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CONCEPTION OF THE THING-IN-ITSELF
IN THE THEORY OF DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM

ABSTRACT

The theory of dialectical materialism as the official philosophy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union present a vision of dynamic material processes forming the laws of development of the higher strata of being. In his interrelated reading of the traditions of German idealism, historical materialism and Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis, Slavoj Žižek presents a vision of dematerialized matter as a way of trying to explain the genesis of subjectivity. This paper serves can be seen as an introductory text to this project as a presentation of how the concept of the Thing-in-itself is to be grasped within such an endeavor. The early materialist notion of den qua the paradoxical notion of something within the domain of nothing is taken by Žižek to be a way of conceiving the gap between Being and the One as the only true reality. In this way, a fresh presentation of the difference between idealism and materialism is given as an incentive to an insight to a different kind of objectivity.

KEYWORDS

Slavoj Žižek, structuralism, psychoanalysis, dialectical materialism, Stalinism, ideology, subjectivity, objet petit a, Ding-an-Sich, den

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The philosophical movement that made Ljubljana known around the academia worldwide is focused on combining the notional apparatus of psychoanalysis, historical materialism and German idealism. This article will focus on an explication of one of the central concepts in the theory of dialectical materialism as proposed in the work of Slavoj Žižek by using theoretical tools of the above mentioned theoretical approaches.¹ Being able to understand the minimal definition of dialectical materialism that “If there is no One, just multiplicities of multiplicities, then the ultimate reality is the Void itself; all determinate things «are and are not»”² demands a thorough reading of Žižek’s work but it would in some sense mean to comprehend the general framework of his theoretical endeavor. In order to come to terms of precisely what is meant by the notion of the thing-in-itself in the Žižekian universe, a general understanding of the basic Lacanian and Hegelian notions is obligatory and a reader unknowledgeable in philosophical and psychoanalytic field may not be able to focus on the more theoretically demanding parts of the texts. The multiplicity of examples meant to explain the concepts being used are deceptively simple and by themselves require considerable elaborations to be understood while presupposing the reader has some basic knowledge about the discipline. It gets even more complex when things are intentionally made enigmatic with the lure of seemingly clear examples, which often make no sense standing on their own. The best way to approach reading the work of Žižek is by being aware of his involvement in practical phi-

¹ While “ecole Slovene” may exist in that there is a plenitude of authors connected with writing about the same philosophical currents in the same publishing house of the Society of Theoretical Psychoanalysis (Močnik, Riha, Šumić, Kobe, Simoniti, Božovič, Moder, Klepec, Bunta, Pelko, Kolenc, Bahovec etc.), the best way to imagine a unified research procedure is to speak of Dolar, Zupančič Žerdin and Žižek as the «Slovene phenomenological troika» as recently introduced by Krečič (2015). The group connected with Lacanian psychoanalysis got affiliated with the publication *Problemi* from the 70s onwards and founded a Society and the publishing house *Analecta* in the 80s. On the opposite side of the so called fashionable nonsense and posturing, there is a strong activity in the analytical field very active in the country, e.g. Potrč, Cerkovnik, Ule, Šuster etc. with roots going back to Veber and an annual international conference being held in Bled. The first writings on the problem of performativity were done by Matjaž Potrč (1977), the first Slovene Lacanian, before the ‘official’ inauguration of the movement with the first books on the topic by Žižek and Močnik.

² S. Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, London 2012, p. 67.

osophy and trying to apply the speculative notions he uses directly to the field of society, history and politics. Without such a course of action the seemingly absurd and opaque ontological concepts can hardly make sense and we can scarcely avoid being completely incapable to understand anything but the narrative content of the abundance of offered examples. The other current to be had in mind is structuralism, which offers a change in understanding what forms an entity and defines a new mode of being that is separated from the One and does not have the ontological status of positivity. "Being is not being identical to itself; being is being in opposition and because of this fact, this opposition is counted as One only as an aftermath, with the mediating of the multitude."³ The separation of the entity and its place as a central notion of the following text is a motif that leaves these procedures; just like the already mentioned philosophical movements, the interested reader needs to go go through at least a basic study of 'poststructuralism' before handling his texts which presuppose a highly developed theoretical field. What follows is an introductory bricolage that focuses on reading the problematic of his thought by an exposition of a central notion to show how the philosophical traditions combined are in many ways complementary and can be seen as an attempt to create a materialist theory of subjectivity.

