ENJOY YOUR SYMPTOM!

Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out

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unique insofar as it marks the point at which Chaplin and Hitchcock, two authors whose artistic universes appear wholly incompatible at the level of both form and content, finally meet. That is to say, it seems as if Chaplin in *Limelight* finally discovered the Hitchcockian tracking shot: the very first shot of the film is a long tracking shot progressing from the establishing shot of an idyllic London street to a closed apartment door which leaks deadly gas (signaling the attempted suicide of the young girl who lives in the apartment), whereas the last scene of the film contains a magnificent backward tracking shot from the close-up of the dead clown Calvero behind the stage to the establishing shot of the entire stage where the same young girl, now a successful ballerina and his great love, is performing. Just before this scene, the dying Calvero expresses to the attending doctor his desire to see his love dancing; the doctor taps him gently on the shoulders and comforts him: “You shall see her!” Thereupon Calvero dies, his body is covered by a white sheet, and the camera withdraws so that it embraces the dancing girl on the stage, while Calvero is reduced to a tiny, barely visible white stain in the background. What is here of special significance is the way the ballerina enters the frame: from behind the camera, like the birds in the famous “God’s-view” shot of Bodega Bay in Hitchcock’s *Birds*—yet another white stain which materializes out of the mysterious intermediate space separating the spectator from the diegetic reality on the screen... We encounter here the function of the *gaze qua object-stain* at its purest: the doctor’s forecast is fulfilled, presissely insofar as he is dead, i.e., insofar as he cannot see her anymore, Calvero looks at her. For that reason, the logic of this backward tracking shot is thoroughly Hitchcockian: by way of it, a piece of reality is transformed into an amorphous stain (a white blot in the background), yet a stain around which the entire field of vision turns, a stain which “smears over” the entire field (as in the backward tracking shot in *Frenzy*)—the ballerina is dancing for it, for that stain.15

1.2 Imaginary, Symbolic, Real

So why *does* the letter always arrive at its destination? Why could it not—sometimes, at least—also *fail* to reach it?16 Far from attesting to a refined theoretical sensitivity, this Derridean reaction to the famous closing statement of Lacan’s “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’”17 rather exhibits what we could call a primordial response of common sense: what if a letter does *not* reach its destination? Isn’t it always possible for a letter to go astray?18 If, however, the Lacanian theory insists categorically that a letter *does* always arrive at its destination, it is not because of an unshakable belief in teleology, in the power of a message to reach its preordained goal: Lacan’s exposition of the way a letter arrives at its
destination *lays bare the very mechanism of teleological illusion*. In other words, the very reproach that “a letter can also miss its destination” misses its own destination: it misreads the Lacanian thesis, reducing it to the traditional teleological circular movement, i.e., to what is precisely called in question and subverted by Lacan. A letter always arrives at its destination—especially when we have the limit case of a letter *without addressee*, of what is called in German *Flaschenpost*, a message in a bottle thrown into the sea from an island after shipwreck. This case displays at its purest and clearest how a letter reaches its true destination: the moment it is delivered, *thrown into the water*—its true addressee is namely not the empirical other which may receive it or not, but the big Other, the symbolic order itself, which receives it *the moment the letter is put into circulation*, i.e., when the sender “externalizes” his message, delivers it to the Other, the moment the Other takes cognizance of the letter and thus disburdens the sender of responsibility for it.19 How, then, specifically, does a letter arrive at its destination? How should we conceive this thesis of Lacan which usually serves as the crowning evidence for his alleged “logocentrism”? The proposition “a letter always arrives at its destination” is far from being univocal: it offers itself to a series of possible readings20 which could be ordered by means of reference to the triad Imaginary, Symbolic, Real.

**Imaginary (mis)recognition**

In a first approach, a letter which “always arrives at its destination” points to the logic of recognition/misrecognition ([reconnaissance/méconnaissance](#)) elaborated in detail by Louis Althusser and his followers (Michel Pêcheux);21 the logic by means of which one (mis)recognizes oneself as the addressee of ideological interpellation. This illusion constitutive of the ideological order could be succinctly rendered by paraphrasing a formula of Barbara Johnson:22 “A letter always arrives at its destination *since its destination is wherever it arrives*.” Its underlying mechanism was elaborated by Pêcheux apropos of jokes of the type: “Daddy was born in Manchester, Mummy in Bristol and I in London: strange that the three of us should have met!”23 In short, if we look at the process backward, from its (contingent) result, the fact that “events took precisely this turn” couldn’t but appear as uncanny, concealing some fateful meaning—as if some mysterious hand had taken care that “the letter arrived at its destination,” i.e., that my father and my mother met . . . What we have here is, however, more than a shallow joke, as is attested by contemporary physics, where we encounter precisely the same mechanism under the name of the “anthropocentric principle”: life emerged on Earth due to numerous contingencies which created the appropriate conditions (if, for example, in Earth’s primeval time the composition of soil and air had differed by a small percentage, no life would have been possible); so, when physicists endeavor to reconstruct the process culminating in the appearance of intelligent living beings on Earth, they either presuppose that universe was created in order to render possible the formation of intelligent beings (the “strong,” overtly teleological anthropocentric principle) or accept a “circular” methodological rule requiring us to always posit such hypotheses about the primeval state of universe as to enable us to deduce its further development toward the conditions for the emergence of life (the “weak” version).

