

The Problem of Perversion:  
Žižek, Rhetoric, and Materiality

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**Abstract**

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Within rhetorical studies, the last decade and a half has witnessed a substantial resurgence of interest in Lacanian psychoanalysis. This thesis situates the resurgence of psychoanalysis within the broader context of rhetorical studies' attempts to theorize rhetoric beyond the scope of discourse and representation, and argues that the work of Slavoj Žižek offers a formulation of psychoanalysis that is useful for engaging non-discursive rhetoric. More specifically, this thesis argues that Žižek's approach to rhetoric stresses the importance of managing an audience's ability to articulate a response to a given rhetorical appeal, and that for Žižek, this management may occur at both discursive and a non-discursive levels. In turn, this equality of discourse and non-discourse within rhetoric draws attention to the multiple—but not necessarily coordinated—levels of rhetoric active in any single rhetorical instance. Such a perspective allows rhetorical critics both to better make sense of sense of supposedly "ineffective" rhetorical appeals by reframing efficacy with respect to a different level of rhetoric, and to recognize as deeply rhetorical certain phenomena that seem to have little to do with rhetoric.

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*For Merrow, Wheeler, York, and Jenks*

## INTRODUCTION

Since the founding of psychoanalysis at the turn of the twentieth century, rhetorical scholarship has maintained an uneasy relationship with Sigmund Freud and his intellectual heirs. This is not to say that rhetoric has avoided psychoanalysis entirely, but even in those instances where psychoanalysis *has* expressed influence over rhetorical scholarship, its role has often been minimized. Kenneth Burke's theory of identification, for example, was inspired by Freudian concepts, but Burke abandoned the notion of sexual identification in favor of social identification.<sup>1</sup> In a similar manner, Ernest Bormann's fantasy theme analysis, though rooted in the psychoanalytic concept of fantasy, defined fantasies as conscious phenomena, and thus disavowed the concept's connection to the Freudian unconscious.<sup>2</sup> Even at its greatest influence, the place of psychoanalysis in rhetoric has been limited.

But like the proverbial repressed, psychoanalysis has returned to rhetoric, and the last decade and a half has witnessed a substantial increase in psychoanalytic rhetorical scholarship. For the most part, this renewed attention has focused not on the work of Freud, but on that of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.<sup>3</sup> The application of Lacan's

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<sup>1</sup> See Diane Davis, "Identification: Burke and Freud on Who You Are," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2008): 123–147, doi:10.1080/02773940701779785; and Stephen D. O'Leary and Mark H. Wright, "Psychoanalysis and Burkeian Rhetorical Criticism," *Southern Communication Journal* 61, no. 2 (1995): 104–121, doi:10.1080/10417949609373005.

<sup>2</sup> For an account of Bormann's relationship to psychoanalysis, see Joshua Gunn, "Refiguring Fantasy: Imagination and Its Decline in U.S. Rhetorical Studies," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89, no. 1 (2003): 41–59, doi:10.1080/00335630308168.

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that Lacan's work briefly drew attention from rhetorical scholars near the end of the 1970s, and again near the end of the 1980s, but that attention did not coalesce into sustained engagement in the same way that contemporary scholarship has. See Loyd S. Pettegrew, "Psychoanalytic Theory: A Neglected Rhetorical Dimension,"

theories to rhetoric has produced an almost palpable excitement: In her 1998 review essay, now a common point of departure for almost all Lacanian rhetorical studies, Barbara Biesecker is “tempted [...] to hazard the strong claim that Jacques Lacan will have already been the great theorist of rhetoric for the twenty-first century.”<sup>4</sup> In place of this admittedly “strong claim,” she settles for “the more modest proposal that the work of contemporary rhetorical theorists and critics will be considerably enriched by risking contact with the best and brightest of the ‘new’ psychoanalysts of culture and society”—that is, the contemporary followers of Lacan.<sup>5</sup> Judging by the output of the following decade and a half, Biesecker’s proposal did not fall on deaf ears. Though relatively few in number, Lacanian rhetorical scholars have proved to be prolific, and their work has treated subjects as diverse as fantasy and imagination in rhetoric,<sup>6</sup> Lacan’s concept of enjoyment,<sup>7</sup> love and desire,<sup>8</sup> the relationship of Burke to Lacan,<sup>9</sup> speech and haunting,<sup>10</sup> and Lacan’s connection

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*Philosophy and Rhetoric* 10, no. 1 (1977): 46–59; Michael J. Hyde, “Jacques Lacan’s Psychoanalytic Theory of Speech and Language,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (1980): 96–114, doi:10.1080/00335638009383505; Bryan C. Short, “The Temporality of Rhetoric,” *Rhetoric Review* 7, no. 2 (1989): 367–379, doi:10.1080/07350198909388867.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara A. Biesecker, “Rhetorical Studies and the ‘New’ Psychoanalysis: What’s the Real Problem? or Framing the Problem of the Real,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84, no. 2 (1998): 222, doi:10.1080/00335639809384215.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Gunn, “Refiguring Fantasy”; and Randall Bush, “Rhetoric, Psychoanalysis, and the Imaginary,” *Cultural Studies* 26, no. 2–3 (2012): 282–298, doi:10.1080/09502386.2011.644115.

<sup>7</sup> Christian Lundberg, “Enjoying God’s Death: The Passion of the Christ and the Practices of an Evangelical Public,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95, no. 4 (2009): 387–411, doi:10.1080/00335630903296184.

<sup>8</sup> Joshua Gunn, “For the Love of Rhetoric, with Continual Reference to Kenny and Dolly,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 2 (2008): 131–155, doi:10.1080/00335630801975418.

to ideological critique.<sup>11</sup> Lacan has even inspired a systematic, book-length treatment of his work in relation to rhetoric: Christian Lundberg's *Lacan in Public*.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, this flood of scholarship has emerged hand-in-hand with a lack of consensus on exactly *what* psychoanalysis might have to offer rhetoric, and *why* this offering might be of interest to rhetorical scholars. Joshua Gunn, for example, values psychoanalysis as “a theory of an inside or an interiority” that opposes rhetoric’s infatuation with “surfaces and exteriorities,”<sup>13</sup> whereas Randall Bush claims that “psychoanalysis, particularly its insistence on the category of the Imaginary in Jacques Lacan’s work, may provide rhetorical theorists an opportunity to consider more carefully the relationship of language *qua* subject.”<sup>14</sup> In yet another vein, Barbara Biesecker sees psychoanalysis as offering “a powerful new critical lexicon that, when inhabited well, helps us make sense out of a symbolic formation without reducing all sense either to it or to its

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<sup>9</sup> Kevin A. Johnson, “Burke’s Lacanian Upgrade: Reading the Burkeian Unconscious Through a Lacanian Lens,” *KB Journal* 6, no. 1 (2009), <http://www.kbjournal.org/content/burkes-lacanian-upgrade-reading-burkeian-unconscious-through-lacanian-lens>.

<sup>10</sup> Joshua Gunn, “Mourning Speech: Haunting and the Spectral Voices of Nine-Eleven,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (2004): 91–114, doi:10.1080/1046293042000288344.

<sup>11</sup> Joshua Gunn and Shaun Treat, “Zombie Trouble: A Propaedeutic on Ideological Subjectification and the Unconscious,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 91, no. 2 (2005): 144–174, doi:10.1080/00335630500291489; Barbara A. Biesecker, “Whither Ideology? Toward a Different Take on Enjoyment as a Political Factor,” *Western Journal of Communication* 75, no. 4 (2011): 445–450, doi:10.1080/10570314.2011.588904.

<sup>12</sup> Christian Lundberg, *Lacan in Public: Psychoanalysis and the Science of Rhetoric*, Rhetoric, Culture, and Social Critique (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Joshua Gunn, “On Dead Subjects: A Rejoinder to Lundberg on (a) Psychoanalytic Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 4 (2004): 501, doi:10.1080/0033563042000304034.

<sup>14</sup> Bush, “Rhetoric, Psychoanalysis, and the Imaginary,” 283.

positive relations.”<sup>15</sup> For Biesecker, each term in the jumbled lexicon of Lacanian psychoanalysis—she lists “quilting, nodal point or the Lacanian *point de capiton*, rigid designator, *synthome*, *petit objet a* [*sic*], *jouissance*, surplus enjoyment, ideological anamorphosis, and retroactivity or retroversion”—is one more gadget in the toolbox of rhetorical theory.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, the sole commonality among the diverse responses offered by Gunn, Bush, and Biesecker (among others) is that Lacanian psychoanalysis is understood as a kind of supplement, an addition to an already-solid bedrock of rhetorical theory. There is, in this formulation, no particular *need* for Lacan. Lacanian psychoanalysis is just one approach among many, with no specific content to make it more attractive than any other. In short, psychoanalysis is an answer without a question. Yet this approach to Lacan elides the historical nature of the resurgence of psychoanalysis in rhetoric, and in doing so, fails to consider the possibility that the very popularity of psychoanalysis may in fact be a response to some insufficiency in contemporary rhetorical theory. In other words, to view Lacanian psychoanalysis as one of many intellectual gadgets is to miss a key line of questioning: Why has psychoanalysis experienced this resurgence *now*? What is it about the current moment that has attracted so many scholars to Lacan?

One answer to this question can be found in the emergence of scholarship that parallels the resurgence of psychoanalysis—for example, recent concern for the

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<sup>15</sup> Biesecker, “Rhetorical Studies,” 227.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

physiological (e.g., the turn to the body),<sup>17</sup> the psychological (e.g., the turn to affect),<sup>18</sup> the place of technology and media (e.g., procedural rhetoric),<sup>19</sup> and the status of extra-linguistic objects (e.g., object-oriented ontology).<sup>20</sup> These bodies of scholarship, despite varying widely in their objects and intellectual commitments, can be seen as part of a larger movement: They are tied by a common interest in understanding rhetoric beyond the scope of discourse. Each strand of scholarship, in its own way, seeks to expand the object of rhetoric to non-discursive grounds—to take into account emotion, or the body, or medium, or some other element. Psychoanalysis, as a theoretical apparatus and a clinical practice centered on the relationship between discourse and its excess (i.e., speech and desire), resonates strongly with these concerns. Thus, psychoanalytic rhetoric is one of many attempts by rhetorical scholars to move beyond purely discursive analysis.

This wider context suggests that the turn to Lacanian psychoanalysis involves much higher stakes than intellectual gadgetry. The point of these various “turns” is not to provide conceptual tools to supplement existing rhetorical theory—to enable a psychoanalytic rhetorical analysis of a text, for example, which may be compared with an Aristotelian or Burkeian analysis, and so on. Rather, these turns are symptomatic of a need to explore the

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<sup>17</sup> For example, see Debra Hawhee, *Moving Bodies: Kenneth Burke at the Edges of Language*, Studies in Rhetoric/Communication (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> For an overview, see Cory Holding, “Affecting Rhetoric,” *College Composition and Communication* 59, no. 2 (2007): 317–329.

<sup>19</sup> The key text for this vein of rhetorical theory is Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> As a relatively new theoretical approach, object-oriented ontology is only beginning to make itself felt within rhetorical scholarship. For an indication of what such scholarship might yield, see Scott Barnett, “Toward an Object-Oriented Rhetoric,” *Enculturation* 7 (2010), <http://enculturation.gmu.edu/toward-an-object-oriented-rhetoric>.

role that material, non-discursive entities play in rhetorical practice. Why might psychoanalysis be of interest to rhetorical scholars? Because psychoanalytic rhetoric, if it can indeed meet the need to which it responds, offers a way of thinking about non-discursive rhetoric.

But much hinges on that last caveat—“if it can indeed meet the need to which it responds.” The turn to Lacan may be part of a larger attempt to address non-discursive rhetoric, but that does not mean that it is a *successful* attempt. Even if the question of *why* psychoanalysis might be valuable to rhetoric can be answered by pointing to a larger movement towards non-discursive rhetoric in the discipline, the question of *how* it might be valuable remains open.

This thesis takes aim at the latter question, via two interrelated claims. The first claim is that psychoanalysis can indeed help rhetorical scholars more effectively approach non-discursive rhetoric. To support this claim, it is necessary to demonstrate that a particular reading of Lacanian theory is able to deal with both discursive and non-discursive entities—and again, the caveat of “particular reading” is key here. There are certainly interpretations of Lacan’s work that are *not* compatible with rhetoric beyond discourse, as is evidenced by studies that employ Lacanian terminology for discursive analysis (e.g., Biesecker). And this potential for incompatibility in turn begs the question: What is this “particular reading”? In other words, what interpretation of Lacan is best positioned to connect psychoanalysis to non-discursive rhetoric?