What does Žižek's declaration of the necessity of a return to the *co-gito* mean? How is an assertion of an existence of a self-transparent autonomous subject possible in an epoch in which consciousness is seen as an epiphenomenon, freedom as a functional illusion of the neuronal mechanism and a priori theories as an outdated scientific approach? Not only do positive sciences show an aversion to this kind of discourse, but even philosophical thought moved away to the historical and social determining factors leaving pure autonomy as an indefensible hypothesis. The question of subjectivity is central in trying to answer the very difficult task of just what is the 'thing-in-itself' from a dialectical materialist stand-point and Žižek offers a way to solve the problem by contrasting it with a seemingly similar thought. He gives the contours by opposing as follows:

The best way to answer this question is, again, to oppose dialectical materialism to Buddhism: in Buddhism, the In-itself is the void, nothing, and ordinary reality is a play of appearances. The question ultimately unanswered here is

³ J.-C. Milner, *Strukturalizem. Liki in paradigma*, Ljubljana 2003, p. 212.

how we get from nothing to something. How do illusory appearances arise out of the void? The dialectical-materialist answer is: only if this something is less than nothing, the pre-ontological proto-reality of den. From within this proto-reality, our ordinary reality appears through the emergence of a subject which constitutes 'objective reality': every positive reality of Ones is already phenomenal, transcendently constituted, 'correlated' to a subject.⁴

This text tries to provide some guidelines for grasping just what this means.

In what sense is Žižek a materialist and what kind of materialism does he advocate? It does seem odd that concept of the material overwhelms the opus of a writer who posits the period of German idealism as the peak and core of all philosophy. It is important to note that the focal point of all his thought is subjectivity, and all the notional apparatuses are used to grasp this problem, even when it seems the question is of grand proportions of the cosmos, density of matter etc. An example is his famous imagining of

[...] the zero-level of creation: a red dividing line cuts through the thick darkness of the void, and on this line, a fuzzy something appears, the object-cause of desire-perhaps, for some, a woman's naked body.⁵

Being an image of cosmic proportions as an awesome metaphor to illustrate the occurrence at the level of subject formation. Apropos the theological language of middle Schelling's *Weltalter* drafts read as a meta-psychological work, Žižek often resorts to the paradoxical imagery of quantum physics to get across a new kind of materialism related to the realm of signification. Quantum physics, the paradoxical unimaginable field accessible only with a strictly mathematical approach, where the ultimate reality is a multitude of ephemeral non-entities is taken as a model of solving the problem of a veritable materialistic position able to account for negativity. Already in his earlier work focused on Schelling, he declares that a genuine materialism that would not simply be a covert idealism or would relapse into idealistic explanatory systems, would have to be based on the notion of the disappearance of matter and postulate his own groundless acosmism along the lines of ontologization procedures that Fichte, Schelling or Hegel undertook

⁴ S. Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, op. cit., p. 958.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 60.

when criticizing Kant.⁶ If being is identical to itself as a material totality of perfectly functioning coordinated components in a homogenous whole, possibility for at least transitory transcendence is impossible. If a finite agent would be able to prevail over its limitations and achieve an insight into the reality of its essential being, it would grasp itself as completely determined and according to Kant turn into a lifeless automaton. The only solution out of this deadlock is an open ontology which is based on an internal antagonism and contradiction of reality itself and this kind of model is provided by quantum physics. It makes viable a materialism different from the usual understanding of the term as designating a reality of dense inertia and is able to provide a materialistic position which presents an incomplete reality of disappearing particles and waves functioning outside of conceivable patterns. This is an image of an inconsistent, incomplete, non-All reality where the origin of the universe is an error and subjectivity can be properly explained in a non-reductionist manner. Only in an originally non-identical being can arise a possibility for the emergence of a negativity, for at least occasional disclosure of a trans-ontological excess, and this kind of motif of the void is omnipresent throughout his writing.

