as one that doesn’t so much “struggle against the imposition of labour” as “develop[s] an over-identification with the seemingly inevitable” (14):

The political left has always eagerly venerated labour. It has stylised labour to be the true nature of the human being and mystified it into the supposed counter-principle of capital. Not labour was regarded as a scandal, but its exploitation by capital . . . Yet the social opposition of capital and labour is only the opposition of different (albeit equally powerful) interests within the capitalist end-in-itself. Class struggle was the form of battling out opposite interests on the common social ground and reference system of the commodity-producing system. It was germane to the inner dynamics of capital accumulation. (Krisis 8)

Tiqqun further observes that this repetition of the ontology of capital—even in the case of the 1986 “unemployed worker’s movement”—is at a tactical level an insistence on a reiteration of labour subjectivity even in revolutionary praxis:

For all those that experienced them from within, not a single one of them wasn’t emptied of all substance and removed from all contact with reality by a sub-policelike para-trotskyist activism that repeatedly “let itself be carried away by the trend it intended or pretended to oppose: bourgeois
instrumentalism, which fetishizes means because its own form of practice cannot tolerate any reflection upon its ends” (Adorno, *Critical Models*). (Tiqqun)

This is, unfortunately, the all-too-common operational application of the idea that ‘direct action gets the goods’—a resistance to capital whose end is precisely an intensified access to the commodity-form. A mode of praxis that fails to reject the reification of labour subjectivity, and instead valorizes it as the only site of emancipatory potential, is doomed to recycle capital precisely because this subjectivity is homologous with, an effect of, and a necessary condition for the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production (Althusser 7). Perhaps this is most tragically demonstrable in a common occurrence during mass mobilizations in North America. The communist tendencies repeat in a profoundly alienated (and alienating) manner slogans that were not written by them, and which, by virtue of their progeny as recycled enunciations of Maoist-type marches, are the very stuff of linguistic abstraction, producing a symptom of this form:

Quite quickly, it ceased to exist in fact as a practical contestation beyond an unanimous parrotlike repetition on the one hand (“let’s all chant together now!”) and the mute autism of direct action cut off from all substantial life on the other . . . The former abandoned itself to its natural inclination: repetition to mask its aphasia and aphasia to mask its repetition. (Tiqqun)

This set of observations, which perhaps provoked Lacan’s famous retort to May 1968 revolutionaries in Paris—“What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a Master. Very well, you shall have one!”—has been incorporated into the radical critique of subjectivity that ‘theory,’ arguably, performs. What is crucially important, what drives this project, is the proposition that even in Althusser’s narration of identification, the subject does not exist as perfectly identical to the singular person interpellated into such abstraction. There are gaps, spaces, remainders which are not subsumed by the recycling of the phenomenon of human existence into subjectivity:

The new theory claimed that the crux of the problem resides in the “subject-form” common to all those who live in the commodity society, although this does not mean that this form is the same for all subjects. The subject is the substrate, the agent, the bearer that the fetishist system of valorization requires to assure production and consumption. It is not completely identical to the human being, who may on occasion feel the subject form as a straitjacket. *This is why Marx called the subject of valorization of value the “automatic subject.”* (Jappe, emphasis mine)

This observation is at the heart of Lacanian praxis: psychoanalytic theory unspools a logic of subjectivity, and a corresponding notion of causality, that presents instrumentality, or one-to-one correspondence, as a misrecognition obtaining at the ontological level. This project

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destabilizes, precisely, the Law—the law that renders exchange supposedly intuitive, the law of history that describes the proletariat’s subsumption under the capitalist mode of social relations as inevitable, the law that would demand that the subject may exist only within the boundaries of subjectification. It does so, however, not by merely denying the existence of the Law in a psychotic autism. Rather it works towards an absurd, tragic, and emancipatory relationship to the law that dissolves the consistency of one’s subjectivity without dissolving the possibility of intersubjective ethics. The inaugural proposition, accordingly, does not deny the existence of cause or the law, but rather places them in a peculiar dialectical relationship: “Cause is to be distinguished from that which is determinate in a chain, in other words the law . . . In short, there is cause only in something that doesn’t work” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental 22*).