Once again, a clue can be found by turning to the wider context of the resurgence of psychoanalysis in rhetoric. Even as the turn to non-discursive rhetoric suggests interesting parallels internal to rhetoric, there is a corresponding movement to be found external to

the discipline: The renewed interest in psychoanalysis can be connected to a wider revitalization of psychoanalytic scholarship over the last two decades. At the forefront of this revitalization is the Ljubljana school of psychoanalysis, a group that has developed a unique interpretation of Lacan via the philosophy of Hegel, and vice versa.<sup>21</sup> The intellectual apparatus resultant from this combination has proved attractive to scholars in a wide range of disciplines—from philosophy to cinema studies to political science—in part due to its application to the work of ideological critique, an area that clearly bridges disciplinary concerns. The Ljubljana school's popularity and influence can also be linked to the fact that some members of the school have positioned their work as an explicitly *materialist* response to poststructuralism. Even if this positioning is not entirely ingenuous,<sup>22</sup> it has still allowed the Ljubljana school to ride, along with figures such as Alain Badiou and Ernesto Laclau, a reactive wave against theorists who center their work on discourse and textuality, such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In the 1970s, Mladan Dolar, Rastko Močnik, Slavoj Žižek, and Alenka Zupančič founded the school in what was then Yugoslavia. For an early overview of this group, see Slavoj Žižek, "The Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis in Yugoslavia: An Interview with Éric Laurent," in *Interrogating the Real*, ed. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Continuum, 2010), 21–25.

<sup>22</sup> For example, John Caputo suggests that the theoretical program of Slavoj Žižek—perhaps *the* representative of the Ljubljana school—is not far from Derridean: "Žižek mocks Derrida mercilessly, but when spaceship Žižek finally lands, when this buzzing flutterbug named Žižek finally alights, one has to ask, exactly how far has he landed from Derrida's 'spectral messianic'?" See John D. Caputo, review of *Review of The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, by Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (2009), <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24179-the-monstrosity-of-christ-paradox-or-dialectic/>.

<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the most obvious example of this is Žižek's criticism of the "postmodern deconstructionist"—a figure targeted so frequently in his books that citation is nearly superfluous—but other scholarship of the Ljubljana school fits into the same vein. For example, see Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 953.

The Ljubljana school's rise to prominence in a motion parallel to the resurgence of psychoanalysis in rhetoric, along with the school's commitment to a materialist interpretation of Lacanian psychoanalysis, means that it is uniquely positioned to offer the "particular reading" needed to support my first claim. And in turn, this positioning leads to my second claim: that the work of one key figure of the Ljubljana school, Slavoj Žižek, offers a theoretical apparatus that is able to throw into relief the value of Lacanian psychoanalysis to rhetoric. This is not to say that Žižek possesses a fully developed theory of rhetoric, or that he has addressed the concerns of rhetorical scholars directly. Rather, for rhetorical scholarship, Žižek is more suggestive than prescriptive. Yet because his work is theoretically founded on Lacan *and* is concerned with issues of non-discursive rhetoric, Žižek acts as a point of entry into the ways in which psychoanalysis might move beyond merely supplementing existing rhetorical theory.

My two claims, then, are that Lacanian psychoanalysis can help rhetoric think through non-discursive rhetoric, and that the Ljubljana school—and in particular, Žižek—offers a formulation of Lacan's work that is useful to this end. To work through these claims in depth, I proceed in three steps, each of which corresponds to a chapter of this thesis. In the first chapter, I elaborate Žižek's relation to rhetoric by clarifying exactly *what* rhetoric is for Žižek. Several of Žižek's engagements with rhetoric seem, at first glance, problematic to my argument, so it is necessary to address the question of whether or not his work is even amenable to rhetorical scholarship in the first place. Furthermore, it is not enough to simply unravel these problems as problems; it is necessary to explain *why* they exist as problems. The solution that I offer consists of a shift in perspective: What appears as an impediment to Žižek's engagement with rhetoric, I claim, is actually indicative of the very

point of his contribution—namely, the psychoanalytic concept of *perversion*. As a split between intellectual knowledge and actualized, embodied belief—best characterized by Octave Mannoni’s formula, “I know well, but all the same...”<sup>24</sup>—perversion marks a significant challenge to traditional conceptions of rhetoric: The perverse subject is *intellectually* persuaded, but without any real effect. But the key to effectively responding to such perversion can be found, I argue, in Mannoni and Žižek’s emphasis on the articulated nature of perversion: For perversion to exist as a subjective position, it must be enunciated. This leads Žižek to formulate, in his own rhetoric, a response based on the procedure of Lacanian clinical practice, in which the ability of the audience to respond to a given rhetorical appeal is preemptively managed and restricted. In this formulation, rhetoric is not only a matter of argumentative content, but also of what “counts” as communication in a given rhetorical instance.

The second chapter turns to the ways in which Žižek’s materialism influences his understanding of perversion—and by extension, the effective rhetorical management of it. This entails three steps: First, a brief survey of the various elaborations of “rhetorical materialism” and “rhetoric’s materiality” within rhetorical scholarship; second, a situation of Lacanian psychoanalytic rhetoric within these wider discussions of materiality and rhetoric; and finally, an exploration of Žižek’s relationship to both psychoanalytic rhetoric and material rhetoric. By connecting Žižek’s materialist commitments to the analysis of perversion from the previous chapter, I show how, for Žižek, perversion and its

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<sup>24</sup> Octave Mannoni, “I Know Well, but All the Same...,” in *Perversion and the Social Relation*, ed. Molly Anne Rothenberg, Dennis Foster, and Slavoj Žižek, trans. G. M. Goshgarian, Sic 4 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 68–92.

management are not necessarily confined to discursive levels of rhetoric; both may also hinge on a non-discursive, *material* structuring of communication.

Finally, the third chapter considers the implications of the previous two chapters for rhetorical criticism. That is to say, after establishing in prior chapters that Žižek *does* engage both discursive and non-discursive rhetoric, I attempt to show how this engagement might be applied to critical practice. To this end, I center the chapter on a specific foil—namely, approaches to rhetoric that foreground technology and media. Because this body of scholarship, like Žižek’s rhetorical response to perversion, is concerned with the structuring of audience *agency*, it offers a useful point of comparison against which the unique features of a Žižek-inspired rhetorical criticism may be further defined. In particular, I argue that a Žižekian approach to rhetoric draws attention to the multiple—but not necessarily coordinated—levels of discursive and non-discursive rhetoric active in any single rhetorical instance. In turn, this allows rhetorical critics both to better make sense of sense of supposedly “ineffective” rhetorical appeals by reframing efficacy with respect to a different level of rhetoric, and to recognize as deeply rhetorical certain phenomena that seem to have little to do with rhetoric.

## CHAPTER ONE: PERVERSION

**Žižek in Warsaw**

In his first English-language book, Slavoj Žižek relates “a well-known joke about ‘Lenin in Warsaw’”:

At an art exhibition in Moscow, there is a picture showing Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife, in bed with a young member of the Komsomol. The title of the picture is ‘Lenin in Warsaw’. A bewildered visitor asks a guide: ‘But where is Lenin?’ The guide replies quietly and with dignity: ‘Lenin is in Warsaw’.<sup>25</sup>

Žižek goes on to elaborate the theoretical structure embodied in the joke’s painting: Even though Lenin is not present in a positive sense—that is, he is not visually represented within the painting—it is his very *absence* which organizes the painting’s content. As Žižek writes, the “exclusion functions as a positive condition for the emergence of what is being depicted.”<sup>26</sup> This kind of determinative absence is not dissimilar to Žižek’s own relationship to psychoanalytic rhetorical scholarship: Within rhetoric, Žižek is often cited but rarely engaged directly. The pattern, it seems, is that rhetorical scholars are more likely to utilize Žižek as a means to explicate other psychoanalytic figures (e.g., Freud, Lacan), or to invoke Žižek as offering alternative formulations of Lacanian concepts, than they are to grapple with the unique aspects of Žižek’s work.<sup>27</sup> Even when the influence of Žižek is a point of contention—as it is, for example, in one of rhetoric’s most visible debates about Lacan<sup>28</sup>—

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<sup>25</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2008), 178.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>27</sup> For example, see Gunn, “Refiguring Fantasy,” 55, n. 2; and Bush, “Rhetoric, Psychoanalysis, and the Imaginary,” 296, n. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Joshua Gunn, “Refitting Fantasy: Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity, and Talking to the Dead,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 1 (2004): 1–23, doi:10.1080/0033563042000206808; Christian Lundberg, “The Royal Road Not Taken: Joshua Gunn’s ‘Refitting Fantasy:

Žižek's work is not itself the object. Instead, it is a Žižekian reading of *Lacan* that is at stake. Indeed, the only major exception to this trend is Biesecker's own foundational review essay, which takes as its subject the texts of the Ljubljana school, including the work of Žižek.<sup>29</sup> But even if Biesecker's call to engage the "new" psychoanalysis was well received by rhetorical scholars, its specifics were not exactly heeded, and Žižek thus remains, as far as rhetoric is concerned, exiled to a disciplinary Warsaw.

To be fair, Žižek has received a substantial amount of attention from scholars in rhetoric's neighboring discipline, composition studies, and the resultant scholarship has been cited within rhetorical studies. For example, Thomas Rickert's *Acts of Enjoyment* explicitly frames itself as a response to Žižek's work, and the *Journal of Advanced Composition (JAC)* featured Žižek in an exclusive interview.<sup>30</sup> This interview also had the virtue of initiating several considerations of Žižek's work, with articles spanning multiple issues of *JAC*.<sup>31</sup>

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Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity and Talking to the Dead' and Lacan's Symbolic Order," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 4 (2004): 495–500, doi:10.1080/0033563042000304025; and Gunn, "On Dead Subjects."

<sup>29</sup> Biesecker, "Rhetorical Studies."

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Rickert, *Acts of Enjoyment: Rhetoric, Žižek, and the Return of the Subject*, Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007); and Gary A. Olson and Lynn Worsham, "Slavoj Žižek: Philosopher, Cultural Critic, and Cyber-Communist," *Journal of Advanced Composition* 21, no. 2 (2001): 252–286.

<sup>31</sup> See Thomas Rickert, "'Hands Up, You're Free': Composition in a Post-Oedipal World," *Journal of Advanced Composition* 21, no. 2 (2001): 289–320; Peter McLaren, "Slavoj Žižek's Naked Politics: Opting for the Impossible, A Secondary Elaboration," *Journal of Advanced Composition* 21, no. 3 (2001): 613–647; Robert Miklitsch, "Passing on Popular Culture: 'Art for Lacan's Sake'," *Journal of Advanced Composition* 21, no. 3 (2001): 605–613; Jeffrey T. Nealon, "The Cash Value of Paradox: Žižek's Rhetoric," *Journal of Advanced Composition* 21,

The *JAC* interview is also worth mentioning because it points to one of the reasons why Žižek's work may not have been addressed directly within rhetorical scholarship. Simply put, Žižek disparages the work of rhetoric. In the *JAC* interview, for example, when asked about his own compositional practices, Žižek insists that his main goal is merely the transmission of information, and that his own "ruthlessness about writing" drives him to disregard the specific formulation of his prose.<sup>32</sup> Jeffrey Nealon, writing in response to the *JAC* interview, observes that for Žižek, "rhetoric [...] seems to be something that's merely added to the rock of the Žižekian real, the argument."<sup>33</sup> In this way, Žižek seems to situate himself within a longstanding, anti-rhetorical tradition: What *really* counts is philosophy, not philosophy's rhetorical formulation.

However, a single exchange is tenuous ground upon which to reject a scholar's work, especially a scholar as well known for provocation as Žižek. Clearly, there is a certain perverse delight visible in the gesture of telling a composition journal that composition is itself irrelevant, and the *JAC* interviewers even go so far as to note this in their opening remarks: "To be fair, it is impossible to determine to what degree the expansive and loquacious Žižek is being purposely provocative."<sup>34</sup> But personal quirks aside, there are at least three reasons why Žižek's relationship to rhetoric is perhaps not as simple as it is portrayed in the *JAC* interview.

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no. 3 (2001): 599–605; and Žižek's reply, Slavoj Žižek, "Our Daily Fantasies and Fetishes," *Journal of Advanced Composition* 21, no. 3 (2001): 647–653.

<sup>32</sup> Olson and Worsham, "Slavoj Žižek," 254.

<sup>33</sup> Nealon, "The Cash Value of Paradox," 599.

<sup>34</sup> Olson and Worsham, "Slavoj Žižek," 253.

First, and most simply, Žižek says otherwise. For instance, in *For They Know Not What They Do*, Žižek actually endorses the Derridean claim that the separation of “the truth” from “mere rhetoric” is ultimately a *rhetorical* gesture.<sup>35</sup> Contrary to what one might expect from the *JAC* interview, Žižek has no quarrel with Derrida on this point, and simply wishes to point out that this separation itself can be understood in terms of the Hegelian dialectic. Of course, this move hardly simplifies Žižek’s relationship to rhetoric, since asserting the “truth” of the dialectic is simultaneously an employment and a disavowal of rhetoric. Nevertheless, the point stands that this relationship is more complex than the *JAC* interview suggests.

Second, Žižek is working within a tradition (i.e., psychoanalysis) that is particularly conscious of its own rhetoric. Although Freud did not address rhetoric explicitly, his work bears testament to a careful consideration of style.<sup>36</sup> Lacan stressed the importance of rhetoric for the training of psychoanalysts,<sup>37</sup> and late in his career even explicitly identified the work of the analyst as rhetorical.<sup>38</sup> Of course, Žižek is by no means bound to the positions of his antecedents, but the prominence of rhetoric in the history of

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<sup>35</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2008), 31–32.