The old metaphysical problem of how to name the nameless abyss pops up here in the context of how to name the primordial gap: contradiction, antagonism, symbolic castration, parallax, diffraction, complementarity... up to difference.⁷

To prevent this model from being understood as implying an idealist supplement, the double barring (of the Real as well as the Symbolic) and the gap with the ontological dislocation it entails is to be correlated with materiality, a certain kind of materiality to be found in the realm of suture as the basic mechanism of signification. The very technical language here covers a modest idea of grasping the subject as a temporal function and asserting the negativity over all possible sources of heteronomy by thinking language in a proper manner. The signifier as nothing but pure difference constitutes the “treatment of any element only from a viewpoint of the minimal properties that is given to it by

⁶ A. Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology – A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*, Northwestern University Press 2008, p. 107.

⁷ S. Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, op. cit., p. 955.

the system, which is itself reduced to the minimal properties of the system,”⁸ but Lacan goes further in his conceptualization to avoid ending up in a discourse idealism. The traditional dichotomy of the ideality of the subjective with its representational activities and its opposed domain of quantity is overcome with the Lacanian signifier as described in his earliest seminars as something material. The signifier is taken here as an “ideational materiality, as the very ‘stuff’ of mental life, the asubjective ‘thingliness’ of thinking situated within the interiority of the psyche as a foreign embodied presence,”⁹ with meaning being inherently linked to matter and the signifier being neither simply ideational nor material.¹⁰ Language as a system is split between conveyance of meaning and inertia as medium, where the second is the condition of the first and as a process retains a certain autonomy over the intentionality of the speaker. As a source of a split between being and non-being, the operation is what produces desire as the remainder and the whole signifying movement creates the (not immaterial) subject. All this is to be understood with the simple ‘communication’ model of people symbolically mediating needs wanting to be understood.

So what kind of materialism is it that Žižek advocates with this kind of understanding of subjectification and are there different models that he proposes? In one of his earliest books, Žižek speaks of the need of materialist thought to “articulate that zero point, at which thought (speech) itself is acting.”¹¹ Speaking of the development of Žižek’s opus is problematic in the eyes of many, who complain that he is tirelessly repeating the same few ideas being supplemented by a different set of trivia from the moment he finished his formal education. Even

⁸ J.-C. Milner, *Jasno delo. Lacan, znanost, filozofija*, Ljubljana 2005, p. 105.

⁹ S. Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, op. cit., p. 88.

¹⁰ When trying to grasp the Real of matter, it is important to remember the tripartite structure of each register: “first, the «imaginary» Real: the proverbial grain of dust, the material «indivisible remainder» which cannot be sublated in the symbolic process. Then, the «symbolic» Real: scientific letters and formulae which render the structure of material reality. Finally, the «real» Real: the cut of pure difference, of the inconsistency of structure” (ibidem, p. 913). However, not to get lost, it is good to have in mind that “In the end, there exists only the social bond” (J. Lacan, *Seminar XX*, Ljubljana 1985).