The same logic is also at work in the well-known accident from the *Arabian Nights*: the hero, lost in the desert, quite by chance enters a cave; there he finds three old wise men, awoken by his entry, who say to him: “Finally, you have arrived! We have been waiting for you for the last three hundred years,” as if, behind the contingencies of his life, there was a hidden hand of fate which directed him toward the cave in the desert. This illusion is produced by a kind of “short circuit” between a place in the symbolic network and the contingent element which occupies it: *whoever* finds himself at this place is the addressee since the addressee is not defined by his positive qualities but by the *very contingent fact* of finding himself at this place. Although the religious idea of *predestination* seems to be the very exemplar of the delusive “short circuit”, it simultaneously intimates a foreboding of radical contingency: if God has decided in advance who will be saved and who will be damned, then my salvation or perdition does not depend on my determinate qualities and acts but on the place in which—*indeed Independently of my qualities, that is to say: totally by chance, in so far as I’m concerned*—I find myself within the network of God’s plan. This contingency manifests itself in a paradoxical inversion: I’m not damned because I act sinfully, trespassing His Commandments, I act sinfully because I’m damned . . . So, we can easily imagine God easing His mind when some big sinner commits his crime: “Finally, you did it! I have been waiting for it for the whole of your miserable life!” And to convince oneself of how this problematic bears on psychoanalysis, one has only to remember the crucial role of contingent encounters in triggering a traumatic crackdown of our psychic balance: overhearing a passing remark by a friend, witnessing a small unpleasant scene, and so forth, can awaken long-forgotten memories and shatter our daily life—as Lacan put it, the unconscious trauma repeats itself *by means of some small, contingent bit of reality*. “Fate” in psychoanalysis always asserts itself through such contingent encounters, giving rise to the question: “What if I had missed that remark? What if I had taken another route and avoided that scene?” Such questioning is, of course, deceitful since “a letter always arrives at its destination”: it waits for its moment
with patience—if not this, then another contingent little bit of reality will sooner or later find itself at this place that awaits it and fire off the trauma. This is, ultimately, what Lacan called “the arbitrariness of the signifier.”

To refer to the terms of speech-act theory, the illusion proper to the process of interpelation consists in the overlooking of its performative dimension: when I recognize myself as the addressee of the call of the ideological big Other (Nation, Democracy, Party, God, and so forth), when this call “arrives at its destination” in me, I automatically miscon-recognize that it is this very act of recognition which makes me what I have recognized myself as—I don’t recognize myself in it because I’m its addressee, I become its addressee the moment I recognize myself in it. This is the reason why a letter always reaches its addressee: because one becomes its addressee when one is reached. The Derridean reproof that a letter can also miss its addressee is therefore simply beside the point: it makes sense only insofar as I presuppose that I can be its addressee before the letter reaches me—in other words, it presupposes the traditional teleological trajectory with a predetermined goal. Translated into the terms of the joke about my father from Manchester, my mother from Bristol, and me from London, the Derridean proposition that a letter can also go astray and miss its destination discloses a typical obsessional apprehension of what would happen if my father and mother had not come across each other—all would have gone wrong, I would not exist. So, far from implying any kind of teleological circle, “a letter always arrives at its destination” exposes the very mechanism which brings about the amazement of “Why me? Why was I chosen?” and thus sets in motion the search for a hidden fate that regulates my path.

Symbolic circuit I: “There is no metalanguage.”

On a symbolic level, “a letter always arrives at its destination” condenses an entire chain (a “family” in the Wittgensteinian sense) of propositions: “the sender always receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form,” “the repressed always returns,” “the frame itself is always being framed by part of its content,” “we cannot escape the symbolic debt, it always has to be settled,” which are all ultimately variations on the same basic premise that “there is no metalanguage.” So let us begin by explaining the impossibility of metalanguage apropos of the Hegelian figure of the “Beautiful Soul,” deploring the wicked ways of the world from the position of an innocent, impassive victim. The “Beautiful Soul” pretends to speak a pure metalanguage, exempted from the corruption of the world, thereby concealing the way its own moans and groans partake actively in the corruption it denounces. In his “Intervention on Transference,”25 Lacan relies on the dialectic of the “Beautiful Soul” to designate the falsity of the hysterical subjective position: “Dora,” Freud’s famous analysand, complains of being reduced to a pure object in a play of intersubjective exchanges (her father is allegedly offering her to Mister K. as if in compensation for his own flirtation with Miss K.), i.e., she presents this exchange as an objective state of things in the face of which she is utterly helpless; Freud’s answer is that the function of this stance of passive victimization by cruel circumstances is just to conceal her complicity and collusion—the square of intersubjective exchanges can only sustain itself insofar as Dora assumes actively her role of victim, of an object of exchange, in other words, insofar as she finds libidinal satisfaction in it, insofar as this very renunciation procures for her a kind of perverse surplus enjoyment. A hysteric continually complains of how he cannot adapt himself to the reality of cruel manipulation, and the psychoanalytic answer to it is not “give up your empty dreams, life is cruel, accept it as it is” but quite the contrary, “your moans and groans are false, by means of them, you are only too well adapted to the reality of manipulation and exploitation”: by playing the role of helpless victim, the hysteric assumes the subjective position which enables him to “blackmail emotionally his environs,” as we would put it in today’s jargon.26