<sup>36</sup> See Patrick J. Mahony, “Freud in the Light of Classical Rhetoric,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 10, no. 4 (1974): 413, doi:10.1002/1520-6696(197410)10:4<413::AID-JHBS2300100406>3.0.CO;2-B.

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), 238.

<sup>38</sup> Christian Lundberg relates that Lacan, in his unpublished twenty-fifth seminar, declared that “the psychoanalyst is a rhetor.” See Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 1.

psychoanalysis introduces a complexity to his relationship to rhetoric that is not explicit in the *JAC* interview.

Third, there is the matter of Žižek's style. As Thomas Brockelman points out, the critical literature on Žižek exhibits "an almost obsessive emphasis on his *style*," even to the point that many of the prominent introductions to Žižek's work "all *start from* the question of *Žižek's style*."<sup>39</sup> In other words, there seems to be something about Žižek's work that necessitates a taking stock of his rhetoric, regardless of whether or not he truly considers it nonessential in the face of "ruthless" information transmission.

Clearly, there is more to Žižek's approach to rhetoric than meets the glancing eye. There is a playful element of paradox at work here, as is evidenced by the *JAC* interview. All of this provokes a series of questions: Where does Žižek *really* stand in relation to rhetoric? Does he really only focus on "ruthless" information transmission? And where does this element of paradox come into all of this? Is it merely idiosyncratic, or does it enact a performative point itself? The answers to these questions lie, I claim, in a problem that Žižek recognizes but much rhetorical scholarship does not: the problem of perversion. In the remainder of this chapter, I outline this problem and Žižek's response to it.

### **The Landlord and the Skinhead**

But to name the problem *perversion* is perhaps a bit premature. The invocation of that particular term, with all the theoretical baggage that it carries, skips right to the end of Žižek's relation to rhetoric, to his *answer*, and thus obscures the process by which he

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas Brockelman, *Žižek and Heidegger: The Question Concerning Techno-Capitalism*, Continuum Studies in Continental Philosophy (New York: Continuum, 2008), 1 (emphasis in original).

arrives at it, as well as his reasons for doing so. Consequently, before moving to perversion specifically, it is useful to review the problem that Žižek identifies, but without the coloring of that particular theoretical lens. A story told by the theologian and philosopher of religion Peter Rollins affords a useful starting point:

There was once a young minister sitting in her house on a Sunday afternoon who was disturbed by a frantic banging on the front door. Upon opening the door, she was confronted by a distraught member of her church. It was obvious that he was exhausted from running to her house and that he was on the verge of tears.

“What’s wrong?” asked the minister.

“Please, can you help?” replied the man. “A kind and considerate family in the area is in great trouble. The husband recently lost his job, and the wife cannot work due to health problems. They have three young children to look after, and the man's mother lives with them as she is unwell and needs constant care. They are one day late with the rent, but despite the fact that they have lived there ten years with no problems and will likely have the money later in the week, the landlord is going to kick them all onto the street if they don't pay the full amount by the end of the day.”

“That’s terrible,” said the minister. “Of course we will help. I will go get some money from the Church fund to make up the shortfall. Anyway, how do you know them?”

“Oh,” replied the man, “I’m the landlord.”<sup>40</sup>

The “catch” of this story, of course, hinges not simply on the distance between the landlord’s actions and his knowledge of those actions, but also on the landlord’s inability to experience that distance as problematic or contradictory. His feelings for the plight of the family are neither an act nor a manipulation; his empathy is real. Nevertheless, he either refuses or is unable to transform that empathy into a conviction that produces real change—for example, a forgiveness of the family’s rent.

Žižek’s *The Parallax View* features an image much in parallel to Rollins’ story of the landlord: Žižek imagines the paradox of a “postmodern,” racist skinhead, an individual perfectly able to engage in hateful, racist violence *and* to explain his own existence as the

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<sup>40</sup> Peter Rollins, *Insurrection: To Believe Is Human; To Doubt, Divine* (New York: Howard Books, 2011), 81–82.

result of a myriad of social and economic factors—deindustrialization, globalization, the erosion of traditional, patriarchal values, and so on.<sup>41</sup> This paradoxical skinhead accepts “critical” explanations for his social presence—even embraces them—but far from serving as an effective critique of explicit programs of anti-Semitism and white supremacy, these academic explanations are held without tension alongside the skinhead’s virulent hate.

Now to be fair, neither Rollins’ landlord nor Žižek’s skinhead are offered here as empirical examples. No claims are made about the empathy of landlords or the facility of skinheads with academic jargon. What this curious pair points to is the *possibility* of a particular subjective position in which intellectual and emotional commitment are totally divorced from action. Such a disassociation easily maps onto a number of everyday variants: I know, for example, that a certain pair of shoes are made by exploited workers in terrible conditions, and that by purchasing them, I am complicit in their exploitation—but I still buy them. Likewise, I know that my conditions of employment could be improved if members of my union were more active and militant—and yet I do not go to union meetings. In all of this, *I am thoroughly convinced*, and yet my actions do not change.

The element of *conviction* inherent in this split between knowledge and action indicates that such a split is not exclusively an ethical problem, though Žižek is certainly concerned with it on this level. It also presents a challenge to conceptions of rhetoric and persuasion that limit their scope to the explicit formulation of signifiers—that is, to content. If persuasion occurs *only* through signification, then what does one make of Žižek’s skinhead or Rollins’ landlord? Should one say that the skinhead does not *truly* understand the academic explanation for his hate? Should one claim that the landlord has an

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<sup>41</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 300.

insufficient understanding of his relation to his tenants? Are they simply not yet adequately persuaded? And if they *are* adequately persuaded, if they *do* affirm the knowledge of their own positions, what good is such persuasion if it is disconnected from action?<sup>42</sup>

Besides registering at both ethical and rhetorical levels, this problem touches an ideological level, too. And it is here, at the level of ideology, that it is possible to trace Žižek's most explicit engagement with the problem posed by the landlord and the skinhead. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek lists three goals for his work: First, "to serve as an introduction to some of the fundamental concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis"; second, "to reactualize Hegelian dialectics by giving it a new reading on the basis of Lacanian psychoanalysis"; and finally,

to contribute to the theory of ideology via a new reading of some well-known, classic motifs (commodity fetishism, and so on) and of some crucial Lacanian concepts which, on a first approach, have nothing to offer to the theory of ideology: the 'quilting point' (*le point de capiton*: 'upholstery button'), sublime object, surplus-enjoyment, and so on.<sup>43</sup>

This third goal—"to contribute to the theory of ideology"—necessarily involves a movement through previous iterations of such theories, and it is this *movement* that makes clear Žižek's own contribution—as well as his contribution's usefulness for confronting the problem of the landlord and the skinhead. In *The Sublime Object*, Žižek engages three key antecedents to his own theory—namely, Karl Marx, Louis Althusser, and Peter Sloterdijk—

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<sup>42</sup> A Burkeian response to the questions I pose here might quibble with my reliance on *action*. Burke himself notes that "we could with more accuracy speak of persuasion 'to attitude,' rather than persuasion to out-and-out action," especially since persuasion "is directed to a man only insofar as he is *free*." Yet the move to attitude from action only displaces the problem: Yes, by the criteria of *attitude* the landlord is persuaded, but this in turn begs the question of the relation between the attitude and the landlord's free decision to act contrary to it. See Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 50 (emphasis in original).

<sup>43</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, xxx.

each of whom offer a different understanding of ideology (and implicitly, of rhetoric): ideology as symptom, ideology as material practice, and ideology as cynicism. In what follows, I examine each of these conceptions in turn.

### **Ideology as Symptom**

Žižek opens *The Sublime Object* with a claim made by Lacan, that “it was none other than Karl Marx who invented the notion of the [psychoanalytic] symptom.”<sup>44</sup> After dismissing the possibility that this claim is “just a sally of wit” or “a vague analogy,” Žižek initiates his inquiry with a question: “How was it possible for Marx, in his analysis of the world of commodities, to produce a notion which applies also to the analysis of dreams, hysterical phenomena, and so on?”<sup>45</sup> Žižek’s answer hinges on the “fundamental homology between the interpretative procedure of Marx and Freud”: Both procedures focus their analyses on *form*.<sup>46</sup> That is to say, although both Marx and Freud differentiate between the manifest and the latent, neither Marx nor Freud stops at uncovering the latter. For both figures, the real interest is in the *formal relationship* between the manifest and the latent. For Freud, this is seen in his insistence that latent dream content is *not* the focus of dream analysis (i.e., latent content is not unconscious); rather, it is in the formal process of the translation of latent content into manifest content that the unconscious asserts itself.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, for Marx it is not sufficient to point to the determination of value (the manifest)

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 510, n. 1.

by labor-time (the latent); classical bourgeois economists had already done this. What such economists missed, according to Marx, is the *historical* nature of this arrangement—that is, they never asked *why* the commodity form took its particular shape in the first place.

Of course, all of this begs the question: How did this homology come about? To answer this, Žižek turns to the work of Alfred Sohn-Rethel, who claims that

the formal analysis of the commodity holds the key not only to the critique of political economy, but also to the historical explanation of the abstract conceptual mode of thinking and of the division of intellectual and manual labor which came into existence with it.<sup>48</sup>

In other words, it is the historical development of the material conditions of commodity exchange that enable a particular kind of formal analysis. There is a particular order to the development of abstraction as such: “Before thought could arrive at pure *abstraction*, the abstraction was already at work in the social effectivity of the market.”<sup>49</sup> And the nature of the abstraction here is key. If abstraction is “at work in the social effectivity of the market” prior to its introduction to *thought*, then the kind of abstraction at hand is definitely *not* to be conceived as occurring at the level of conscious knowledge. Such abstraction is, by definition, unconscious. However, this unconscious is not simply an *absence* of conscious knowledge; such “absence” itself remains at the level of knowledge, albeit in a negative dimension. So how does the unconscious “exist” as a positive presence, but not at the level of knowledge? Here Žižek returns to the insight shared by Marx and Freud: The

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<sup>48</sup> Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel (London: MacMillan Press, 1978), 33.

<sup>49</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 10.

unconscious is “*the form of thought whose ontological status is not that of thought.*”<sup>50</sup> The unconscious exists as *form*, and nothing more.

With this detour through Sohn-Rethel, Žižek is finally able to return to the question of the symptom and Marx’s involvement in its “invention.” Sohn-Rethel’s point is not only that philosophy and other forms of abstract thought rely on the formal precedent of commodity exchange, but also that, for the continued functioning of such forms, they must remain blind to such a precedent.<sup>51</sup> For Sohn-Rethel, any philosophy that aspires to universality must *formally* ignore its historical foundations in the lived reality of commodity exchange. And it is this logic of a constitutive exception—of a singular element which must remain formally excluded from a wider field for that field’s sustenance—that is the structure of the symptom.

Here Žižek approaches the first of his three antecedents, in what he terms “the most elementary definition of ideology”: “the well-known phrase from Marx’s *Capital*: ‘*Sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es*’—‘they do not know it, but they are doing it.’”<sup>52</sup> But even this seemingly simple formula requires explication: What exactly is the “it” here? Is “it” ideology? Or is “it” the material action that ideology obscures? The riddle of this formula sits within the subsection of *Capital* titled “The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret,”

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 13 (emphasis in original).

<sup>51</sup> As Sohn-Rethel writes, “Science [i.e., abstract thought] is equipped for its socially necessary tasks, but only with false self-awareness.” Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 77–78.

<sup>52</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 24.

in which Marx teases out the “mystical character of the commodity”<sup>53</sup>—that is, the process by which a commodity “changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness” (i.e., use-value).<sup>54</sup> Marx has already demonstrated, earlier in the first chapter of *Capital*, that the exchangeability of commodities rests on equivalences of value as based on the social average of labor-time necessary to produce them.<sup>55</sup> But in offering this explanation, he encounters a problem: To *uncover* the “truth” of the commodity is to simultaneously assert that commodity exchanges in everyday life are understood in a different (and false) fashion by those actually participating in the exchanges. So what do these participants believe motivates the exchange? And how do they come to believe this? To answer this, Marx borrows the concept of fetishism from “the misty realm of religion,” where

the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands.<sup>56</sup>

The trick of fetishism, then, is not that it points to the wrong entity—the entity “God” is certainly relevant to religious practice—but rather that it confuses causality: God is taken to bring religious practice into being instead of the other way around. And as Marx states, the logic is the same with the commodity:

Men do not therefore bring the products of their labour into relation with each other as values because they see these objects merely as the material integuments of homogenous human labour. The reverse is true: by equating their different products

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<sup>53</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (New York: Penguin, 1990), 164.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:163.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:129.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:165.

to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. They do this without being aware of it.<sup>57</sup>

So it is not that participants in commodity exchange first identify equivalences in the commodity itself, and then move to exchange. To ask “What do the participants in commodity exchanges believe?” is to miss the point that that *exchange comes first*—and furthermore, exchange does not even require its participants’ knowledge for its perpetuation. Indeed, the relationship between knowledge and exchange is exactly reversed: In order for exchange to effectively function, individuals *must* assume that exchange is *subsequent* to equivalence.