In addition to providing the text for an elementally amusing anti-flag, Lacan’s observation provides one possible pharmakon by which to treat the tendency of insistently class-oriented mobilizations to “[fall] into the reductive trap of positing an affirmative counter-logic to capitalism within a social space which is already completely contained, delineated, and dominated by late-capitalism” (Wood 31). Al- den Wood finds the counter to this double bind in an anti-political, mystical embracing of the nothingness that is latent within the nihilistic contradictions at the core of late-capitalism. This destruction of the nihilism undergirding the contradictions of late-capitalist logic through the adoption of nihilism itself as an ethical position is precisely the course that Tiqqun argues for in their essay “Silence and Beyond.” (32)

I would argue, rather, that the mysticist tack Wood takes by reading Tiqqun’s radical refusal through Bataille’s notion of death is an overcorrection, failing as it does to take account of the very real material suffering that subjects of labour, subjects of colonization, subjects of forced reproductive labour, *all subjects under capitalism* find their existence characterized by. Still, a dissolution of subjectivity, as composed along the lines of force established by capital, seems the only means by which to avoid the recyclical nature of, for instance, the communist revolutions of the twentieth century. In this context, Žižek’s observation that “the very existence of the symbolic order implies a possibility of its radical effacement of ‘symbolic death’—not the death of the so-called ‘real object’ in its symbol, but the obliteration of the signifying network itself” (*Sublime Object* 132) identifies the possible dissolution of the structures of exchange, representation, and identification in which capital manifests at the anthropological level.

The homology between structures of subjectivity and the commodity-form are grounds for the heuristic proposition that the negation of negation at the level of the symbolic must be understood as a primordially political act.
This observation runs counter to a general “apolitical” tendency in some strains of radical thought. Tiqqun, for instance, collectively appears to advocate against political action of any sort. Still, it’s possible that this is a function of the fatigue that they, among others, experience when confronted with a notion of the political that is configured explicitly within the inevitability of capitalist social relations, antagonistic though these relations may be understood to be.

Against this mode of resistance, Tiqqun then militates for the deployment of silence as “a critical metaphysical sabotage device directed against the triumph of positivity and the defeat of Being by its forgetting,” and explicates this programme in terms that render an account of the mutated form of capitalist ideology that accompanies the ratcheting up of the valorization process after 1971: “The fact that our tyrannical enemy no longer draws its power from its ability to shut people up, but from its aptitude to make them talk—i.e. from the fact that it has moved its center of gravity from its mastery of the world itself to its seizure of the world’s mode of disclosure—requires that a few tactical adjustments be made” (Tiqqun).

The refusal to speak, this ontologically-targeted silence, is correspondent to an existential hostility to subjugation, an absolute refusal to function as one of two terms under the sign of dead labour.11 It also characterizes the difference between a traditional strike, in which labour is withheld as a bargaining method for achieving better working conditions, and an unlimited general strike, which is not deployed as a tactical operation within capital but as a fundamental opposition to the practice of labour itself:

Strike for strike’s sake is the condition of the contemporary struggle. Unmotivated, with neither objective nor political referent, it is the oppositional response adopted against a production which is also unmotivated, with neither a referent, nor a social use-value, nor any finality other than its own—production for production’s sake, in short, a system which has become only a system of reproduction, revolving around itself in a gigantic tautology of the labour process—a re-cycle. (Baudrillard, Symbolic Exchange 27)

At the semiotic level, an unlimited general strike takes the form of a refusal to represent, of the advancement of an aesthetics of failure that is the direct inversion of Brecht’s instrumentality. In such conditions, the sign cannot be exchanged for its referent, and, in manifesting this very failure, manifests in representational substance the negation of the negation.