This answer, in which the “Beautiful Soul” is confronted with how it actually partakes of the wicked ways of the world, closes the circuit of communication: in it, the subject/sender receives from the addressee his own message in its true form, i.e., the true meaning of his moans and groans. In other words, in it, the letter that the subject puts into circulation “arrives at its destination,” which was from the very beginning the sender him- self: the letter arrives at its destination when the subject is finally forced to assume the true consequences of his activity. This is how Lacan, in the early 1950s, interpreted the Hegelian dictum about the rationality of the real (“What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational”): the true meaning of the subject’s words or deeds—their reason—is disclosed by their actual consequences, so the subject has no right to shrink back from them and say “But I didn’t mean it!” In this sense, we may say that Hitchcock’s Rope is an inherently Hegelian film: the homosexual couple strangles their best friend to win recognition from professor Caddell, their teacher who preaches the right of Supermen to dispose of the useless and weak; when Caddell is confronted with the verbatim realization of his doctrine—when, in other words, he gets back from the other his own message in its inverted, true form, i.e., when the true dimension of his own “letter” (teaching) reaches its proper addressee, namely himself—he is shaken and shrinks back from the consequence of his words, unprepared to recognize in them his own truth. Lacan defines “hero” as the subject who (unlike Caddell and like Oedipus, for example) fully
assumes the consequences of his act, that is to say, who does not step aside when the arrow that he shot makes its full circle and flies back at him—unlike the rest of us who endeavor to realize our desire without paying the price for it; revolutionaries who want Revolution without revolution (its bloody reverse). Hitchcock's benevolent-sadistic playing with the spectator takes into account precisely this halfway nature of our desiring: he makes the spectator shrink back by confronting him with the full consequence of the realization of his desire ("you want this evil person killed? OK, you will have it—with all the nauseating details you wanted to pass over in silence . . ."). In short, Hitchcock's "sadism" corresponds exactly to the superego's "malevolent neutrality:" he is nothing but a neutral "purveyor of truth," giving us only what we wanted, but including in the package the part of it that we prefer to ignore.

This reverse of the subject's message is its repressed; so it is not difficult to see how the impossibility of metalanguage is linked to the return of the repressed. "There is no metalanguage" insofar as the speaking subject is always already spoken, i.e., insofar as he cannot master the effects of what he is saying: he always says more than he "intended to say," and this surplus of what is effectively said over the intended meaning puts into words the repressed content—in it, "the repressed returns." What are symptoms qua "returns of the repressed" if not such slips of the tongue by means of which "the letter arrives at its destination," i.e., by means of which the Big Other returns to the subject his own message in its true form? If, instead of saying "Thereby I proclaim the session open," I say "Thereby I proclaim the session closed," do I not get, in the most literal sense, my own message back in its true, inverted form? So what could, at this level, the Derridean notion that a letter can also miss its destination mean? That the repressed can also not return—yet by claiming this, we entangle ourselves in a naive substantialist notion of the unconscious as a positive entity ontologically preceding its "returns," i.e., symptoms qua compromise formations, a notion competently called in question by Derrida himself. Here, we cannot but repeat after Lacan: there is no repression previous to the return of the repressed; the repressed content does not precede its return in symptoms, there is no way to conceive it in its purity undistorted by "compromises" that characterize the formation of the symptoms.

This brings us to the third variation, that of the frame always being framed by part of its content; this formula is crucial insofar as it enables us to oppose the "logic of the signifier" to hermeneutics. The aim of the hermeneutical endeavor is to render visible the contours of a "frame," a "horizon" that, precisely by staying invisible, by eluding the subject's grasp, in advance determines its field of vision: what we can see, as well as what we cannot see, is always given to us through a historically me-
diated frame of preconceits. There is of course nothing pejorative in the use of the term "preconceit" here: its status is transcendental, i.e., it organizes our experience into a meaningful totality. True, it involves an irreducible limitation of our vision, but this finitude is in itself ontologically constitutive: the world is open to us only within radical finitude. At this level, the impossibility of metalanguage equals the impossibility of a neutral point of view enabling us to see things "objectively," "impartially"—there is no view that is not framed by a historically determined horizon of "preunderstanding." Today, for example, we can ruthlessly exploit nature only because nature itself is disclosed to us within a horizon that is itself seen as raw material at our disposal, in contrast to the Greek or medieval notion of nature. The Lacanian "logic of the signifier" supplements this hermeneutical thesis with an unheard-of inversion: the "horizon of meaning" is always linked, as if by a kind of umbilical cord, to a point in the field disclosed by it; the frame of our view is always already framed (re-marked) by a part of its content. We can easily recognize here the topology of the Moebius band where, as in a kind of abyssal inversion, the envelope itself is encased by its interior.