To return to the riddle of “it”: Within this larger discussion of commodity fetishism—the misapprehension of causality at play in exchange—it is clear that the “it” in question is the equation of commodities as values in exchange. The “it” is therefore located on the side of *action*. This action is, however, positioned within a structure that maintains the individual’s non-knowledge of action’s own precedence in exchange—and it is at this level that Marx’s formula is, in Žižek’s terms, “a formation whose very consistency implies a certain non-knowledge on the part of the subject”—that is to say, it is symptomatic in the psychoanalytic sense.<sup>58</sup>

With this symptomatic aspect exposed, Žižek is able to reformulate Marx’s elementary formula: Ideology is “*a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence.*”<sup>59</sup> Such a definition implies a particular critical procedure: One should focus on exposing the “essence” of a given social reality—

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 1:166–167.

<sup>58</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 16.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 15–16 (emphasis in original).

and the success of such an exposure should be judged by its result (i.e., the dissolution of the symptom).<sup>60</sup> Yet this procedure still relies on an expression of *content* (i.e., the transmission of signifiers) with the assumption that the subject will appropriately respond.<sup>61</sup> But here one encounters the limit to such a procedure: That a change of knowledge (that is, bringing non-knowledge to light) would *not* effect a change in action is, within this framework, inconceivable—and as such, this theoretical apparatus cannot offer a convincing account of the problematic subjective position seen in the landlord and the skinhead.

### **Ideology as Material Practice**

If ideology cannot be understood in terms of the symptom—or rather, if it cannot be *effectively* understood as such—how should it be conceptualized? To answer this question, Žižek returns to the formula of “they do not know it, but they are doing it,” and to the point, noted earlier, that the ideological illusion rests on the side of action. In the symptomatic reading of ideology, the illusion of ideology resides in the formal relationship expressed between knowledge and non-knowledge; it is in the maintenance of the *position* of non-knowledge that the “illusion” of ideology lies. But, as Žižek points out, such a symptomatic understanding of ideology “leaves out an illusion, an error, a distortion which is already at

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>61</sup> This near-evangelistic position is all the more evident when one considers the allusion of “*sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es*” to Christ’s demand to forgive, for “they know not what they do” (“*sie wissen nicht, was sie tun*”), in Luke 23:34 (LUT). And yet far from offering illumination, this pseudo-religious dynamic only obscures the mechanism of change: Some have “ears to hear,” while other simply do not.

work in the social reality itself, at the level of what the individuals are *doing*.”<sup>62</sup> The distinction here is subtle. There are *two* illusions are work: First, there is the formal illusion (i.e., the one addressed by the conceptualization of ideology as symptom); and second, there is the illusion that supports *action itself*. By identifying this second illusion, Žižek introduces “a new way to read the Marxian formula ‘they do not know it, but they are doing it’”:

What they do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion... What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity.<sup>63</sup>

With this rereading of the Marxian formula, Žižek comes to the second of his antecedents: Louis Althusser. Althusser’s approach to ideology is perhaps best captured by his famous claim that “ideology is a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence,” but it is important to remember that these imaginary elements are themselves to be located within the field of action, not that of knowledge.<sup>64</sup> For Althusser, ideology’s “imaginary relation is itself endowed with a material existence”—that is, it resides in everyday practices and rituals.<sup>65</sup> In this way, the “double illusion” elaborated by Žižek is fully in line with an Althusserian conception of ideology. For both, what counts is what individuals *do*.

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<sup>62</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 28.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>64</sup> Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 162.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

As Althusser points out in his essay on ideological state apparatuses, the supposed, commonsense relationship between ideology and material practices moves causally from the former to the latter: “An individual believes in God, or Duty, or Justice, etc.” and “this belief derives [...] from the ideas of the individual concerned, i.e. from him as a subject with a consciousness which contains the ideas of his belief.”<sup>66</sup> The ideas of the individual, influencing his or her belief, then translate into action:

The individual in question behaves in such and such a way, adopts such and such a practical attitude, and, what is more, participates in certain regular practices which are those of the ideological apparatus on which ‘depend’ the ideas which he has in all consciousness freely chosen as a subject. If he believes in God, he goes to Church to attend Mass, kneels, prays, confesses, does penance...<sup>67</sup>

Even if the individual’s actions contradict his or her explicitly stated beliefs, those actions are themselves taken to be indicative of another, separate set of beliefs; it is supposed that “he has other ideas in his head as well as those he proclaims.”<sup>68</sup>

Against this idealist explanation of belief and action, Althusser turns to the understanding of belief developed by Blaise Pascal at the end of his famous wager:

You want to be cured of unbelief and you ask for the remedy: learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have. These are people who know the road you wish to follow, who have been cured of the affliction of which you wish to be cured: follow the way by which they began. They behaved just as if they did believe, taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. That will make you believe quite naturally...<sup>69</sup>

Here Pascal inverts the standard understanding of the causality of belief: Instead of “genuine” belief motivating action, Pascal suggests that action begets belief. For Pascal, as

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>69</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 125.

for Althusser, the reality of belief resides in action, not knowledge. Ideas only appear after the fact, as retroactive explanations of beliefs embodied in actions.

But what then is the difference between the Althusserian understanding of ideology as material practices and the Marxian understanding of ideology as symptom? Is not the move to Pascal simply another version of Marx's point about exchange? For Žižek, the crucial point not to be overlooked is that the Althusserian formulation implies "the paradoxical status of a *belief before belief*: by following a custom, the subject believes without knowing it, so that the final conversion is merely a formal act by means of which we recognize what we have already believed."<sup>70</sup> Here we return to the "double illusion" of ideology: The belief that precedes belief—that is, the belief embodied in the subject's material practices—is precisely the second illusion of which Žižek writes.

All of this establishes a relationship between knowledge and action significantly different from the one seen in the conception of ideology as symptom. For Althusser, knowledge simply names the individual's response to ideology embodied in material practices (that is, action), and as such it is more or less beside the point. Knowledge is, at best, part of the "formal act" that marks the recognition of an already existing state. Whereas Marx points to the formal relation between knowledge and non-knowledge as the field of change (i.e., it is the center of dissolving the symptom), Althusser places full emphasis on the role of the structure of belief in ideology. For Althusser, it is not content

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<sup>70</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 39.

that effects ideology but rather the structure of material practices (which may be inhabited by any range of content) that is ideological.<sup>71</sup>

The problem with this formulation is that it cannot explain the distinction between individuals who maintain some internal distance from their actions (e.g., Žižek's skinhead) and those who embrace their actions directly, without any distance. In Althusser's formulation, common material practices *should* lead to common beliefs (i.e., common ideological subjectification), but this is clearly not always the case. After all, Žižek's skinhead is only notable as an *exception* to the "normal" skinhead, who directly identifies with his racism. Thus, Althusser is no better prepared than Marx to understand the problem of the landlord and the skinhead.

### **Ideology as Cynicism**

The third antecedent that Žižek engages is Peter Sloterdijk. Unlike Marx or Althusser, Sloterdijk does not offer a complete theory or a succinct formula of ideology, and as a consequence, Žižek's approach to Sloterdijk takes a somewhat different form than his treatment of the other two figures. However, Sloterdijk does offer an important concept—"cynicism"—that serves as both an impetus for Žižek's theoretical contribution *and* a marker of the limits of that contribution as it is formulated in *The Sublime Object*.

The text which Žižek takes as his theoretical inspiration is Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason*.<sup>72</sup> In this *Critique*, Sloterdijk analyzes the impotence of traditional ideology

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<sup>71</sup> The Althusserian "hail" is indicative of this: The content of the hail is irrelevant, as is the subject's reaction to it. *Any* reaction to the hail interpellates the individual as a subject.

<sup>72</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred, *Theory and History of Literature* 40 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

critique in an era of “universal, diffuse cynicism.”<sup>73</sup> According to Sloterdijk, such cynicism should be distinguished from the philosophical tradition of cynicism (e.g., Diogenes), which Sloterdijk instead designates by the term *kynicism*.<sup>74</sup> In contrast to *kynicism*, cynicism is defined as “*enlightened false consciousness*.”<sup>75</sup> It is precisely the position embodied by the landlord and the skinhead, a position in which knowledge is completely disconnected from action. Thus, Sloterdijk’s contribution is twofold: First, he recognizes that such a split between knowledge and action exists (naming it cynicism); and he acknowledges that this split undermines traditional modes of critique, since such modes implicitly assume a Utopian correspondence of speech and motivation—a “free dialogue of those who, under no external compulsion, are interested in knowledge.”<sup>76</sup> This leads Sloterdijk to revise Marx’s formula of “*Sie wissen das nicht...*”: In the contemporary era, “they *know* what they are doing, *but they do it*.”<sup>77</sup>

Yet for all his analysis, Sloterdijk does not ask what sustains cynicism; his inquiry is more focused on delineating cynicism’s historical development as a widespread ideological form. The identification of cynicism as an ideological problem is a credit to Sloterdijk, but for the solution to the problem of cynicism, it is necessary to turn from Sloterdijk’s *Critique* to Žižek. However, Žižek does not *immediately* arrive at a convincing response to the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 3–4. Sloterdijk is, of course, stressing cynicism’s etymological roots in κυνισμός.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 5 (emphasis in original).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 5 (emphasis added).

problem outlined by Sloterdijk. In *The Sublime Object*, Žižek's response is basically Althusserian; Žižek simply sees cynicism as

just one way—one of many ways—to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*.<sup>78</sup>

For Žižek, at least at this point in his overall intellectual project, cynicism is problematic but not particularly unusual. It is just one more instantiation of the ideological edifice. But, as with Sloterdijk, this description of cynicism is hardly a remedy to its existence. In this way, Žižek remains open to the same criticism as Althusser: How is it that cynicism itself comes about? What differentiates the cynical subjective position from an “authentic” one?

Nevertheless, cynicism is important because it marks Žižek's first engagement with the problem, even if his first response is insufficient. But Žižek's second and more theoretically robust response appears in his second English-language book, *For They Know Not What They Do*. This book, conceived by Žižek as a supplement and correction to *The Sublime Object*, offers an important revision of Žižek's understanding of cynicism: Cynicism is reinterpreted through the psychoanalytic concept of *perversion*.

### **From Cynicism to Perversion**

Perversion, as a psychoanalytic concept, began with a relatively conservative definition: In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud equates perversion to all behaviors falling outside normative heterosexuality.<sup>79</sup> However, this definitional stress on *normativity* is itself somewhat problematic, since Freud's own theoretical edifice leads him

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<sup>78</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 30 (emphasis in original).

<sup>79</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 15.

to assert that perversions “are rarely absent from the sexual life of healthy people, and are judged by them no differently from other intimate events.”<sup>80</sup> In Freud’s eyes, there is no “normal” per se; human sexuality’s defining characteristic is that it lacks a “natural” order. Human sexuality is always excessive and perverse.<sup>81</sup>

Lacan moves past this tension in Freud’s theory by defining perversion in structuralist terms:

[Perversion] is not simply an aberration in relation to social criteria, an anomaly contrary to good morals, although this register is not absent, nor is it an atypicality according to natural criteria, namely that it more or less derogates from the reproductive finality of sexual union. *It is something else in its very structure.*<sup>82</sup>

As Dylan Evans points out, this redefinition of perversion as a structure means that

while there are certain sexual acts which are closely associated with perverse structures, it is also possible that a perverse subject may never actually engage in such acts. [...] A perverse structure remains perverse even when the acts associated with it are socially approved.<sup>83</sup>

Of course, all of this raises the question: If perversion is not to be associated with a particular class of behaviors, and is instead a structure, what exactly does this structure look like? According to Lacan, the structure of perversion hinges on *disavowal*.<sup>84</sup> This term

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>81</sup> Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 141.

<sup>82</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991), 221 (emphasis added).

<sup>83</sup> Evans, *Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 141.

<sup>84</sup> As Bruce Fink notes, “the three main diagnostic categories adopted by Lacan are *structural* categories based on three fundamentally different mechanisms”: for neurosis, repression; for perversion, disavowal; and for psychosis, foreclosure. See Bruce Fink, *A*

(*Verleugnung* in Freud's original lexicon) is first elaborated in Freud's 1927 essay on fetishism,<sup>85</sup> but Lacan generalizes it beyond this particular class of perversions to perversion as such: The disavowal found in fetishism is "the perversion of perversions" ("*la perversion des perversions*").<sup>86</sup> In clinical terms, the structure of perversion is one in which the subject *disavows* his or her knowledge that the mother lacks the phallus—a relation to knowledge quite distinct from *repression*, another psychoanalytic structure. In repression, the subject has no conscious access to the knowledge that is repressed. By contrast, in perversion, the knowledge is conscious, but held at a distance through the mechanism of disavowal. All of this is, of course, quite clinical, but it is the structure of disavowal in fetishism that leads from the clinical domain to the broader application of the concept of perversion that is found in Žižek's work. The connection between the two lies in an essay by Octave Mannoni, a Lacanian psychoanalyst, which Žižek takes as his theoretical foundation in *For They Know Not's* revised attempt to address the problem of cynicism.<sup>87</sup>

Mannoni's essay centers on "the psychological problems thrown up by beliefs."<sup>88</sup> In particular, he is interested in the kinds of beliefs that seem to enact a split between knowledge and action—for example, "a person watching a magician perform does not for

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*Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 76.