¹¹ S. Žižek, *Hegel in označevalec. Poskusi “materialističnega obrata Hegla” v sodobni psihoanalitični teoriji in njihov pomen za historični materializem*, Ljubljana 1980.

his own dismissals of most of his opus are paradigmatic, privileging just a couple of works that are usually produced in numbers each year (see the film Žižek!). However, some kind of development can be found from his early work as based on transcendentalism and a move towards a position of dialectical materialism through the gradual exploration through the period of German idealism, moving from Kant to Schelling and then Hegel and Fichte and moving from a transcendentalist to a dialectical position. These are problematic schemas though, as some of the earliest theoretical work (1982) of his was already focused on the same topics as his later “big fat book” qua his magnum opus (2012). In his own words, the ‘transcendental materialist’ position amounts to the position that

[...] all reality is transcendently constituted, correlative to a subjective position, and, to push this through to the end, the way out of this ‘correlationist’ circle is not to try to directly reach the In-itself; but to inscribe this transcendental correlation into the Thing itself. The path to the In-itself leads through the subjective gap, since the gap between For-us and In-itself is immanent to the In-itself: appearance is itself ‘objective’; therein resides the truth of the realist problem of ‘How can we pass from appearance For-us to reality In-itself?’¹²

In contrast to the *res cogitans* of Descartes, which offers a robust theory of the subject but still remains in a totalizing framework, the rupture within the structure of the subject that is achieved by Kant’s radicalization reveals the subject as a pure negativity. Kant brings to play the notion of the “thing-in-itself” as a limiting notion designating “that there are no conditions affecting the essence of the given of things *per se*.”¹³ In a division between the phenomenal dimension of subjectivity qua the subject as it appears to itself in experience and the noumenal dimension as the unrepresentable conditionality that makes experience possible, the subject is to stay only as an empty point of self-relating. It is only a correlate that is able to accompany all possible experience, with its noumenal dimension being the unavailable in-itself subsistence acting as the void in the constituted reality. Žižek makes a return to the Cartesian subject mainly through the solutions offered by the later idealists, where the problem is of “the ontological

¹² Idem, *Less than Nothing*, op. cit., p. 906.

¹³ D. Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel. Lectures on German Idealism*, Cambridge 2003, p. 49.

status of ‘negativity’, nonbeing, what is not (or is not simply the fullness or presence of positive being). In the simplest sense, we are talking about intentional consciousness, say in perception or empirical judgments, and the ontological status of agency.”¹⁴ He parallels this conception with the desubstantialized subject offered by Lacanian psychoanalysis, took as a function of the structure, where “the structure is the real: language as a structure and structure as language belong to the real”¹⁵ and it is the legacy of structuralism which is here of the outmost importance and the core of Žižekian problems.

The Real is primordially nothing but the gap that separates a thing from itself, the gap of repetition.¹⁶

The problem lurking behind these speculations is that of agency and subjectivity; how does the determining of our objective reality takes place, what gives ideology its “performative” power, how do individuals become interpellated and how can freedom emerge? The starting point here is the desubstantialization of the subject which is exactly what amounts to the unconscious and the inherent negativity which makes the structuring process efficient. By contrast, the conceptual and spatio-temporal mediation and the wealth of experience are nothing but semblances which result in a set of objectified coordinates as the *moi* of false-identification (who am I?). The subject is to be found in the gap in this breach between the false sense of self and the automatically functioning structure found in the unconscious, where the unconscious is more of an exterior discursive organization than a container of primal instincts. The key assertion of transcendental idealism is that it is the subjective act of transcendental synthesis which transforms the sensuous multitude into reality as an objective whole; all reality is appearing as determinate by being mediated by the transcendental act which creates the coordinates of our world. The question of the transcendental genesis tackles the problem of how proper reality emerges out of this proto-reality of the void prior to subjectification. It is answerable only if a portrayal of the split subject reveals the pseudomaterial dimension of fantasmatic space acting as the condition of possibility of the symbolic order. This is different

¹⁴ R. Pippin, *Back to Hegel?*, “Mediations” 2012, XXVI, No. 1–2., p. 28.

¹⁵ J.-C. Milner, *Strukturalizem...*, op. cit., p. 212.