The best way to exemplify this inversion is via the dialectic of view and gaze: in what I see, in what is open to my view, there is always a point where "I see nothing," a point which "makes no sense," i.e., which functions as the picture's stain—this is the point from which the very picture returns the gaze, looks back at me. "A letter arrives at its destination" precisely in this point of the picture: here I encounter myself, my own objective correlative—here I am, so to speak, inscribed in the picture; this ontic "umbilical cord" of the ontological horizon is what is unthinkable for the entire philosophical tradition, Heidegger included. Therein lies the reason of the uncanny power of psychoanalytical interpretation: the subject pursues his everyday life within its closed horizon of meaning, safe in his distance with respect to the world of objects, assured of their meaning (or their insignificance), when, all of a sudden, the psychoanalyst pinpoints some tiny detail of no significance whatsoever to the subject, a stain in which the subject "sees nothing"—a small, compulsive gesture or tic, a slip of the tongue or something of that order—and says: "You see, this detail is a knot which condenses all you had to forget so that you can swim in your everyday certainty, it enfames the very frame which confines meaning on your life, it structures the horizon within which things make sense to you; if we unknot it, you will lose the ground from under your very feet!" It is an experience not unlike that rendered in the old Oriental formula: "Thou art that!"—"Your entire fate is decided in this idiotic detail!" Or, if we keep ourselves to a more formal level of the set theory: among the elements of a given set, there is always One which overdetermines the specific weight and color of the set as
such; among the species of a genus, there is always One which over-
determines the very universality of the genus. Apropos of the relationship
of different kinds of production within its articulated totality, Marx wrote:

In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production
which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination
which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity
of every being which has materialized within it.33

Do not these propositions amount to the fact that the very frame of
production (its totality) is always enframed by a part of its content (by
one specific kind of production)?

Symbolic circuit II: Fate and repetition

The encounter with "Thou art that!" is of course experienced as an
encounter with the knot which condenses one's fate; this brings us to the
last variation on the theme "a letter always arrives at its destination":
one can never escape one's fate, or, to replace this rather obscurantist
formulation with a more appropriate psychoanalytic one, the symbolic
debt has to be repaid. The letter which "arrives at its destination" is also
a letter of request for outstanding debts; what propels a letter on its
symbolic circuit is always some outstanding debt. This dimension of fate
is at work in the very formal structure of Poe's "The Purloined Letter":

isn't there something distinctly "fateful" in the way the self-experience
of the main character's in Poe's story is determined by the simple "me-
chanical" shift of their positions within the intersubjective triad of the
three glances (the first which sees nothing; the second which sees that
the first sees nothing and deludes itself as to the secrecy of what it hides; the
third which sees that the two first glances leave what should be hidden
exposed to whomever would seize it)? In the way, for example, the min-
ister's fate is sealed not because of his personal miscalculation or oversight
but because the simple shift of his position from the third to the second
glance in the repetition of the initial triad causes his structural blindness?

Here, we encounter again the mechanism of imaginary (mis)recognition:
the participants in the play automatically perceive their fate as something
that pertains to the letter as such in its immediate materiality ("This
letter is damned, whosoever comes into possession of it is brought to
ruin")—what they misrecognize is that the "curse" is not in the letter as
such but in the intersubjective network organized around it. However,
to avoid repeating the played-out analysis of Poe's story, let us address

a formally similar case, the classical Bette Davis melodrama Now, Voy-
ger, the story of Charlotte Vale, a frustrated spinster, the "ugly duckling"
of the family, who is pushed into a nervous breakdown by her domi-
neeering mother, a rich widow.34 Under the guidance of the benevolent
Doctor Jacquith, she is cured to emerge as a poised and beautiful woman;
following his advice, she decides to see life and takes a trip to South
America. There, she has an affair with a charming married man; he is,
however, unable to leave his family for her because of his daughter who
is on the brink of madness, so Charlotte returns home alone. Soon
afterward, she falls into depression and is hospitalized again; in the mental
asylum, she encounters the daughter of her lover who immediately de-
velops a traumatic dependence on her. Dr. Jacquith informs Charlotte
that her lover's wife died recently, so that they are now free to marry;
yet she is quick to add that this marriage would be an unbearable shock
for the daughter—Charlotte is her only support, the only thing standing
between her and the final slip into madness. Charlotte decides to sacrifice
her love and to dedicate her life to mothering the unfortunate child; when,
at the end of the film, her lover asks her for her hand, she promises him
just deep friendship, refusing his offer with the phrase: "Why reach for
the moon, when we can have the stars?"—one of the purest and therefore
most efficient nonsense in the history of cinema.

When her lover shows to Charlotte a picture of his family, her attention
is drawn to a girl sitting aside and staring sadly into the camera; this
figure arouses her immediate compassion and Charlotte wants to know
all about her. Why? She identifies with her because she recognizes in her
her own position, that of the neglected "ugly duckling." So when, at the
film's end, Charlotte sacrifices her love life for the poor girl's rescue, she
does not do it out of an abstract sense of duty: the point is rather that
she conceives the girl's present situation, when her very survival depends
on Charlotte, as the exact repetition of her own situation years ago when
she was at her mother's mercy. Therein consists the structural homology
between this film and "The Purloined Letter": in the course of the story,
the same intersubjective network is repeated, with the subjects shifting
to different positions—in both cases, an omnipotent mother holds in her
hands the daughter's fate, with the one difference that in the first scene
it was an evil mother driving the daughter to madness, while in the second
scene a good mother is given a chance to redeem herself by pulling
the daughter from the brink. The film displays poetic finesse by conferring
a double role on Doctor Jacquith: the same person who, in the first scene,
"sets free" Charlotte, i.e., opens up to her the perspective of an unchained
sexual life, appears in the second scene as the bearer of prohibition who
prevents her marriage by reminding her of her debt. Here, we have the
"compulsion to repeat" at its purest: Charlotte cannot afford marriage
since she must honor her debt. When, finally, she seems freed from the nightmare, “fate” (the big Other) confronts her with the price of this freedom by putting her into a situation where she herself can destroy the young girl’s life. If Charlotte would not sacrifice herself, she would be persecuted by the “demons of the past”: her happy marital life would be spoiled forever by the memory of the unfortunate child in the asylum paying the price, a reminder of how she betrayed her own past. In other words, Charlotte does not “sacrifice herself for the other’s happiness”: by sacrificing herself, she honors her debt to herself. So, when she finds herself face to face with a broken girl who can be saved only by means of her sacrifice, we could again say that “a letter arrives at its destination.”