<sup>85</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud.*, vol. 21 (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 147–157.

<sup>86</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre IV: La Relation d'Objet, 1956–57*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 192–194.

<sup>87</sup> Mannoni, "I Know Well, but All the Same..."

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

an instant believe that his tricks are magic, yet she insists that the illusion be ‘perfect.’”<sup>89</sup> In such a scenario, Mannoni wryly notes, “We would be hard put to say who is supposed to be fooled.”<sup>90</sup> Similar kinds of beliefs, Mannoni points out, appear regularly in the course of psychoanalytic treatment, and other examples can be found in literature—Mannoni cites Talayesva’s *Sun Chief* and Casanova’s *History of My Life*.<sup>91</sup> The commonality of such beliefs, Mannoni claims, is that they may all be distilled into a single formula of disavowal: I know well *x*, but all the same *y*. Indeed, it is easy to see how this formula fits with any number of situations—for example, “I know well that horoscopes are rubbish, but all the same I feel uneasy if mine predicts misfortune.” Such a formula can even be applied to Žižek’s hypothetical skinhead: “I know well that my racism results from social factors, but all the same I embrace it as if it did not.”

Yet on the face of it, this formula of perverse disavowal appears simply to be another name for the cynical phenomenon: It marks a split between knowledge and action, a split in which the subject is perfectly knowledgeable of and even oriented against (on the level of knowledge) their actions, but nevertheless continues in the same material practice. However, Mannoni’s understanding of disavowal offers one element that is absent from Sloterdijk’s analysis of cynicism: With Mannoni, *disavowal is consistently represented in the form of an enunciation*—and more often than not, this enunciation takes the form of a direct quotation (e.g., “I know well, but all the same...”). Even when Žižek adapts Mannoni’s work

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Don C. Talayesva, *Sun Chief: The Autobiography of a Hopi Indian*, ed. Leo W. Simmons (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942); and Giacomo Casanova, *History of My Life*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

to the analysis of ideology, representations of disavowal through quotation abound: “I know that it is so, but nevertheless I can’t believe it”;<sup>92</sup> “I know that there is no God, but nevertheless...”;<sup>93</sup> “I know that the verdict which condemned me to death is faulty, but nevertheless we must respect the form of the Law as such...”<sup>94</sup>

So what then is the significance of the representation of perverse disavowal through enunciation? Is it simply convenience, or perhaps literary flourish—or does it indicate some deeper theoretical point? To answer this question, it is necessary to return for a moment to the exteriority of belief, theorized by Pascal, Lacan, Althusser and Žižek: If belief is radically exterior to the subject—if it is embodied in material practices, rituals, and so on—then the perverse position, to register itself as a genuine belief, *must be made an object*. In other words, the perverse position must entail some process of inscribing the split between knowledge and action within the side of action itself. Mannoni’s representation of disavowal by enunciation indicates that it is the process of *articulating* disavowal that serves as the ritual that cements perversion as an *objective* subject position. Thus, the perverse subject position can be maintained only insofar as the subject is able to articulate their disavowal—that is, to make their disavowal an object outside of themselves. Rollins’ landlord can only maintain his greed and his empathy without conflict as long as he articulates his concern to the priest. Likewise, Žižek’s skinhead can only maintain his distance from his violence by the act of explaining it. Without such

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<sup>92</sup> Žižek, *For They Know Not*, 241.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

enunciation, these subjects simply *are* their actions, without any distancing or objectification.

### The Rhetoric of the Analyst

With the structure of perversion elucidated, it is possible to return to rhetoric. The problem of the split between knowledge and action amounts to an inability to guarantee that the persuasive presentation of content (i.e., on the level of knowledge) will actually influence an audience on the level of action. But if the mechanism of this split is understood as being linked to enunciation, the focus of rhetoric shifts: Rather than centering exclusively on the content and presentation of the argument, rhetorical weight must be given to the ways in which the audience is able to articulate their disavowal within the particular communicative context. Thus, it follows that effective persuasion entails the effective management of the audience's ability to respond.

But how does all of this play out in Žižek's relation to rhetoric? That is, how does this understanding of perversion influence his rhetorical procedure? A hint of an answer can be found in an anecdote Žižek tells (in the third person) of his own pedagogical practice:

In order to block the students' customary reaction at the exams, which consists in pretending that it is *really just this* question which has unpleasantly surprised them, struck them on their weak point, [Žižek] allowed them to *ask themselves a question* they had to answer—the apparent liberalism had of course an underhand repressive motive: he wanted thus to bar the possibility of the students' flight—they had to stay for their own question; here there is no excuse left for them.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 275 n. 31 (emphasis in original). Within the wider context of his oeuvre, Žižek's use of the third person here seems out of place. However, Žižek *consistently* uses the third person throughout *For They Know Not*, so it is likely that this particular formulation indicates little more than the presence of an editorial hand.

The essential point of this passage is that the communicative structure of the exam preempts any perverse positioning. By virtue of the “rules” that Žižek establishes, the students are not able to distance themselves from their actions; they *must* bear the responsibility for their own exam responses, without caveat.

Furthermore, this pedagogical procedure is not isolated from Žižek’s core theoretical commitments. It is, in fact, a broader application of the same dynamic cultivated in clinical psychoanalytic practice, which can be briefly summarized as follows:

The beginning, or ‘point of entry into the analytic situation’, is a contract, or ‘pact’, between analyst and analysand which includes the analysand’s agreement to abide by the fundamental rule [i.e., to say whatever comes into their mind]. Following the initial consultation, a series of face-to-face preliminary interviews take place. [...] After the preliminary interviews, the treatment is no longer conducted face to face, but with the analysand reclining on a couch while the analyst sits behind him, out of the analysand’s field of vision (the couch is not used in the treatment of psychotic patients). As he free associates, the analysand works through the signifiers that have determined him in his history, and is driven by the very process of speech itself to articulate something of his desire.<sup>96</sup>

It is important to note that in psychoanalytic treatment, “the analysand is not ‘analysed’ by the analyst; it is the analysand who analyses, and the task of the analyst is to help him to analyse well.”<sup>97</sup> A central tension of analysis, then, is the analyst’s refusal to do the work of interpretation on behalf of the analysand.<sup>98</sup> To interpret *for* the analysand would allow the analysand to avoid bearing the weight and responsibility of his or her own free association:

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<sup>96</sup> Evans, *Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 217.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>98</sup> Bruce Fink, perhaps the most influential clinical practitioner of Lacanian analysis in the English-speaking world (and the translator of Lacan’s *Écrits*), echoes this sentiment when he writes of his own understanding of analysis: “It always seemed to me that analysis was not so much a matter of technique but of the kind of work the analyst inspires the analysand to do in the course of analysis.” Bruce Fink, *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique: A Lacanian Approach for Practitioners* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007), ix.

The analysand could simply ignore the interpretation's meaning as the *analyst's* mistaken construction. In this way, the analytic situation, from the point of view of the analyst, constitutes a curious kind of persuasion: The analyst has no "answer" to impress on the analysand, and yet the analysand must be persuaded of *this fact* (i.e., the lack of content). This manner of persuasion does *not* depend on the transmission of content. Instead, it all hinges on the initial pact between analyst and analysand, the contract in which both parties agree upon what will "count" as speech within the context of analysis (i.e., with analysis, as opposed to everyday interactions, *everything* counts), just as Žižek's pedagogical example hinges on what will "count" as an exam answer.

However, there is a tension at work here. The analyst must keep the analysand within analysis long enough to come to accept that the analyst has no special knowledge of the analysand, but the analyst cannot simply explain this need outright, since this would return analysis to the level of content, and the analysand would be able to shift the work of analysis back onto the analyst. In other words, the analyst must balance between the overinvestment of the analysand in the analyst (i.e., allowing the analysand to avoid the work of analysis) and no investment at all (i.e., the analysand has no reason to come to analytic sessions). In clinical terms, this is why the phenomenon of *transference* is essential to analysis: The analysand sees the analyst as a "subject supposed to know"<sup>99</sup>—a figure with some hidden knowledge of the analysand—and it is the duty of the analyst to occupy

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<sup>99</sup> For Freud, transference is a phenomenon in which the analysand's feelings for a particular figure (e.g., the analysand's father) are redirected toward the analyst. But Lacan, in a move similar to his redefinition of perversion, redefines transference in structuralist terms: Lacanian transference is a specific set of relationships between the subject, the Other (i.e., the "subject supposed to know"), and knowledge. For an overview of the subject supposed to know, see Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1964*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998), 230–243.

this *position* without making use of it (i.e., without trying to persuade the analysand of a specific content).<sup>100</sup> By occupying the formal position of the subject supposed to know, the analyst is able to keep the analysand within the analytic setting long enough for the true work of analysis to be done.<sup>101</sup>

### **Žižek's Rhetoric**

Just as the analyst must navigate between the extremes of the analysand's overinvestment and no investment at all, other rhetorical responses to perversion must maintain a similar balance. In rhetorical contexts beyond psychotherapy, the effective management of perverse responses cannot resort to disallowing perversion *completely*. Such a procedure breaks the audience's investment in the speaker, and this frees the audience from any need to register (i.e., articulate) their perversion. This is similar to the way in which an analysand, if he has no investment in the analyst as a subject supposed to know, will have no cause to continue coming to analytic sessions. Yet on the other hand, no management of responses at all will easily allow perverse positioning, just as an analyst who tries to engage analysis on the level of content necessarily allows the analysand to escape the work of analysis. Much like analysis, the balance of persuasion involves a tension between too much control and too little.

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<sup>100</sup> For an example of the exploitation of the position of the subject supposed to know, see Joshua Gunn's reading of the rhetoric of John Edwards, a television psychic, in Gunn, "Refitting Fantasy."

<sup>101</sup> Notably, there is a wide range of techniques used in analysis to reinforce this dynamic. Payment to the analyst is one such technique: By insisting on compensation, the analyst maintains a position of value relative to the analysand. "I paid her," the analysand's logic goes, "so surely she must have *something* of value to me!" For a survey of the issue of payment in contemporary analysis, see William G. Herron and Sheila Rouslin Welt, *Money Matters: The Fee in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Guilford Press, 1992).

Of course, rarely does a speaker have the same measure of control over their communication—over what “counts”—as does an analyst conducting a therapeutic session, or an instructor administering an exam. At first glance, this seems to be a pragmatic limit to the understanding of rhetoric elaborated in this chapter. Even if the solution to the problem of perversion lies in adopting the analytic structure (i.e., the structural relationship between analyst and analysand), how can this be maintained outside of clinical practice? The answer can be found by turning to Žižek’s own rhetoric, and by focusing on two elements of it: his humor and his self-contradiction.

Žižek’s employment of (often vulgar) humor in his writing is well-known, and the jokes that pepper his books are an essential element of his style. But these seemingly non-serious elements, approached from a framework of psychoanalytic therapy in which Žižek plays analyst to his audience of analysands, take on a very serious tone: They are part and parcel of Žižek’s attempt to initiate transference, to coax his audience into an analytic relation. This happens on two levels: First, there is the spontaneous appeal of reading his jokes (or of witnessing Žižek give *JAC* a hard time). Put simply, Žižek is entertaining, and this aspect of entertainment serves as an obvious but nevertheless enjoyable lure for his readers. But these entertaining jokes come, of course, from a philosopher, and this leads to the second level: Even as Žižek’s readers enjoy his humor, his status as a philosopher drives readers to “look behind” the jokes, to draw some deeper meaning out of them. In other words, the jokes themselves, held in tension with Žižek’s (supposed) status as a serious thinker, leads readers to suspect that there’s some deeper purpose to Žižek’s use of jokes—and in an unexpected sense, there is, because this very move places Žižek in the position,

relative to his readers, of the subject supposed to know. Thus, Žižek's humor initiates a transferential relationship.

But, as noted above, the analytic situation is not simply one in which there is transference.<sup>102</sup> Analysis involves the additional element of the analyst's refusal to provide the analysand answers from the position of the subject supposed to know. So even if Žižek can entice his readers into transference via his use of jokes, how can he avoid actually offering some "real meaning" behind these jokes? That is to say, how can he avoid the level of *content*? The solution to this problem comes in the form of what is usually considered a criticism of his work: points of self-contradiction. Of course, Žižek is not a static thinker, and a number of authors (including Žižek himself) have attested to conceptual shifts from his early work to his more recent writing.<sup>103</sup> But even within a single book, Žižek can be seen seemingly to contradict himself. For example, in the introduction to one book, he derides one of his concepts as nothing more than a "bluff":

Some months before writing this, at an art round table, I was asked to comment on a painting I had seen there for the first time. I did not have *any* idea about it, so I engaged in a total bluff, which went on something like this: the frame of the painting in front of us is not its true frame; there is another, invisible, frame, implied by the structure of the painting, the frame that enframes our perception of the painting, and these two frames do not overlap—there is an invisible gap separating the two. [...] To my surprise, this brief intervention was a huge success, and many following participants referred to the dimension in-between-the-two-frames, elevating it into a term. This very success made me sad, really sad. What I encountered here was not

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<sup>102</sup> Lacan notes that "where there is love there is transference," which obviously extends the phenomenon of transference to a wide range of non-analytic relationships. See Lacan, *Seminar I*, 90.