¹⁶ S. Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, op. cit., p. 614.

from a simple account of performativity in the linguistic sense, as it involves a time component and a factor of heterogeneity being introduced into the structure. A lengthy passage from probably the most eminent contemporary Žižekian scholars offers a very clear overview of which elements are at work here:

Žižek's ontology of the Real and corresponding transcendental materialist theory of subjectivity involve (at least) three central notions: first, nature as the barred Real of dematerialized matter, as being bereft of the massiveness of weighty self-enclosure a la a totally consistent One-All (i.e., substance as already an in-itself subject, \$ as *Todestriebe* negativity); second, culture as the barred Symbolic of the inconsistent big Other (i.e., the symbolic order, the mediating milieu of identificatory subjectification, as containing ineliminable loopholes and short-circuiting points of potential dysfunctional breakdown); and third, the movement of the monistic One (i.e., the conflict-ridden substance of [human] being) becoming the dualistic Two (i.e., mind versus body, transcendental versus empirical, noumenal versus phenomenal, ontological versus ontic, etc.), a Two refracting the One into a series of incommensurable parallax splits (i.e., subjective negativity as separating off from and thereby transcending its immanent material-ontological ground, establishing itself as the second-order self-relating negativity of a for-itself void). The relatively simple theoretical gesture of directly identifying the subjective negativity focused on by Žižek with temporality has the tempting appeal of tying together the above notions into an elegant systematic unity as well as enabling the vexed issue of the relationship between transcendentalism and materialism to be readdressed productively.¹⁷

The ultimate question here is how the synthetic emergence (symbolic construction of reality) happens, of what are the conditions of possibility of performativity itself. There has to be a space for a negativity in the structuring materiality, and this is made viable by the basis of a pseudomaterial fantasmatic support to the ideal. The unconscious is not some givenness, something that would subsist the subject, but the condition of realization which is fulfilled in the speech act."¹⁸ Even though it is a structured entity, its status is not symbolic, but real, and that is where the objet a is to be located. The question of the Thing-in-itself is to be grasped only after tackling the complexity of the register of the Real.

¹⁷ A. Johnston, op. cit., p. 236.

¹⁸ J.-A. Miller, *O nekem drugem Lacanu. Odgovori realnega*, Ljubljana 2001, p. 244.

[...] this hole in the texture of the Real can only arise if the Real itself is ultimately nothing but a void, if “all there is” is, precisely, not-All, a distorted fragment which is ultimately a “metonymy of nothing.”¹⁹

The procedure Hegel used against Kant to displace the contradictions of thinking to the things themselves is exactly what Žižek is trying to do by an exposition of the register of the Real which shows the Thing in itself as ontologically incomplete. Far from being some kind of reappraisal of Stalinistic teleological-messianism of the diamat legacy, a dialectical materialism is a materialism that tries to base itself on the concept of negativity to ground the question of genesis of the subject and rejects the existence of a full determining structure.²⁰ Žižek criticizes Marx for still being too idealist and claims the Hegelian speculation does not need any kind of reversal to grasp its rational core. He opposes the usual reading of the dialectical process as the absolute undergoing a process of self-negation, thus externalizing and alienating itself in its products, followed by another negation for a return to itself in a sublated self-identity. On the contrary, there is no ending the process in a third position of synthesis of previous negations, but in the proper understanding of the antagonism between them. As Žižek sums it up: “Synthesis is its own antithesis, freed from the perspective of the starting thesis—everything that happens between antithesis and synthesis, the whole ‘transition’ from the antithesis to synthesis is just this turn of perspective.”²¹ Dialectics stop at two. The “negation” and the “negation of negation” are acknowledged in their incommensurability and the reconciliation is one of accepting the irreducibility of the antinomy, which make it lose its antagonistic nature. The ‘one splits into two’ is not an account of how an original organic unity experiences self-alienation, but an affirmation of its status of

¹⁹ S. Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, op. cit., p. 641.