Within this dimension of the outstanding debt, the role of the letter is assumed by an object that circulates among the subjects and, by its very circulation, makes out of them a closed intersubjective community. Such is the function of the Hitchcockian object: not the decried MacGuffin but the tiny “piece of the real” which keeps the story in motion by finding itself “out of place” (stolen, etc.): from the ring in Shadow of a Doubt, the cigarette lighter in Strangers on a Train, up to the child in The Man Who Knew Too Much who circulates between the two couples. The story ends the moment this object “arrives at its destination,” i.e., returns to its rightful owner: the moment Guy gets back the lighter (the last shot of Strangers on a Train where the lighter falls out of dead Bruno’s clasped hand), the moment the abducted child returns to the American couple (in The Man Who Knew Too Much), etc. This object embodies, gives material existence to the lack in the Other, to the constitutive insufficiency of the symbolic order: Claude Lévi-Strauss pointed out how the very fact of exchange attests a certain structural flaw, an imbalance that pertains to the Symbolic, which is why the Lacanian mathem for this object is S(A), the signifier of the barred Other. The supreme exemplar of such an object is the ring from Richard Wagner’s Ring des Nibelungen, this gigantic drama of the unbalanced symbolic exchange. The story opens with Alberich stealing the ring from the Rhine maidens, whereby it becomes the source of a curse for its possessors; it ends when the ring is thrown back into the Rhine to its rightful owners—the Gods, however, pay for this reestablishment of the balance with their twilight, since their very existence was founded upon an unsettled debt.

The imaginary and the symbolic dimension of “a letter always reaching its destination” are thus in their very opposition closely connected: the first is defined by the imaginary (mis)recognition (a letter arrives at its destination insofar as I recognize myself as its addressee, i.e., insofar as I find myself in it), whereas the second comprises the concealed truth that emerges in the “blind spots” and flaws of the imaginary circle. Let us just recall so-called “applied psychoanalysis,” the standard “psychoanalytic interpretation” of works of art: this procedure always “finds itself,” and the propositions on Oedipus complex, on sublimation, etc., are again and again confirmed since the search moves in an imaginary closed circle and finds only what it is already looking for—what, in a sense, it already has (the network of its theoretical preconcepts). A letter traversing the symbolic circuit “arrives at its destination” when we experience the utmost futility of this procedure, its utmost failure to touch the inherent logic of its object. The way “a letter arrives at its destination” within the symbolic circuit therefore implies the structure of a slip, of “success through failure”: it teaches us unbeknownst to us. In Agatha Christie’s Why Didn’t They Ask Evans?, the young hero and his girl friend find a mortally wounded man on the links who, seconds before his death, raises his head and says “Why didn’t they ask Evans?” They set out to investigate the murder and, long afterward, when the dead man’s mysterious phrase is completely forgotten, they concern themselves with the somewhat peculiar circumstances of the certification of a dying country gentleman’s will: the relatives called as a witness a distant neighbor instead of using the servant Evans who was present in the house, so . . . “Why didn’t they ask Evans?” Instantaneously, the hero and his girl friend realize that their question reproduces verbatim the phrase of the man who died on the links—therein consists the clue for his murder. What we have here is an exemplary case of how “a letter arrives at its destination”: when, in a totally contingent way, it finds its proper place.