<sup>103</sup> Žižek's early endorsement (in *The Sublime Object*) and later rejection (in *For They Know Not*) of liberal democracy is perhaps the most salient example of such a shift.

only the efficiency of a bluff, but a much more radical apathy at the very heart of today's Cultural Studies.<sup>104</sup>

However, in the last chapter of the same book, Žižek employs this same concept in a seemingly serious manner, without any reference to its origin in an academic “bluff”:

One of the minimal definitions of a modernist painting concerns the function of its frame. The frame of the painting in front of us is not its true frame; there is another, invisible, frame, the frame implied by the structure of the painting, the frame that enframes our perception of the painting, and these two frames by definition never overlap—there is an invisible gap separating them.<sup>105</sup>

At first glance, this tension between cynicism and seriousness cannot help but be read as an embarrassing moment of compositional self-contradiction. But in a later text, in what is perhaps his most explicit consideration of his own rhetoric, Žižek explains that this contradiction is itself a *performative* gesture, one that reiterates the concern for disavowed belief (i.e., perversion) that I have stressed throughout this chapter:

What distressed me was how even some of my friends and followers missed the point—most of those who noticed this repetition read it either as a self-parodic indication of how I do not take my own theories seriously, or as a sign of my growing senility (assuming I had simply forgotten by the end of the book that I had mocked the very same notion in the introduction). Was it really so difficult to perceive how my procedure here perfectly illustrated the point I was (and am) repeatedly trying to make apropos of today's predominant attitude of cynicism and of not-taking-oneself-seriously? Even when a subject mocks a certain belief, this in no way undermines the belief's symbolic efficacy—the belief often continues to determine the subject's activity.<sup>106</sup>

This case of the “two frames” is a pointed example of how Žižek attempts to maintain the *position* of the subject supposed to know, without formulating content. By establishing his argument at the level of a performative contradiction, rather than at the level of explicit

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<sup>104</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 5–6.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>106</sup> Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 87.

content, Žižek defers the moment of total readerly comprehension. All of this allows Žižek to avoid drawing his readers into the position of “I know, but nevertheless...”; the “knowing” is itself hinged on a performative uncertainty.<sup>107</sup>

With this in mind, both Žižek’s relation to rhetoric and the extent to which this relation is influenced by psychoanalysis become a bit clearer. At the base of Žižek’s dismissal of rhetoric (e.g., the aforementioned *JAC* exchange) are his misgivings, not about rhetoric in general, but about the kinds of rhetoric that may engender an intellectual commitment that is divorced from action. Žižek identifies this problem as perversion, and implicitly offers a rhetorical solution, drawn from clinical psychoanalysis: the careful management of the audience’s ability to respond in a perverse fashion. It is therefore clear, *contra* Nealon, that rhetoric is far more than “something that’s merely added to the rock of the Žižekian real, the argument.”<sup>108</sup> For Žižek, the trouble with the kinds of rhetoric that ignore the problem of perversion is, paradoxically, that they are not rhetorical *enough*. By limiting themselves to the rhetorical force of content and presentation, these approaches miss the rhetorical importance of the management of audience responses in a given communicative instance—a management that, far from offering a one-size-fits-all rhetorical diagnosis, necessarily entails a dynamic similar to analytic transference.

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<sup>107</sup> Notably, much of the criticism of Žižek completely ignores this performative aspect, and focuses solely on the surface level. Critics claim, for example, that Žižek has no real theoretical point or substance, that he is self-contradictory, that he is overly dismissive of other philosophers, and so on. These critiques most certainly do *not* follow the perverse form of “Žižek has some good points, but nevertheless...”; they are outright rejections rather than disavowals. In other words, they are *preemptive* attacks, a discounting that happens a point *before* the establishment of a transference relationship—and thus they miss the thrust of his argument entirely.

<sup>108</sup> Nealon, “The Cash Value of Paradox,” 599.

Yet even if the problem of perversion has important implications for Žižek's treatment of rhetoric, the identification of this problem—and of Žižek's psychoanalytic solution to it—says little about how perversion might be perpetuated or restricted by other individuals in other contexts. It also avoids the broader object of this thesis, non-discursive rhetoric, insofar as Žižek's adoption of psychoanalytic practice to rhetoric seems to hinge on discursive processes (e.g., requiring his students to ask themselves an question). Perversion may establish the importance and form of rhetoric for Žižek, but more work is required to show the ways in which a rhetoric based on psychoanalytic practice might lead beyond discourse. In the following chapter, I turn to this problem.

## CHAPTER TWO: MATERIALITY

### **The Importance of the Couch**

Thus far, I have argued that Žižek's rhetoric, in response to the problem of perversion, is modeled on the structure of clinical psychoanalytic practice. This is apparent in Žižek's attempt to initiate transference through his use of humor, and in his use of self-contradiction at the level of content to performatively move his readers into a position that precludes content-oriented certainty. Yet even as all of this demonstrates the *potential* for psychoanalytically-inspired rhetoric outside the bounds of clinical analysis, it is not apparent that such an understanding of rhetoric has much use beyond explicating Žižek. In other words, even if Žižek does formulate a robust rhetorical response to the problem of perversion, it is not clear that this is a useful point of departure for understanding forms of discourse other than Žižek's own.

The way past this impasse begins with the observation that although Žižek's rules and contradictions emulate analytic practice, rules and contradictions do not encompass the *entirety* of such practice. Take, for example, the placement of the couch in analysis. As Evans writes:

After the preliminary interviews, the treatment is no longer conducted face to face, but with the analysand reclining on a couch while the analyst sits behind him, out of the analysand's field of vision (the couch is not used in the treatment of psychotic patients).<sup>109</sup>

The purpose of this arrangement is obvious enough. By sitting outside the analysand's sight, the analyst limits the amount of feedback that the analysand receives from the analyst, and thus makes easier the analyst's task of refusing to interpret or to signal meaning as the subject supposed to know. But unlike other elements used by the analyst to

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<sup>109</sup> Evans, *Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 217.

manage the analysand's communication (e.g., the fundamental rule), the position of the couch is not a discursive matter. There is no *representation* here, no use of language to limit or incite other language—only the brute, material positioning of the couch.

It is this extension of communicative control, in a rhetorical sense, to a material level—a level of things, not signs—that offers the means to expand Žižek's understanding of rhetoric to contexts beyond clinical analysis and philosophical writing. The task of this chapter is to elucidate exactly how this might work: If a key element of psychoanalytic practice is material, and if Žižek's approach to rhetoric is an adoption of psychoanalysis to other rhetorical contexts, then what role does the material play in the understanding of rhetoric elaborated in the last chapter? To answer these questions, I first review the treatment of the material within the larger arena of rhetorical studies, and clarify what "material" has meant to whom. With this background established, I then turn to psychoanalytic rhetorical theorists, and explore what this branch of scholarship might contribute to understanding rhetoric and the material. Finally, I situate Žižek's own understanding of the material in the midst of all of this, first by differentiating between his treatment of subjectivity and subjectification, and second by connecting this distinction to the understanding of rhetoric developed in the previous chapter.

### **Rhetorical Materialism and Rhetoric's Materiality**

Before diving into the literature on rhetoric and the material, it is necessary to offer one terminological caveat. In their introduction to *Rhetoric, Materiality, and Politics*, Barbara Biesecker and John Lucaites point to an important conceptual distinction in the literature on rhetoric and the material: the difference between *rhetorical materialism* and

*rhetoric's materiality*.<sup>110</sup> By the former, Biesecker and Lucaites designate a response to the “aestheticization of rhetoric”—that is, the focus on “ideal” forms and instances of rhetoric—that emphasizes rhetoric’s presence in everyday communication. In contrast, the latter is to be understood as yet a further response, spurred by the poststructural theory of the 1980s and 1990s, to rhetorical materialism’s reliance on particular notions of subjectivity and communication.<sup>111</sup> As this periodization suggests, Biesecker and Lucaites attribute this distinction to the natural growth of the discipline—that is, as rhetorical materialism was exhausted theoretically, scholarship on rhetoric’s materiality stepped in to take its place. However, the development of this body of literature is not quite so simple. While it is true that important studies of rhetorical materialism and of rhetoric’s materiality are more or less associated with different eras, it is also possible to trace the presence of both concerns throughout the literature, so that the relation between rhetorical materialism and rhetoric’s materiality can be understood less as a shift from one to the other, and more as an ongoing, persistent tension between the two. In other words, by treating rhetorical materialism and rhetoric’s materiality in terms of chronological development, Biesecker and Lucaites elide the fact that the literature on rhetoric and the material has been troubled by terminological and conceptual confusion from the beginning. Under the single heading of “material,” rhetorical scholars have actually addressed two distinct topics: *materialism* (a philosophical and methodological orientation) and *materiality* (an ontological status or property of objects). And though materialism and

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<sup>110</sup> Barbara A. Biesecker and John Louis Lucaites, “Introduction,” in *Rhetoric, Materiality, and Politics*, ed. Barbara A. Biesecker and John Louis Lucaites, *Frontiers in Political Communication* 13 (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 1–16.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–4.

materiality are certainly conceptually related, rhetorical scholarship has all too often ignored the distinction between the two, so that an author responding to an essay on materiality, for example, might treat the subject entirely within the bounds of materialism. This is not to say that all scholarship on rhetorical materialism avoids the question of rhetoric's materiality, or that work on rhetoric's materiality never speaks to rhetorical materialism. To the contrary, the two are so closely linked conceptually that a theory of one necessarily implies a theory of the other. But the extent to which such a theory is *implied*, rather than formulated explicitly, means that conceptual differences concerning materiality do not necessarily line up with differences concerning materialism. Indeed, opposing sides of scholarly debates over the nature of materialism may be in total agreement about the nature of materiality, and vice versa.

Consequently, the literature on rhetoric and the material is best approached not from a strictly chronological account of various debates—as Biesecker and Lucaites would have it—but rather from a schema of shared conceptualizations. And since the question of this chapter hinges on materiality (i.e., the rhetorical status of the couch's material presence in analysis) and not materialism, the categorizations employed in this chapter's sketch of the literature are derived from conceptualizations of materiality. Necessarily, this approach may occult points of the literature that may be important to other contexts and to other ends. It does, however, allow the literature to be divided into three groups, each distinguished by a specific conception of materiality: materiality as extra-discourse, materiality as rhetoricality, and materiality as infrastructure.

### Materiality as Extra-discourse

The first conception of materiality emerges from the first substantial consideration of the material within rhetorical studies, Michael Calvin McGee's "A Materialist's Conception of Rhetoric."<sup>112</sup> In this seminal essay, McGee attacks what he sees as the discipline's idealist tendencies: For McGee, the discipline of rhetoric has become a kind of history of ideas—an inquiry into the intellectual progression from Isocrates to Aristotle to Quintilian, and so on. Rhetoricians have forgotten, claims McGee, that these theories and categorizations of rhetoric did not come from timeless, Platonic forms, but rather from the observation of discourse in everyday life (e.g., for Aristotle, the context of classical Greece). In other words, the discipline of rhetoric, while purporting to offer instruction in how to effectively persuade, has overlooked the actual, quotidian practice of rhetoric. For McGee, "what has been called 'rhetorical theory' [...] is not theory at all, but a set of technical, prescriptive principles which inform the practitioner while, paradoxically, remaining largely innocent of practice."<sup>113</sup>

For the solution to this problem, McGee draws inspiration from Marx and Engel's assertion of materialism against the idealism that dominated the philosophy of their time. Such an approach starts not "from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh," but rather

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<sup>112</sup> Michael Calvin McGee, "A Materialist's Conception of Rhetoric," in *Explorations in Rhetoric: Studies in Honor of Douglas Ehninger*, ed. Ray E McKerrow (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, and Co., 1982), 23–48.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

“from real, active men” and “their real life-process.”<sup>114</sup> Likewise, McGee asserts that, for rhetoric, “practice ‘comes first,’ that the essential mission of rhetorical theory is not to *prescribe* technique but formally to account for what seems to be an essential part of the human social condition.”<sup>115</sup> Notably, such a procedure involves a reconceptualization of rhetoric as an object of study rather than a body of principles or an intellectual apparatus.<sup>116</sup> Rhetoric, for McGee, is a pervasive social force, at work in all levels of human affairs—from the grandest political speeches to the smallest chatter between friends—and the task of rhetoric as a discipline is to study all of these.

Of course, all of this focuses on materialism as a philosophical orientation—on the question of where rhetorical theory should begin—rather than addressing the question of *what* the “material” is for a materialist. In other words, McGee seems to address materialism without touching on materiality. And with the grounds of conflict established along the division between idealism and materialism, it seems that McGee’s “materialist conception” is little more than a call to examine different texts: Rhetoric is at work in everyday life, and *all* of the diverse texts that constitute ordinary, everyday rhetoric deserve attention. In this sense, it seems that McGee’s materialism has little to do with the nature of rhetoric as an object, as long as rhetoric *is* an object.