This is in a very real sense the danger of literature—its failure to enact the law, its alignment with the cause that does not work—that Maurice Blanchot describes in his work on “Literature and the Right to Death”:

Literature is not only illegitimate, it is also null, and as long as this nullity is isolated in a state of purity, it may constitute an

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extraordinary force. To make literature become of this emptiness inside, to make it open completely to its nothingness, recognize its own unreality, was one of the tasks undertaken by surrealism. (30.1)

The effect produced by literature of this nature is profoundly unsettling. As an exemplary text, Ror Wolf’s “Nothing Was Said,” a series of reportages mimicking the incident report that is the bureaucratic state’s stock-in-trade, links the aesthetics of refusal to, precisely, silence. Still more precisely, the title’s grammatical ambiguity opens up the possibility not just that nothing was said, but that nothing was said—that what was articulated, represented, was, somehow, precisely negativity. This, as one vignette indicates, is metaphysically dangerous:

An Almost Complete Portrayal of the Conditions in Maybe Waabs

A man, whose name I’ve thankfully forgotten, came up to me and said something that I’ve thankfully forgotten. It happened in a city whose name escapes me, on a day I don’t remember, or on a night I don’t remember. I also can’t say what happened later. I know nothing about the beginning and even less about the end. I did, however, notice that never in my life had I experienced anything quite as dangerous as I had in this moment. But I forgot about it. (Wolf)

This nullity is very much an extraordinary force. Literature itself, and, in particular, bourgeois realism, has performed an ideological function in that it may act, by virtue of the reader’s identification with the subjectivity organizing the text, to naturalize current social relations and the epistemology which they are embedded in and produce. Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose texts work directly against this process, describes such texts as “linked to an entire rationalistic and organizing system whose flowering corresponds to the assumption of power by the middle class” (32) and, as a result, an arena of the attempt to subsume all experience completely under its signification (his word is “master”). The inverse operation, enacted by texts such as Wolf’s that refuse representation, makes possible a praxis that fundamentally destabilizes subjectivity, producing an unguaranteed— and thus unvalorizable—subjectivity.

This moment is dramatized in Lacan’s reading of James Joyce as an identification with the sinthome as that fourth strand binding the Borromean knot of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary, lending subjectivity as such its consistency (an operation he describes as manifest in the act of writing) (Sinthome 61).

Slavoj Žižek extends this concept in a formula that can be applied as a qualification to what Tiqqun identifies as the necessity of silence—“refusal to take recourse to any of the codes, to any of the accepted signifiers or meanings” (Tiqqun)—that does not preclude the possibility of a negative political act:

What we must bear in mind here is the radical ontological status of symptom: symptom, conceived as sinthome, is literally our only
substance, the only positive support of our being, the only point that gives consistency to the subject. In other words, symptom is the way that we—the subjects—‘avoid madness,’ the way that we ‘choose something’ (the symptom formation) instead of nothing (radical psychotic autism, the destruction of the symbolic universe), through the binding of our enjoyment to a certain signifying symbolic formation which assures a minimum of consistency to our being-in-the-world. (Sublime Object 74)

To be signified: to identify with the signifier; to be translated; recycled into the order of things; to be interpellated—this is the event producing the necessity of a tactic of symbolic resistance. Not a total refusal of signification but an insistence on the gap that the negation of this negation opens up. Perhaps a general economy of subjectivity, for it is possible, even within an episteme conditioned by finitude, that the operation of interpellation is never entirely complete. There remains the untranslatable, the unsubjectifiable, the unnameable, the unrecyclable, and the possibility of a subjectivity that in a “heretical relationship to lived experience,” (Tiqqun) binds its jouissance not to the speech of the Other but to metaphysical silence instead:

This double, self-referential negation does not entail any kind of return to positive identity, any kind of abscission, of cancella-
tion of the disruptive force of negativity, of reducing it to a passing moment in the self-mediating process of identity: in the ‘negation of negation,’ the negativity preserves all its disruptive power; the whole point is just that we come to experience how this negative, disruptive power, menacing our identity, is simultaneously a positive condition of it. (Žižek, Sublime Object 176)

To take this position is to encounter the event of subjectivity in the mode of production and to designate that site where its impossibility manifests—where it shows—as a ground for resistance.