This reference to the letter and its itinerary enables us to distinguish between the two modalities of the crowd. When, apropos of his interpretation of the Freudian dream of Irma’s injection, Lacan speaks of “l’immixion des sujets,” “the immixing of subjects,” of the moment when the subjects lose their individuality by being reduced to little wheels in a nonsubjective machinery (in the dream itself, the moment of this reversal is the appearance of the three professors who explicate Freud by enumerating mutually exclusive reasons for the failure of Irma’s treatment), this machine is of course synonymous with the symbolic order. This mode of the crowd is exemplarily depicted in the paintings of Pieter Brueghel from the years 1559 and 1560 (Dutch Proverbs, Fight between Carnival and Lent, Child Games): the subject is here “beheaded,” “lost in the crowd,” yet the transsubjective mechanism which regulates the process (games, proverbs, carnivals) is clearly of a symbolic nature: it can be unearthed by means of the act of interpretation. In other words, it is the signifier which runs the show—through this very confusion and blind automatism, the letter nevertheless “arrives at its destination.” How? Let us recall Eric Ambler’s spy novel Passage of Arms, the story of a poor Chinese in Malaya in the early 1950s, after the breakdown of
the Communist insurgency: upon discovering a forgotten hideout of Communist arms in the jungle, he plans to sell them in order to buy an old bus and thus become a small-scale capitalist. He thereby sets in motion an unforeseen chain of events which exceed by far his original intent: the rich Chinese who buys the arms resells them to an Indonesian pro-Communist guerilla, the transaction involves an “innocent” American tourist couple, the story moves from Malaya to Bangkok, then to Sumatra, yet all this improvisatory texture of accidental encounters brings us back to our starting point: at the end, the Chinese becomes the owner of an old, ramshackle bus, “the letter arrives at its destination,” as if some hidden “cunning of Reason” regulated the chaotic flow of events. Something not dissimilar to this is at work in the quartets and quintets of Mozart’s great operas; it suffices to mention the finale of Le Nozze di Figaro: the persons speak and sing over one another, there is an entire network of misapprehensions and false identifications, yet this chaos of comic encounters seems to be run by the hidden hand of a benevolent destiny which provides for the final reconciliation. An abyss separates this “immixture” from, say, the quintet in the third act of Wagner’s Meistersinger von Nürnberg where all the voices efface their differences and yield to the same pacifying flow—not to mention the brutal irritation of the crowd that follows Hagen’s “call to men (Männerruf)” in the second act of Die Götterdämmerung. The point here is that the link between this crowd and the prelude to the opera with the sibyls no longer able to decipher the future course of events, since the cord of destiny is cut—the crowd enters the stage when history is no longer regulated by the texture of symbolic destiny, i.e., when the father’s phallic authority is broken (one should remember that, the previous evening, Siegfried broke Wotan’s spear). This crowd, the modern crowd, appeared for the first time in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd”: the anonymous observer watches through the windowpane of a café (this frame that introduces the distance between “inside” and “outside” is crucial here) the turmoil of the London evening crowd and decides to follow an old man; at dawn, after long hours of walking, it becomes clear that there is nothing to discover: “It will be in vain to follow; I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds.” The old man is thus exposed as the “man of the crowd,” the epitome of evil, precisely insofar as he embodies something that “doesn’t allow itself to be read”—es lässt sich nicht lesen, as Poe himself puts it in German. This “resistance to being read” of the crowd designates of course the passage from the symbolic register to that of the Real.

The real encounter

The motif of fate has brought us to the very brink of the third level, that of the Real; here, “a letter always arrives at its destination” equals what “meeting one’s fate” means: “we will all die.” A common prethe-
The unpaid symbolic debt is therefore in a way constitutive of our existence; our very symbolic existence is a “compromise formation,” the delaying of an encounter. In Max Ophuls’s melodrama Letter from an Unknown Woman, this link connecting the symbolic circuit with the encounter of the Real is perfectly exemplified. At the very beginning of the film “a letter arrives at its destination,” confronting the hero with the disavowed truth: what was for him a series of unconnected, ephemeral love affairs that he only vaguely remembered destroyed a woman’s life. He assumes responsibility for this by means of a suicidal gesture: by deciding not to escape and to attend the duel he is certain to lose.

However, as is indicated in Lacan’s above-quoted reading of the dream of Irma’s injection, the Real is not only death but also life: not only the pale, frozen, lifeless immobility but also “the flesh from which everything exudes,” the life substance in its mucous palpitation. In other words, the Freudian duality of life and death drives is not a symbolic opposition but a tension, and antagonism, inherent to the presymbolic Real. As Lacan points out again and again, the very notion of life is alien to the symbolic order. And the name of this life substance that proves a traumatic shock for the symbolic universe is of course enjoyment. The ultimate variation on the theme of a letter that always arrives at its destination reads therefore: “you can never get rid of the stain of enjoyment”—the very gesture of renouncing enjoyment produces inevitably a surplus enjoyment that Lacan writes down as the “object small a.” Examples offer themselves in abundance, from the ascetic who can never be sure he does not repudiate all worldly goods because of the ostentatious and vain satisfaction procured by this very act of sacrifice, to the “sense of fulfillment” that overwhelms us when we submit to the totalitarian appeal: “Enough of decadent enjoyment! It’s time for sacrifice and renunciation!” This dialectic of enjoyment and surplus enjoyment—i.e., the fact that there is no “substantial” enjoyment preceding the excess of surplus enjoyment, that enjoyment itself is a kind of surplus produced by renunciation—is perhaps what gives a clue to so-called “primal masochism.”

Such a reading, however, leads beyond Lacan’s “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter, ’” which stays within the confines of the “structuralist” problematic of a senseless, “mechanical” symbolic order regulating the subject’s innermost self-experience. From the perspective of the last years of Lacan’s teaching, the letter which circulates among the subjects in Poe’s story, determining their position in the intersubjective network, is no longer the materialized agency of the signifier but rather an object in the strict sense of materialized enjoyment—the stain, the uncanny excess that the subjects snatch away from each other, for forgetful of how its very possession will mark them with a passive, “feminine” stance that bears witness to the confrontation with the object-cause of desire. What ultimately interrupts the continuous flow of words, what hinders the smooth running of the symbolic circuit, is the traumatic presence of the Real when the words suddenly stay out, we have to look not for imaginary resistances but for the object that came too close.

Notes

2. Ibid., p. 49.
5. Among the more recent films which are centered on the efficacy of the final scene, mention should be made of Peter Weir’s Dead Poet’s Society: is the whole story not a kind of buildup to the final pathetic crescendo when the pupils defy the school authorities and express their solidarity with the fired teacher by standing on their benches?
6. The fact that this final dialogue takes place in complete silence—we read the words in interposed titles as in silent movies—confers on it an additional intensity: it is as if silence itself has begun to speak. An intrusion of the voice at this point would ruin the whole effect, more precisely: it would ruin its sublime dimension. This scene alone more than justifies Chaplin’s “eccentric” decision to produce a silent movie in the era of sound, because the whole efficacy of the sequence is due to the fact that we—the spectators—know that movies already talk and thus experience this silence as the absence of the voice.
9. It should be noted that City Lights itself germinated from a similar idea. It was originally to be the story of a father who lost his sight in an accident; to avoid the psychic traumatism that knowledge of his blindness would cause his small daughter, he pretends that the clumsy acts which result from his
blindness (his overturning a chair, his numerous false steps, etc.) are comical imitations of a clown, meant to amuse her; unsuspecting of the true state, the girl accepts this explanation and laughs heartily at her father's misadventures.