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<sup>114</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 47.

<sup>115</sup> McGee, “A Materialist’s Conception,” 24 (emphasis in original).

<sup>116</sup> Indeed, many of the disagreements between McGee and the “idealists” seem to hinge less on the philosophical implications of idealism versus materialism and more on the delineations of objects of study that these positions imply. For an overview of this conflict, see Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, “Object and Method in Rhetorical Criticism: From Wichelns to Leff and McGee,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54, no. 3 (1990): 290–316, doi:10.1080/10570319009374344.

But even as McGee explicitly addresses questions of materialism, he implicitly develops an understanding of rhetoric's materiality. McGee's attempt "to think of rhetoric as an *object*," is tied to the claim that this object is "as material and as omnipresent as air and water"—a claim that concerns materiality, not materialism.<sup>117</sup> Of course, McGee does not mean to say rhetoric is a *physical* object in the same way that a stone is a physical object.<sup>118</sup> To the contrary, McGee's strange attachment of "omnipresent" to air and water—objects that are clearly *not* omnipresent in the physical universe—suggests the orientation of this claim: Just like air and water, rhetoric is omnipresent with respect to *human existence*. Thus, rhetoric-as-object is "'material' by measure of human *experiencing* of it," and we are faced with its materiality "because of its pragmatic *presence*, our inability to safely ignore it at the moment of its impact."<sup>119</sup> To return to the comparison of the stone: For McGee, the materiality of rhetoric lies in the fact that, just as one can stumble over a stone, one can "trip" over rhetoric.

Two points follow from this conception of materiality. First, in an almost paradoxical fashion, McGee's blurring of the boundary between stone-stumbles and rhetoric-trips ends up relying on a sharp division between the world of signifiers and the world of things. That is to say, the claim that rhetoric is material by virtue of its pragmatic presence presupposes an unambiguously material realm—an arena where, when words "count," they register as effects. This division becomes especially clear in a later essay by McGee, in which he specifies the nature of action as distinct from speech:

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<sup>117</sup> McGee, "A Materialist's Conception," 26.

<sup>118</sup> Only a few pages later, McGee notes that "it is only the residue of rhetoric [i.e., rhetoric preserved in some recording medium] one can hold like a rock." *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.* (emphasis in original).

*Action* is doing-to the world, the chopping of trees, their shaping for use, and the being-within an environment human beings have altered. There is a tremendous gulf between action and discourse, the distance between murder, for example, and the “symbolic killing” of name-calling. [...] Speech will not fell a tree, and one cannot write a house to dwell in.<sup>120</sup>

The second point worth noting is that this division implies a specific relation to temporality. As McGee notes, “Discursive action [...] always stands in anticipation of its consequences, an act that requires additional acts before one is clear that it ever was more than ‘mere talk.’”<sup>121</sup> In other words, if rhetoric is material in terms of its pragmatic presence, in terms of its effects on some separate material realm, then the materiality of rhetoric is always a *retroactive* materiality. The material effect of a given discourse cannot be predicted prior to its enunciation. And furthermore, since materiality emerges after the fact, there is in theory no temporal limit on the potential for “mere talk” to transform into rhetoric. An “ineffectual” speech, for example, may become years later a rallying point for some social movement, and by virtue of this delayed response, finally register its materiality.

Furthermore, even though McGee’s understanding of materiality tends to take a broadly dualistic form—that is, all material counts equally in its opposition to “mere talk”—the same basic conception of materiality offers room for variation. For example, Dana Cloud, a former student of McGee, draws on McGee’s initial materialist project, but

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<sup>120</sup> Michael Calvin McGee, “Against Transcendentalism: Prologue to a Functional Theory of Communicative Praxis,” in *Form, Genre, and the Study of Political Discourse*, ed. Herbert W. Simons and Aram A. Aghazarian, *Studies in Rhetoric/Communication* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1986), 122 (emphasis in original).

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

modifies it through a more explicit connection to Marxism.<sup>122</sup> For Cloud, unlike McGee, not all material is equal: The material that bounds rhetoric—that is, the material that *really* matters to rhetorical criticism—should ultimately be located in the mode of production of a given epoch, and in the way that this mode of production generates practices of exploitation. But even this more explicitly Marxist formulation, with its insistence on the continued relevance of the base to analyses of superstructure, relies on an extra-discursive materiality. When Cloud, in a moment of scathing polemic, writes that “if a bomb falls on civilians in Baghdad, and a critic is not present to see it, the bomb still did, in reality, fall,” Cloud has no need to validate the bomb’s materiality through some connection to political or economic conditions.<sup>123</sup> The opposition of the bomb to “mere talk” is enough. Even if Cloud’s own particular understanding of materialism parts ways with McGee’s, both rely on a common conception of materiality as *outside* of discourse, as a space where bombs really do fall on Baghdad.

### **Materiality as Rhetoricity**

It would, however, be remiss to consider either McGee or Cloud’s materialism apart from their respective conceptions of ideology, especially since it is the *severing* of the connection between the two that introduces a second understanding of materiality. For both McGee and Cloud, the connection of the material to ideology is signaled by the intellectual history of their materialism—that is, by their respective invocations of Marx

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<sup>122</sup> Dana L. Cloud, “The Materiality of Discourse as Oxymoron: A Challenge to Critical Rhetoric,” *Western Journal of Communication* 58, no. 3 (1994): 141–163, doi:10.1080/10570319409374493.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

and Engels. But this connection is much more than a simple attachment to a particular scholarly genealogy: For both McGee and Cloud, the impetus for developing a materialist conception of rhetoric is precisely the need to provide a ground from which rhetoric may be critiqued, a place from which to judge whether or not a given discourse is ideological obfuscation. The distinction between the world of signifiers and the world of things (e.g., between the world of the critic and the world where bombs fall on Baghdad) in McGee and Cloud's respective understandings of materiality is ultimately the foundation for their preferred form of political intervention—that is, the critique of ideology.

But the severing of ideology from this conception of materiality (i.e., extra-discursive materiality) transforms the relationship between materiality and rhetoric. Two important examples of this are Maurice Charland's constitutive rhetoric and Raymie McKerrow's critical rhetoric.<sup>124</sup> The former takes inspiration from McGee's early work on "the people," and from Edwin Black's concept of the second persona.<sup>125</sup> Charland appreciates the utility of both approaches for the critique of ideology—they offer a means of understanding how certain discourses function as ideology, as already agreed-upon—but notes that simply acknowledging "that audiences identify with a persona explains neither (1) the ontological status of those in the audiences before their identification, nor

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<sup>124</sup> Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Québécois*," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2 (1987): 133–150, doi:10.1080/00335638709383799; and Raymie E. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communication Monographs* 56, no. 2 (1989): 91–111, doi:10.1080/03637758909390253.

<sup>125</sup> Michael Calvin McGee, "In Search of 'The People': A Rhetorical Alternative," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61, no. 3 (1975): 235–249, doi:10.1080/00335637509383289; and Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56, no. 2 (1970): 109–119, doi:10.1080/00335637009382992.

(2) the ontological status of the persona, and the nature of identifying with it.”<sup>126</sup> In other words, even if the second persona, as a concept, points to a form of ideology, it stumbles on the problem of materiality: *What* is the audience, materially, before it is an audience?

To surmount this problem, Charland supplements Black’s second persona with Althusserian interpellation: Rhetoric not only shapes audiences; it shapes *subjects*, too. Specifically, subjects are produced “through a process of identification with a textual position,” and this identification is to be understood in an Althusserian (rather than Burkeian) sense, so that “the very moment of recognition of an address constitutes entry into a subject position.”<sup>127</sup> Thus, by introducing the category of the subject, Charland resolves his ontological problem: “Persons are subjects from the moment they acquire language”—that is, from the moment they are exposed to the world of rhetoric—and consequently, “audiences do not exist outside of rhetoric.”<sup>128</sup> Before identification, audiences are *not*.

The end result of this is a strange twist on McGee’s understanding of materiality. Like McGee, Charland stresses the pragmatic effects of rhetoric. But unlike McGee, Charland does not appeal to a separate, “material” space in which the pragmatic effects of rhetoric must register. This is not to say that Charland rejects the material side of McGee’s ontological dualism. Instead, Charland simply eliminates the category of “mere talk”—the converse of McGee’s extra-discursive materiality. For Charland, to the extent that all discourse participates in a kind of constitutive naming, *all* discourse has pragmatic effects.

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<sup>126</sup> Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric,” 137.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

All discourse is rhetorical; there is no “mere talk.” In other words, according to Charland, the persons who compose the audience obviously “exist” outside of the address of rhetoric, but since all discussion of such existence happens within language—and thus within rhetoric—extra-discursive materiality is effectively foreclosed.

This position is echoed in the work of Raymie McKerrow. In “Critical Rhetoric,” McKerrow simultaneously acknowledges the existence of something outside of discourse—for McKerrow, “what is constituted as ‘real’ is *not only so structured* through discursive practices”—and asserts that this extra-discursive element itself falls within the bounds of rhetoric, since “the discussion of [non-discursive] practices takes place in terms of discursive practices.”<sup>129</sup> In other words, the material is saved—rhetoric is still a matter of *effects*—by foreclosing materialism.

Yet this emphasis on the always-already embeddedness of subjects within language—insofar as the subject *is* a rhetorical construction—produces a somewhat paradoxical result. The barring of access to the material as some “other” realm—as a space apart from “mere talk”—has the effect of expanding rhetoric *as an object* to a kind of generalized “rhetoricity.”<sup>130</sup> In other words, the claim that all rhetoric is material (i.e., there exists no category of non-material “mere talk”) is tied to its inverse: *All material is rhetorical*. Here Charland and McKerrow’s shared conceptualization of materiality leads to a surprising point: By stressing the materiality of *all* rhetoric, they have produced a theory that, in the words of Dana Cloud, might be “more properly called the discursivity of the

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<sup>129</sup> McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric,” 103 (emphasis added).

<sup>130</sup> I borrow this term from John Bender and David E. Wellbery, “Rhetoricity: On the Modernist Return of Rhetoric,” in *The Ends of Rhetoric: History, Theory, Practice*, ed. John Bender and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 3–39.

material rather than the materiality of discourse.”<sup>131</sup> Taken to the extreme, this view of materiality leads to *de facto* idealism. Materiality and rhetoricality become one and the same.

### **Materiality as Infrastructure**

The third major approach to materiality and rhetoric attempts to navigate the space between the extremes of extra-discursive materiality and rhetoricality. Instead of seeing materiality as an ontologically separate sphere, or as an immanent feature of all rhetoric, this third strand of theory conceptualizes materiality as the conditions of possibility for rhetoric—a kind of rhetorical “infrastructure.” Put differently, the focus of this scholarship shifts from “What is material about rhetoric?” to “What kind of materiality is a prerequisite for rhetoric?”

However, different scholars emphasize different levels of rhetoric’s “infrastructure.” Ronald Greene’s “Another Materialist Rhetoric,” for example, draws on the work of Michel Foucault to theorize rhetoric in terms of “human technologies,” which

involve the calculated organization of human forces and capacities, together with other forces—natural, biological, mechanical—and artifacts—machines, weapons—into functioning networks of power.<sup>132</sup>

By thinking of rhetoric as a human technology—more specifically, as a technology of sign systems<sup>133</sup>—Greene shifts the focus from interpreting discourse (“What does this text

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<sup>131</sup> Cloud, “The Materiality of Discourse,” 153.

<sup>132</sup> Nikolas S. Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 8; quoted in Ronald Walter Greene, “Another Materialist Rhetoric,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 15, no. 1 (1998): 30, doi:10.1080/15295039809367031.

mean or do?") to analyzing the relation of discourse to other human technologies in a given context ("How does this fit within networks of power?"). With regard to materiality, the payoff for this focus on rhetoric's place in a network—rather than on its stand-alone presence or effects—is that Greene is not tied to any single conception of materiality. For Greene, "the materiality of rhetorical practices exists in how they occupy a position in different institutional structures."<sup>134</sup> In other words, different rhetorical practices require different material foundations (i.e., different relationships to other human technologies) for their continued existence. Particular rhetorical practices of broadcast television reporting, for example, rely on a host of other human technologies—e.g., the recording and transmission equipment of broadcast television (technologies of production), and the normative expectations for the reporter's behavior (technologies of power)—even as these rhetorical practices reciprocally reinforce their material supports.

A related strand of scholarship locates materiality not within networks of power, but rather in communication media. Kenneth Rufo's approach to materiality, for example, begins with the obvious but often unappreciated fact that "no communication can take place without some underlying material substrate"—that is, without a medium.<sup>135</sup> Yet the importance of media does not, for Rufo, mean that rhetoric can or should be reduced,

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<sup>133</sup> Foucault identifies four kinds of human technologies: technologies of production, technologies of sign systems, technologies of power, and technologies of the self. See Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 18.

<sup>134</sup> Greene, "Another Materialist Rhetoric," 35.