This operation is embedded in its history, designated by Foucault as the project of philosophy in the modern episteme:

In this form, the cogito will not therefore be the sudden and illuminating discovery that all thought is thought, but the constantly renewed interrogation as to how thought can reside elsewhere than here, how it can be in the forms of non-thinking. The modern cogito does not reduce the whole being of things to thought without ramifying the being of thought right down to the inert network of what does not think. (324)

Here Foucault, designating the inert nature of that which does not think, invokes the automaton, “the return, the coming-back, the insistence of the signs” (Lacan, Four Fundamental 53-54). The real, presenting itself “in the form of that which is unassimilable in it—in the form
of trauma, determining all that follows, and imposing on it an apparently accidental origin” (53-54) appears by virtue of its own repression. Although the automaton of valorisation is also at work in the network of signifiers invoked by all writing, the representation of the refusal to represent, and the jouissance that this produces, opens a valve onto a new ground of subjectivity, one that is suspended from an identification with the symptom provoked in us by our dependence on the Other, rather than by that Other’s recognition.¹²

IV.

We place a high importance on the manifestations of a negativity that invent a new active grammar of contestation.

Tiqqun

Throughout all of the discourses that this writing knits together, finitude—death, as drive, as substance, as principle of exchange or repetition—enacts a boundary around the space of subjectivity and provides the motor, in absentia, for the automaton. But, returning again to the mechanics of identification with the sinthome, death in the form of the dissolution of subjectivity takes up the status not so much of a circuit as a horizon, dangerous though its pursuit would prove. The psychoanalytic process that apprehends the negative ground of a subjectivity is dangerous, too, but may be a means of fatal exchange with the structural law of value:

Lacan’s emphasis is not on the supposed incapacity of the self to reflect, to grasp its own conditions—on its being the plaything of inaccessible unconscious forces: his point is that the subject can pay for such a reflection with the loss of his very ontological consistency. It is in this sense that the knowledge that we approach through psychoanalysis is impossible-real: We are on dangerous ground in getting too close to it; we absorb suddenly how our consistency, our positivity is dissolving itself. (Žižek, Sublime Object 68-69)¹³

This movement is, in the psychoanalytic topography of subjectivity, a function which does not attempt a ‘supercession’ of the negative movement of abstraction, of interpellation. It is rather an “experience of the fact that negativity as such has a positive function, enables and structures our positive consistency . . . it is a negative moment which opens the very place where every positive identity can be situated” (Žižek, Sublime Object 176-77). So, if the structure of subjectivity, homologous with the structure of the commodity-form, is an ontology of the contemporary mode of production, then it is possible that an aesthetic grounded in this condition, but not entirely mimetic of it, offers a method of both critique and praxis. Possibly, even, a poesis.

Blanchot writes of the possibility of negation in the register of aesthetic signification and the symbolic death that this entails. Then, in a second movement of negation, he indicates
a potential means to evade the double bind of labour resisting capital as labour. This concept of literature graphs a topography of the refusal of the labour of representation. But more crucially, perhaps, through its praxis, this refusal becomes visible. It shows; it “makes visible.”¹⁴

In the economy of the commodity form, one might imagine the “it shows” as the relationship of price to the valorisation process—the former manifests the effect of this process, in a quite arbitrary signifier, marking the hole punctured in the notion of value-as-meaning borne by the commodity form by making visible on a different register the marks left by the violence inherent in this abstraction. So also, with literature:

This refusal to mean anything, a refusal immersed in words turned to salt; in short, this destiny which literature becomes as it becomes the language of no one, the writing of no writer, the light of a consciousness deprived of self, this insane effort to bury itself in itself, to hide itself behind the fact that it is visible, all this is what literature shows. If it were to become as mute as a stone, as passive as the corpse enclosed behind that stone, its decision to lose the capacity for speech would still be legible on the stone and would be enough to wake that bogus corpse. (Blanchot 329)

Why is the corpse bogus? Because even at the moment of negativity, the negation of negation that writing inaugurates exchanges death with death and thus engenders a reversion which disrupts the compulsive repetition or recycle of the automaton. This action renders the corpse fundamentally different from the corpse-like substance of value, since it is an ontological disruption of the valorization process. Under the structural law of value, such a corpse would be, indeed, illegitimate.