²⁰ Not to be too quick in dismissing Stalin’s theory, as there are facets of it which are surprising and feasible, like his view of language being independent of the economic base, that is, his treating language as form, which is exactly the focus of structuralism. “It is only for my theory of language as the structure of unconscious that it is possible to say that it is implied by marxism, as your demands are not higher than a material implication” (J. Lacan, *Cahier pour l’Analyse*, Paris 3. 5. 1966, p. 10; see Milner’s study in chapter 3 of *L’ouvre claire. Lacan, la science, la philosophie*, Paris 1995).

²¹ S. Žižek, M. Dolar, *Hegel in objekt. Filozofija skozi psihoanalizo*, Ljubljana 1985, p. 90.

a retroactive fantasy. The starting point of a symbolic field is posited by its result, with an irreconcilable discontinuity persisting.

One is a Two of which one part is nothing. [...] One is constituted through the passage to duality. [...] Number of dialectics is 2: the inherent self-distancing of the One itself.²²

There is no return from One to One, from and to the starting point via its self-mediation by the splitting; the Two do not come back to One, even if this one would be a different one produced in the process. There is no One to begin with, producing a duality, it is always a duality which produces it, a division constituting the whole retroactively. This Two is not one of an opposition, but the redoubling of the One, the split between it and its empty place of inscription.

As Žižek puts it: “The original couple is not that of two signifiers, but that of the signifier and its *reduplicatio*, that is, the minimal difference between a signifier and the place of its inscription, between one and zero.”²³ This is the crucial point which makes the difference between dialectics proper and a simple historicist evolutionism, where a series of historical patterns follow each other after successive deteriorating. The system never simply functions as a consistent One, but it has to split itself from itself to become an operative socio-symbolic field. The dialectical process is nothing but the multiple parallax effects dividing the One from itself into Two where there is no One to begin with. The key moment for understanding this is that the gap here is temporal, that reality becomes itself retroactively with the multiplicity getting stabilized in the quilting points of registration.

And this is precisely the materialistic moment of the dialectic, where the inertia is included in the dialectic as its central moment. The process develops through a retroactive development, always operating on the logic of future antérieur. Žižek focuses on the temporal dimension of the dialectic:

The first moment, “thesis” is always, structurally “too quick”, “not itself”, and is realized retroactively with its repetition in “synthesis”. Said differently, the “motor” of the dialectical process is the very incommensurability between the “pure” logical structure” and the “impurity” of the inertia of the real.²⁴

²² S. Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, op. cit., pp. 473–474.

²³ Ibidem, p. 588.

²⁴ S. Žižek, M. Dolar, *Hegel in objekt...*, op. cit., p. 99.

The simple model of a linear teleological dialectic poses a completely different reality with Being insisting as a fully operative material existence. The fundamental feature of symbolic reality is its ontological incompleteness which acts as the cause of its functioning. A modern materialism does not advocate the need of positing the existence of a trans-notional material density, but one that focuses on the deadlock because of which it is not possible to achieve a fully actualized notional structure.

The Real is thus simultaneously the Thing to which direct access is not possible and the obstacle that prevents this direct access; the Thing that eludes our grasp and the distorting screen that makes us miss the Thing. More precisely, the Real is ultimately the very shift of perspective from the first standpoint to the second.²⁵

The Hegelian procedure of criticizing the Kantian notion of the Ding-an-Sich involves the idea of the noumena as merely the conceptual product of an epistemological approach of treating reality as an appearance, which implies an opposed essence grounding it. Structuralism excludes the relation of language to the extraneous “thing-in-itself” and seemingly does not answer the problem of this crucial division. However, this is not to be taken as a weakness of its theoretical stance, but as Žižek puts it:

[...] a positive answer, that is, it shows the ontological range of language, the fact that ‘the primordial symbolization’ excludes the Real, the un-relational, that with the emergence of the Symbolic the Real already splits into the subject-opposed imaginary reality and the always lacking Thing (itself) in it, that is object a, sign of the excluded Real.²⁶

This is the Lacanian idea of the Real as ‘the impossible’ qua the content of primordial always already past exclusion which founds reality while remaining outside of its scope.