10. This split between the ideal figure of the rich man and the tramp as the ideal figure's objective support enables us also to locate the paradox of self-destructive female curiosity, at work from Richard Wagner to contemporary mass culture. That is to say, the plot of Wagner's Lohengrin turns on Elsa's curiosity: a nameless hero saves her and marries her, but enjoins her not to ask him who he is or what is his name (the famous air "Nie solst du mich befragen" from act 1)—as soon as she does so, he will be obliged to leave her... Elsa cannot stand it and asks him the fateful question; so, in an even more famous air ("In fernem Land," act 3), Lohengrin tells her that he is a knight of the Grail, the son of Parsifal from the castle of Montsalvat, and then departs on a swan, while the unfortunate Elsa collapses dead. How not to recall here Superman or Batman where we find the same logic? In both of these cases, the main female character has a presentiment that her partner (the confused journalist in Superman, the eccentric millionaire in Batman) is really the mysterious public hero, but the partner puts off as long as possible the moment of revelation. What we have here is a kind of forced choice attesting to the dimension of castration: man is split, divided into the weak everyday fellow with whom sexual relation is possible and the bearer of the symbolic mandate, the public hero (knight of the Grail, Superman, Batman); we are thus obliged to choose: as soon as we force the sexual partner to reveal his symbolic identity, we are bound to lose him.

So when Lacan says that the "secret of psychoanalysis" consists in the fact that "there is no sexual act, whereas there is sexuality," the act is to be conceived precisely as the performative assumption, by the subject, of his symbolic mandate, as in the passage in Hamlet where the moment when, finally—too late—Hamlet is able to act is signaled by his expression "I, Hamlet the Dane": this is what is not possible in the order of sexuality, i.e., as soon as the man proclaims his mandate, saying "I... Lohengrin, Batman, Superman," he excludes himself from the domain of sexuality.


13. Or, to mention an example from western movies: it is easy to love Indians portrayed as helpless, brutalized victims, as in The Broken Arrow or Soldier Blue, but the situation is far more ambiguous in John Ford's Fort Apache where they are portrayed as victorious, militarily superior, overrunning the US cavalry like a blast of wind.


15. It would be interesting to read Limelight as a film which is complementary to City Lights: at the end of City Lights, the tramp "begins to live" (is recognized in his true being), whereas at the end of Limelight, he dies; the first film begins with his uncovering (the Mayor unveils the monument), the second ends with the veiling of his body; in the first film, he becomes at the end the full object of another's gaze (and is thereby recognized as a subject), whereas in the second film he himself turns into a pure gaze; in the first film, the mutilation of the girl, his love, refers to her eyes (blindness), in the second to her feet (paralysis: the original title of the film was Footlights); etc. The two films have thus to be approached in a Lévi-Straussian manner, as the two versions of the same myth.


18. Since this recourse to common sense takes place more often than one might suspect, systematically even, within the "deconstruction," one is tempted to put forward the thesis that the very fundamental gesture of "deconstruction" is in a radical sense commonsensical. There is, namely an unmistakable ring of common sense in the "deconstructionist" insistence upon the impossibility of establishing a clear cut difference between empirical and transcendental, outside and inside, representation and presence, writing and voice; in its compulsive demonstration of how the outside always already seeps over the inside, of how writing is constitutive of voice, etc. etc.—as if "deconstructionism" is ultimately wrapping up commonsensical insights into an inarticulate jargon. Therein consists perhaps one of the hitherto overlooked reasons for its unforeseen success in the USA, the land of common sense par excellence.

19. What is crucial here is the difference between the letter's symbolic circuit and its itinerary in what we call "reality": a letter always arrives at its destination on the symbolic level, whereas in reality, it can of course fail to reach it. This difference is strictly homologous to that established by Lacan apropos of the two possible readings of the phrase "You are the one that will follow me" (Jacques Lacan, Le Séminaire, livre III: Les Psychoses (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1981), pp. 315-19):

1) read as a statement ascertaining a positive state of things, it can of course be falsified if it proves inaccurate, i.e., if you do not follow me;
2) read as a bestowal of a symbolic mandate, or designation, i.e., as the establishment of a pact giving birth to a new intersubjective relation, it cannot simply be falsified by your factual behavior: you remain "the one that will follow me" even if, in reality, you do not do it—in this case, you simply do not live up to your symbolic title which nevertheless determines your place in the symbolic network. In other words, read in this second sense, the determination "the one that will follow me" functions as a "rigid designator" in the Kripkean sense: it remains true "in all possible worlds," irrespective of your factual behavior.