Thus the danger of literature. Operating in this manner, it performs a “scrupulous reversion” (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange* 5). But, as subjects under ideology, if we already exist, as labour, in a state of death deferred, how can this gesture be accomplished—how can death be fended off with undead hands? Perhaps by the assumption of a symbolic death, one which can be accomplished by a refusal of the symbolic existence of the Other, a recognition of this linguistic placeholder as the mark of the automaton:

What is at stake in this ‘destitution’ is precisely the fact that the subject no longer presupposes himself as subject; by accomplishing this he annuls, so to speak, the act of formal conversion. In other words, he assumes not the existence but the nonexistence of the big Other; he accepts the Real in its utter, meaningless idiocy; he keeps open the gaps between the Real and its symbolization. The price to be paid for this is that by the same act he also annuls himself as subject. (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 230-31)
So, then, a sort of death, in that it is a “repulsion of one’s very own existence as a subject of labour and competition and the flat refusal of a life on an ever more miserable level” (Gruppe Krisis 25).

Referring to literature, Slavoj Žižek has made insistent reference to refusal as a particular political position that avoids the endless repetition of the structure of capital as an antagonism between two terms. He derives this from a peculiar, unsettling tale by Herman Melville. The narrator of “Bartleby the Scrivener” relates an inverted *bildungsroman*, describing the narrator’s experience of undoing provoked by his interaction with a clerk who refuses the task of recording, in written signification, the transactions of capital. Bartleby, as an allegorical representation of a cause that does not work, is only apprehendable to the narrator by his repeated utterance, “I would prefer not to.” This reversal of the compulsion to repeat that characterizes the valorization process does not function as a subjective negation of the predicate. Rather, it is an affirmation of a non-predicate:

This is how we pass from the politics of “resistance” or “protestation,” which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position and its negation . . . This is the gesture of difference . . . its political mode, Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” is not the starting point of “abstract negation” which should then be overcome in the patient positive work of the “determinate negation” of the existing social universe, but a kind of *arche*, the underlying principle that sustains the entire movement: far from “overcoming” it, the subsequent work of contradiction, rather, gives body to it. (Žižek, *Parallax View* 381-82)

It is in a similar matter that we might understand the power of the Tahrir Square Book Club. In the wake of violent repression in Turkey of a resistance to both neoliberal and fundamentalist legislative measures (the two are not mutually exclusive, given as they are in a radically positivist apprehension of their respective texts), a series of silent protests emerged. Sometimes those who are assembled are reading (Henton). In doing so they un-assume the identity of labourers remonstrating with the state for a more bearable version of capital. Their refusal to “do work” is not oriented towards life under capital, but towards capital’s symbolic death, one that “ought never to be understood as a real event that affects a subject or a body, but as a form in which the determination of the subject and of value is lost” (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange* 5). This silent reading, this absolute refusal, and this making visible of refusal, is the *poesis* that must necessarily accompany *praxis*, a ‘negation of the negation’ that lends positive content to symbolic resistance. As a mode of resistance, it traverses the fantasy masking valorization, and, perhaps, approaches the horizon binding what is now global capital in a murderous compulsion to repeat. Of course this understanding is not extraordinarily heterodox, not to anyone who has ever insisted upon bread *and* roses.
When Fran, Roger, Stephen, and Peter arrive at the shopping centre by helicopter, it is, initially, to be a short stop, to acquire supplies—objects of use-value and use-value alone. And yet even as the mode of production collapses under the weight of a biological articulation of its configuration of finitude, the fascination—the phantasy—retains its lure, trapping the four in a frightful repetition of capitalist desire. The automatic composition of this desire is made unavoidably evident by the living dead who also continue this practice, repeating it even in their unlife. Fran, consistently uneasy at the con-
fluence, observes of the men’s refusal to leave, “You’re hypnotized by this place.” And yet, Fran and Peter are able to escape; and they are able to escape because they are no longer compelled by an unconscious relation to finitude but by a willingness to risk their lives in confronting it. As the helicopter ascends over the scene of murderous consumption they have fled, Peter asks Fran, “How much fuel do we have left?” She replies, “Not much”; he, “Well, all right.”

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“Do” meaning an act of productive labour. Consumption is also a labour, given that it produces surplus value. That’s why they can keep working. Boy howdy, malls are exhausting.