The thing-presentations in the unconscious are opposed to the trans-linguistic Thing which we cannot imagine. Žižek focuses on the affinity between the Lacanian Thing and the Kantian thing-in-itself:

²⁵ S. Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Cambridge 2003, p. 77.

²⁶ Idem, *Hegel in označevalec...*, op. cit., p. 197.

Only on the level of the signifier do we experience how the usual substitution of the thing with the word (we are only dealing with words and not with the things themselves), the absence of ‘the thing itself’ that comes with the presence of the word, at the same time opens a certain absence in this ‘thing itself.’²⁷

The Real emerges when multiple conflicting perspectives try to articulate the truth and there occurs a realization that there is no pre-perspectival Thing that would ground them – the Real being nothing but the impossibility of bringing the multitude of perspectival manifestations into a reconciled One-All. As an example, Žižek borrows the notion of society; the concept of society is split between the individualistic-nominalistic and the organicist-corporate notions. On the one hand, you have a view that there exists only a multitude of individuals and on the other hand the view that there exists a collective body of humanity. This seems to be a contradiction which makes it impossible for us to get an insight to society in-itself. The way to proceed is to do a transposition and note how this radical antinomy already is the Thing-itself, which means that the thing itself, society “in itself”, is not a Whole, but a set of mediations without a core.²⁸ Notional contradictions bring us to contradictions in the thing-itself, which disappears as a common ground of different viewpoints. This is true of all reality, in the same way the antinomies of the world apply to all the specific objects possible.

We touch the Real-in-itself in our very failure to touch it, since the Real is, at its most radical, the gap, the ‘minimal difference’ that separates the One from itself.²⁹

Žižek offers his gappy ontology in the image of the void, which presents a view of materialism which is distant from conceptions of a consistent, concrete World. Johnston sums up just what is the void Žižek is occasionally talking about:

[...] an intangible web of virtual possibilities [...] that becomes a fully constituted reality if and when the symmetrical balance of this web is disturbed through one virtual possibility being endowed with greater weight than the

²⁷ Ibidem, pp. 193–194.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 248.

²⁹ Idem, *Less than Nothing*, op. cit., p. 959.

others. The virtuality of possibility thereby “collapses” into the reality of actuality. But what prompts the collapse of this intangible virtual web? What catalyzes the falling out of something (i.e., the reality of actuality as substantial being with material heft) from nothing (i.e., the virtuality of possibility as an insubstantiality within substantial being more than substantial being itself)? Here is where things obviously reconnect with the Hegelian topic of the rapport between substance and subject [...] the reflection of subjectivity, rather than being wholly external to what it observes, is inscribed directly into the ontological structure of the Real being of material nature itself.³⁰

Unlike the Kantian antinomies as an indication of our finitude, the contradictory here is what gives rise to the failure of the Thing itself; the Real is immanent to the symbolic which produces it. However, like the Real, this symbolic is a non-All, and it is this very incompleteness which is the condition of possibility of the emergence of the Real; it is the repetitive failure of producing stable signifiers that gives rise to the subject (of the unconscious). So the In-itself is reachable because it is not external, but because it is on the side of the subject, since

[...] there are (transcendentally constituted) objects (of “external reality”) because there is a split subject. This constitutive split of the subject (which precedes the split between subject and object) is the split between the void that “is” the subject (\$) and the impossible-Real objectal counterpart of the subject.³¹

We are not talking about a simple transcendentalism in which the Real is subjectively constituted in reality which remains non-totalizable because of the finiteness of the synthesizing agent; the non-All is shifted to the Thing in itself as well, because the Real is immanent to the incompleteness of (symbolic) reality. It is only with an exclusion that the consistency of reality emerges and this excluded Real is what makes performativity function.