24. An exemplary case of such a (mis)recognition is found in Joseph Markiewicz's Letter to Three Wives where each of the three wives on a Sunday trip recognizes herself as addressee of the letter sent to them by the local femme fatale announcing that she has run away with one of their husbands: the letter stirs up the trauma of each of them, each of them becomes aware of the failure of her marriage.
28. Therein consists the elementary Hegelian procedure: Hegel demonstrates the "nontruth" of some proposition not by comparing it with the thing as it is "in itself" but ascertaining the proposition's inaccuracy, but by comparing the proposition with itself, i.e., with its own process of enunciation: by comparing the intended meaning of the proposition with what the subject effectively said. This discord is the very impetus of the dialectical process, as is attested at the very beginning of the Phenomenology of Spirit where "sense certainty" is refuted by means of a reference to the universal dimension contained in its own act of enunciation.
29. Cf. Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in Writing and Difference (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), where it is demonstrated by rigorous analysis how it is not possible to differentiate in a clear-cut way between "primary" and "secondary" processes: the "primary" process (subjected to the logic of the unconscious: condensations, displacements, etc.) is always already (re)marked by the "secondary" process that characterizes the system of consciousness/preconscious.
30. Stricto sensu, there is a subjective position within which a letter does not arrive at its destination, within which the repressed does not return in the shape of symptoms, within which the subject does not receive from the Other his own message in its true form: that of a psychotic. "A letter arrives at its destination" only with the subject entering the circuit of communication, i.e., capable of assuming the dialectical relationship toward the Other qua locus of truth. However, according to Lacan's famous formula of the psychotic foreclosure ("what was foreclosed from the Symbolic returns in the Real"), even in psychosis the letter does ultimately reach the subject, namely in the form of psychotic "answers of the Real" (hallucinations, etc.).
34. We rely here on the perspicacious analysis by Elizabeth Cowie, "Fantasia," m/f 9 (1984).
35. There is, however, another side to this story: Charlotte's act of renunciation can also be read as an attempt to elude the inherent impossibility of the sexual relationship by positing an external hindrance to it, thus preserving the illusion that without this hindrance, she would be able to enjoy it fully. In short, the trick is here the same as that of "courty love": "A very refined manner to supplant the absence of the sexual relationship by feigning that it is us who put the obstacle in its way." (Jacques Lacan, Le Séminaire, livre XX: Encore (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975) p. 65).
36. When, with the advent of capitalism, the symbolically structured "community" was replaced by the "crowd," community became in a radical sense imagined: our "sense of belonging" does not refer anymore to a community we experience as "actual," but becomes a performative effect brought about by the "abstract" media (press, radio, etc.) (cf. Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities London and New York: Verso Books, 1983). Every community, from the most "primitive" tribes onward, was of course always already "staged" by symbolic rituals; yet it was only with capitalism that the community became "imagined" in the precise sense of being dialectically opposed to the atomized, "actual" economic life. What we have in mind here is not only the fact that, in contrast to the precapitalist ethnic communities, the concept Nation is a product of the expansion of the media (the role of the press in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Hitler and radio, Moral Majority's TV evangelism, etc.), but that a more refined logic is at work from political identification up to TV quiz shows and sexuality. Let us recall Stuart Hall's analysis of Thatcherism's political appeal (cf. his Hard Road to Renewal (London and New York: Verso Books, 1988)): the Thatcherite interpellation succeeded insofar as the individual recognized himself/herself not as a member of some actual community but as a member of the imagined community of those who may be "lucky in the next round" by way of their individual entrepreneurship. The hope of success, the recognition of oneself as the one who may succeed, overshadows the actual success and already functions as a success, the same as in a TV quiz show where, in a sense, "taking part in it" already is to win: what really matters is not the actual gains but being identified as part of the community of those who may win. Today, such a logic has penetrated even the most intimate domain of sexuality, as attested by the success of "minitel" (the network of personal computers connected by phone) in France: upon entering the circuit of minitel communication, I choose a pseudonym for myself and then exchange the most obscene sexual fantasies with others whom I also know only by their pseudonyms. . . . The point of it, of course, is that, within this imagined community of anonymous participants, everybody knows that these fantasies will never be "realized"; gratification is procured by the flow of signifiers itself— it is as if "minitel" were made to exemplify Lacan's thesis according to which enjoyment is primarily enjoyment in the signifier. It
seems therefore that today's predominant economy of enjoyment repeats the paradox of quantum physics where possibility (the possible trajectories of a particle) as such possesses a kind of actuality: to imagine a possible gratification of desire equals its actual gratification.


39. In other words, if we subtract from enjoyment its surplus, we are left with nothing at all; the closest scientific analogy to it is perhaps the notion of photon in physics. When physicists refer to the mass of a particle, they usually refer to its mass when it is at rest. Any mass other than a rest mass is called relativistic mass; since the mass of a particle increases with velocity, a particle can have any number of relativistic masses—the size of its relativistic mass depends upon its velocity. The total mass is thus composed of the rest mass plus the surplus added by the velocity of its movement. The paradox of photons is, however, that they don't have any rest mass: their rest mass equals zero. The photon is thus an object which exists only as a surplus, as the acceleration due to its velocity; in a way, it is "without substance"—if we subtract the relativistic mass that depends upon its velocity, i.e., if we "quiet it down" and attempt to seize it in its state of rest, "as it really is," it dissolves. And it is the same with the "object small a" qua surplus enjoyment: it exists only in its distorted state (visually, for example, only insofar as it is viewed from aside, anamorphotically extended or contracted)—if we view it "straight," "as it really is," there is nothing to see.