I am here failing to do justice to the representation of people of colour in this film, including Peter, that for me are very important topics of discussion and are a big part of making Romero’s film one for the books. This is partly because I am not inclined to appropriate or project analyses of the subject-positions of people of colour, since I am not one, and partly because when someone does this it would, I imagine, be a whole other article.

Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.”

The full deck is deployed in each round and shuffled. Counting cards is extraordinarily difficult.

“The past exists as it is included, as it enters the synchronic net of the signifier—it is this elaboration which decides, retroactively what they ‘will have been’ . . . the symptom as a ‘return of the repressed’ is precisely such an effect which precedes its cause (its hidden kernel, its meaning)” (Slavoj Žižek, Sublime Object, 56).

The expression of abstract labour in the commodity-form exists in the immediate and the immediate future perfect tense: “All labour contained in the yarn is past labour and it is a matter of no importance that the labour expended to produce its constituent elements lies further back in the past than the labour expended in the final process, the spinning. The former stands, as it were, in the pluperfect, the latter in the past tense, but this does not matter” (Marx 294).

Dominic Rushe, “New York Stock Exchange Sold to Derivatives Company in $8bn Takeover: Sale of Nearly 200-Year-Old Institution to Intercontinental Exchange Comes Amid Historic Shift to Electronic Trading,” The Guardian. 20 December 2012. First as tragedy (the NYSE), then as farce (ICE), if you will.

I took this photograph on 3 June 2013, at the Vancouver Airport. This airport is built upon treaty land, and the relationship between the state agents and the nations who require that they hold to treaty are characterized by an imperative towards the subsumption of all economic activity under capital by the former.

“Capital no longer belongs to the order of political economy: it operates with political economy as its simulated model. The entire apparatus of the commodity law of value is absorbed and recycled in the larger apparatus of the structural law of value, thus becoming part of the third order of simulacra (see below). Political economy is thus assured a second life, an eternity, within the confines of an apparatus in which it has lost all its strict determinacy, but maintains an effective presence as a system of reference for simulation. It was exactly the same for the previous apparatus—the natural law of value which the system of political economy and the market law of value also appropriated as their imaginary system of reference (‘Nature’): ‘nature’ leads a ghostly existence as use-value at the core of exchange-value. But on the next twist of the spiral, use-value is seized as an alibi within the dominant order of the code” (Baudrillard, Symbolic Exchange 2).

Itself a telling nomination, one that ascribes the subjectivity of labour even to those who are not engaged directly in capitalist production!
11 “It makes this rupturing energy which would shatter the relations of production into a term homogeneous with the relations of production, in a simulation of opposition under the sign of dead labour. From now on a single hegemonic agency (dead labour) divides into capital and living labour” (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange* 35).

12 The latter is the operation of interpellation, as Althusser has deduced: “We observe that the structure of all ideology, interpellating individuals as subjects in the name of a Unique and Absolute Subject is speculary, i.e. a mirror-structure, and doubly speculary: this mirror duplication is constitutive of ideology and ensures its functioning. Which means that all ideology is centered, that of the Absolute Subject occupies the unique place of the Center, and interpellates around it the infinity of individuals into subjects in a double mirror-connexion such that it subjects the subject to the Subject, while giving them in the Subject in which each subject can contemplate its own image (present and future) the guarantee that this really concerns them and Him” (“Ideology” 54).

13 See also Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*: “Reversibility alone thereafter, rather than unbinding or drifting, is fatal to it” (5).

14 In the visual register, Lacan describes the “spot” or “stain” on the screen, the visual analogue to the space of the fantasy, as that which covers over the pure negativity at its centre (*Four Fundamental* 96-97).

15 Revolutionary queer praxis is another manifestation of this position—the refusal of heteronormativity is not then overcome by a normalization of or creation of an abstract properly “queer” subject but, rather, is an establishing gesture that opens up a space for the practice of an eros that does not take heteronormativity as a referent at all.

16 The “standing-man” actants do not participate in remunerated labour. Nor are they—either as “protestors,” operating as logistical technicians if of higher rank, or “boots on the ground” if of lower—valorized in the economy of resistance by virtue of being the corporeal manifestation of Struggle (maybe the Geist?) that feeds on the life of their bodies as surely as the spectre of mechanized labour would: “Let’s all chant together now.”
Works Cited


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