The easiest way to grasp this is to start with the simple observation that meaning is always dependent on expectation and procrastination. There is a dimension of time involved in the signifying process, and this time for comprehension introduces a gap between the repetitive registrations. The signifying process begins with a supposition of an exterior ground, on which the enunciation procedures are dependent,

³⁰ A. Johnston, op. cit., pp. 200–201.

³¹ S. Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, op. cit., p. 958.

but such an exteriority does not exist before the enunciating situation proceeds. The In-itself is reachable not because it is external, but because it is on the side of the subject, since the condition of possibility of transcendently constituted objects is a split subject. The subject is split before it is opposed to the object, its constitutive split being between itself as the void and the impossible-Real objectal counterpart. Performativity only functions because of an exclusion of this counterpart, which is the condition of possibility of a consistent reality. Prior to a constituted reality is a symmetrical balance of possibilities that collapses only when one of them is excluded from the virtual network. The reality of actuality in its material dimension is dependent on the Real being produced in the reproduction of the symbolic milieu. This is the object that introduces an antagonism into the seemingly purely formal differential field, the very gap which determines the structure. It is also the very source of the structure as One, which gets produced at the same time with it, granting it the power of sustaining the proliferation of Being. With the identities of the entities being dependent on constant metaphorical repetitions granting them consistency, subject is linked to the structure as a temporal function. Between the gaps of registrations that create a constant shifting of identities, the entities receive performative power.

Perhaps this gap separating the two vacuums is then the ultimate word (or one of them, at least) that we can pronounce on the universe: a kind of primordial ontological dislocation or difference on account of which, no matter how peaceful things may appear *sub specie aeternitatis*, the universe is out of joint and *eppur si muove*.³²

Being only exists through language and is the result of its functioning mechanisms, which are reducible to a formal network. Structuralism presented the immaterial signifier as pure differentiability. Centering a materialism on the signifying order focuses on an extra-formal dimension in language being introduced through enunciation. In the enunciating process, an inherent otherness is produced, a dimension which we cannot enunciate as such but which insists as the condition of a subjectified structure. One way of approaching this problem is to talk of the relationship between the signifier and the place of its in-

³² *Ibidem*, p. 377.

scription, as a difference that is implied by a dimension of privation being included in the signifying order. Each entity as One can be integrated a negative, it can be considered as absent and its own absence can be considered as being a part of itself, its place can be granted as distinct from itself.³³ The minimal difference that arises is the difference between the place and the inscription on that place. 'Place' here should be taken literally, as a topos that results from the opposite modalities of a signifier that can be present or absent; place is the very absence of the signifier. In this way, a manqué is introduced in the signifying order, which is made consistent by a reflexive point, an entity that is different not only from the other signifiers but from itself. This is where subjectivity is introduced into the structure, on the place of difference between the signifier and its place, between presence and absence. As a correlate, this place is linked with a point of radical otherness, an object that is nothing objective, an existence that does not exist, that which is not countable but makes all counting possible and adds a point of opacity to the system. Understanding Žižek demands a painful reading of the philosophical traditions he is involved with, which in many cases can be seen as a necessity to trying to pose a new understanding of the subject-object relationship:

That language is never a neutral/transparent process of enunciating, means that through the 'signified' objects, it is always relating to a 'surplus', a paradoxical object, between which and signifier there is no distance, which distances the sign from the signified thing, an object whose cut in relation to the signifier is internal to the signifier.³⁴

In Žižek's vacuous ontology/ epistemology, the central notion is that remainder of the Other, which is conceptualized in *a*; the paradoxical inconsistent object that insists in repetition and can only be conceived against the background of the gap that keeps apart the structure from the elements that fill in its places and which can be seen as a conceptualization of *den*.

³³ J. A. Miller, *Matrix*, [online] <http://www.lacan.com/symptom13/?p=127> (read especially point n. 5).

³⁴ S. Žižek, *Zgodovina in nezavedno*, Ljubljana 1982, p. 354.

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