<sup>135</sup> Kenneth Rufo, "Shades of Derrida: Materiality as the Mediation of *Différance*," in *Rhetoric, Materiality, and Politics*, ed. Barbara A. Biesecker and John Louis Lucaites, *Frontiers in Political Communication* 13 (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 229.

without remainder, to specific communication media (e.g., the printing press, the Internet). Even as media “determine the possibilities of rhetorical construction”—that is, they offer material limits to what can and cannot be communicated—they “also change the social frame in which discursive acts are understood and disseminated.”<sup>136</sup> In other words, the materiality of a medium does not stand on its own; it is always accompanied by norms and expectations regarding *how* such a material substrate should function.<sup>137</sup> And since these norms and expectations are part and parcel of the functioning of a given medium, Rufo—via a detour through the conceptual apparatus of Jacques Derrida—ultimately suggests that the materiality of media draws critical attention to the ways in which every rhetorical instance contributes to an understanding of what “counts” as rhetoric:

Contemporary rhetorical practice [...] cannot be understood merely as a question of representation, a question resolvable by a critic’s close reading of a text or an artifact in order to understand that X signifies Y; rather, we have before us a question of *mimesis*, in which critics must engage the artifact as itself an argument for what qualifies as the appropriate theater for the dissemination of reality, and in doing so *a posse ad esse*, productive of a symbolic order as effect or affect.<sup>138</sup>

Whether located in networks of power, or in the structure of media and their accompanying logics, the common theme here is that materiality exists as that which makes rhetorical practice possible. And this materiality, far from being foreclosed into

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> A similar argument is advanced in Bruce Gronbeck’s study of the photography of Jacob Riis. For Gronbeck, photography as a medium is doubly material: both in the sense that it relies on specific technologies, and in the sense that it is premised on particular modes of presentation and contextualization. See Bruce E. Gronbeck, “Jacob Riis and the Doubly Material Rhetorics of His Politics,” in *Rhetoric, Materiality, and Politics*, ed. Barbara A. Biesecker and John Louis Lucaites, *Frontiers in Political Communication* 13 (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 131–160.

<sup>138</sup> Rufo, “Shades of Derrida,” 246.

some primordial pre-discursivity, is actually present and tangible in everyday communication—even if, as Rufo suggests, it escapes a logic of representation.

### **Materiality and Lacanian Rhetorical Scholarship**

The three approaches to materiality outlined above—materiality as extra-discourse, materiality as rhetoricality, and materiality as infrastructure—offer, in a kind of shorthand, the means of grasping materiality without regard to larger theoretical entanglements (e.g., one’s position on materialism). However, this conceptual mapping is not sufficient, on its own, to explicate the place of materiality for the conceptualization of rhetoric suggested by Žižek’s work. One additional step is required: Materiality must be situated in relation to contemporary Lacanian rhetorical scholarship. That is to say, before asking how Žižek’s approach to rhetoric fits with the three aforementioned conceptions of materiality, it is necessary to ask how Lacanian rhetorical scholarship, independent of Žižek, might add to the scholarly conversation initiated by McGee’s original call to consider the material. Yet this question itself necessitates one further detour, because materiality, for Lacanian rhetorical scholars, is thoroughly entangled not only with the scholarship initiated by McGee, but also with Lacan’s tripartite register theory. Consequently, a brief explication of this theory is required before the place of materiality within Lacanian rhetoric can be properly understood.

Lacan’s theory of subjectivity relies on three interrelated dimensions or “registers”: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. These three registers form the basic backdrop upon which much of Lacan’s theoretical apparatus is prefaced, insofar as they provide both a *de facto* ontology and a means of talking about specific elements of subjectivity without

necessitating recourse to terms such as “reality” or “language”—terms simultaneously too vague and too specific for Lacan’s purposes. It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that the definitions of these registers are, even for Lacan, decidedly fixed. As Lacan’s focus on particular registers changed throughout his long career, his explications of the registers also changed. Even setting aside the extent to which the English-language reception of Lacan has been shaped by the influence of the Ljubljana school, the evolution of Lacan’s own terminology has complicated the work of any scholarship grounded in Lacanian theory. Thus, any *definition* of the three registers necessarily masks the organic complexity inherent in Lacan’s work.

But definitions—however limiting, provisional, and potentially misleading—are required as a starting point, and so I begin with Adrian Johnston’s helpful entry on Lacan in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Of the Imaginary, Johnston writes:

Lacan tends to associate (albeit not exclusively) the Imaginary with the restricted spheres of consciousness and self-awareness. It is the register with the closest links to what people experience as non-psychoanalytic quotidian reality. Who and what one “imagines” other persons to be, what one thereby “imagines” they mean when communicatively interacting, who and what one “imagines” oneself to be, including from the imagined perspectives of others—all of the preceding is encompassed under the heading of this register.<sup>139</sup>

Importantly, the “imagined” aspect of the Imaginary is not set in contrast to some deeper, more fundamental “reality.” Even though the Imaginary is the dimension of fictions and fantasies, these phenomena should be understood as “necessary illusions.”<sup>140</sup> In other words, “the Imaginary is an intrinsic, unavoidable dimension of the existences of speaking psychical subjects,” and “the fictional abstractions of the Imaginary, far from being merely

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<sup>139</sup> Adrian Johnston, “Jacques Lacan,” ed. Edward N. Zalta, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/lacan/>.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

‘unreal’ as ineffective, inconsequential epiphenomena, are integral to and have very concrete effects upon actual, factual human realities.”<sup>141</sup>

The Imaginary experience of reality for speaking subjects is intimately tied to the second of Lacan’s three registers, the Symbolic. This register is more familiar ground for rhetorical scholars: The Symbolic refers not only to the realm of language, but also to all structurally differentiated realms of representation—“to the customs, institutions, laws, mores, norms, practices, rituals, rules, traditions, and so on of cultures and societies.”<sup>142</sup> Obviously, speaking subjects make use of the resources of the Symbolic in their everyday lives, but part of Lacan’s point in distinguishing the Symbolic from the Imaginary is that, unlike the fantasies of the Imaginary, the Symbolic actually precedes a given subject’s lived experience. The Symbolic forms a “non-natural universe [...] of inter-subjective and trans-subjective contexts into which human beings are thrown at birth.”<sup>143</sup> In other words, even though subjects manipulate the Symbolic, they are also manipulated by it, insofar as it structures the world into which they are born.

The combination of the Imaginary and the Symbolic constitutes the apprehensible “reality” of speaking subjects. This reality is held in contrast to the third and final register, the Real. As Johnston points out, of the three registers, the Real is the most difficult to define in even the most provisional manner. In part, “Lacan’s numerous and shifting pronouncements apropos the Real” are to blame, but there is also a certain performative element to Lacan’s avoidance of a clear definition:

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

Rather than being just a barrier to grasping the Real, this absence [of a clear definition of the Real] is itself revelatory of this register. To be more precise, as that which is foreign to Imaginary-Symbolic reality—this reality is the realm containing conscious apprehension, communicable significance, and the like—the Real is intrinsically elusive, resisting by nature capture in the comprehensibly meaningful formulations of concatenations of Imaginary-Symbolic signs. It is, as Lacan stresses again and again, an “impossibility” *vis-à-vis* reality.<sup>144</sup>

The registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real serve as the bedrock for Lacanian theory, but the various adoptions of Lacan by rhetorical scholars have not always stressed each register equally. Indeed, one of the distinguishing characteristics of different strains of Lacanian rhetorical scholarship is precisely the degree to which certain registers are emphasized and others are not. This is particularly important for the purposes of this chapter, because the specific conceptions of the material found within psychoanalytic rhetoric are deeply informed by the emphasis that a given scholar places on particular registers.

This dynamic is particularly salient in psychoanalytic rhetoric’s most visible debate, the mid-2000s exchange between Joshua Gunn and Christian Lundberg.<sup>145</sup> On the surface, this debate hinges on a question of focus: Which of Lacan’s three registers is the proper site for rhetorical inquiry? For Gunn, it is the Imaginary, because the work of rhetoric is ultimately the creation of the (necessary) fantasy that communication between distinct subjects is possible (i.e., that a message can be reduced to what the sender “really means”). According to Gunn, “the symbolic world, as much as the natural world, is maddening, a ‘great blooming, buzzing confusion’ that the subject fashions into one coherent scheme or another for coping,” and “persuasion is the call to coherence” in the midst of this

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Gunn, “Refiguring Fantasy”; Gunn, “Refitting Fantasy”; Lundberg, “The Royal Road Not Taken”; and Gunn, “On Dead Subjects.”

confusion.<sup>146</sup> Such coherence, however, is never actually warranted by the “buzzing confusion”; it emerges not from the subject’s rational appraisal of messages, but rather from the subject’s desperate attempt to manage an overwhelming plenitude of meanings. This phantasmatic management, for Gunn, is the product of rhetoric.

In “The Royal Road Not Taken,” Lundberg agrees with Gunn’s conceptualization of rhetoric as a response to the fundamental impossibility of communication—elsewhere Lundberg similarly defines rhetoric as “a way of *feigning unicity* [i.e., coherence] *in the context of failed unicity*”<sup>147</sup>—but he places this response at the level of the Symbolic rather than the Imaginary.<sup>148</sup> For Lundberg, the work of rhetoric (that is, the “call to coherence”) is tropological; it is metaphor and metonymy, as opposed to fantasies, that structure the subject’s experience of reality.

But this Imaginary-versus-Symbolic debate is, in many ways, only a surface-level disagreement, one that ultimately reduces to a question of conceptualization, rather than a question of object. Despite their differences, and despite their apparent arguments for different objects of rhetoric (i.e., fantasies versus tropes), both Gunn and Lundberg center rhetorical inquiry on *discourse*. To conceive of rhetoric as Imaginary, as Gunn does, is to see rhetoric as “a kind of *discursive* map of Self and Other.”<sup>149</sup> Similarly, Lundberg’s Symbolic rhetoric—a poetics of trope—is a matter of discourse. In other words, the Imaginary-

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<sup>146</sup> Gunn, “Refitting Fantasy,” 4.

<sup>147</sup> One might say that, by this definition, rhetoric is feigning communication in the context of failed communication. See Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 3 (emphasis in original).

<sup>148</sup> Lundberg, “The Royal Road Not Taken.”

<sup>149</sup> Gunn, “Refitting Fantasy,” 4 (emphasis added).

versus-Symbolic debate obscures considerable points of *agreement* between Gunn and Lundberg.

This debate also obscures what could be considered the underlying point of conflict between Gunn and Lundberg: their respective conceptualizations of the Real. And it is here, in the register of the Real, that each scholar's understanding of the *material* becomes most apparent. In "Refiguring Fantasy," there is only a brief, albeit suggestive, mention of the Real: Gunn notes that "positing the primacy of the imagination is troublesome for many scholars" because it "seems to deny the Real, a world beyond signification, in favor of human thought and 'the ideal.'"<sup>150</sup> This understanding of the Real is developed further in "Refitting Fantasy," where Gunn describes the Real as "something akin to an external absolute that cannot be imagined or symbolized"—a kind of conceptual exterior to discursive (that is, Imaginary-Symbolic) reality.<sup>151</sup> Gunn goes on to identify the Real with "naked nature," the pre-phantasmatic and pre-discursive element of reality "that we recognize most consciously in moments of trauma"—that is, when our fantasies and discourses fail us.<sup>152</sup> Two points should be drawn from these definitions: First, that Gunn places the Real in opposition to "the ideal," and by implication, in association with "the material"; and second, that Gunn sees the Real as *exterior* to the Symbolic.

In "The Royal Road Not Taken," Lundberg rejects Gunn's interpretation of the Real on the grounds that Gunn "seems to revert to a more material conception of the Real."<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Gunn, "Refiguring Fantasy," 41.

<sup>151</sup> Gunn, "Refitting Fantasy," 7.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> Lundberg, "The Royal Road Not Taken," 496.

Lundberg is especially concerned with Gunn's connection of "naked reality" to the Real. For Lundberg, this goes too far in suggesting that the Real "exists" in a positive sense, as a presence that interferes with the Symbolic. In contrast, Lundberg offers an alternate interpretation of the Real:

The Real does not reside in the Symbolic order, but instead is produced by a gap in the Symbolic order. On this interpretation, the Real is simply unsymbolizable excess that, although generated by a failure in the Symbolic order, does not reside in the Symbolic. This interpretation of the Real figures it more squarely as a specific function of a *lack* in the Symbolic as opposed to the kind of naked material reality that resides in the Symbolic.<sup>154</sup>

This dispute over exteriority and lack—here lack is an *interior* structure—may seem to be, as Lundberg writes, "a splitting of psychoanalytic hairs," but there is more at stake here than psychoanalytic doctrine.<sup>155</sup> Structurally, this debate mirrors rhetoric's debates concerning materiality: Gunn's conception of the Real as "naked reality" clearly resonates with McGee's conception of extra-discursive materiality, and Lundberg's insistence on the primacy of the Symbolic, in which any exterior to the Symbolic is only accessed through a failure or lack internal to the Symbolic, echoes an understanding of materiality as rhetoricality. In other words, Gunn and Lundberg's respective treatments of the Real follow the form of the debates over materiality in the discipline at large.

This does not, however, mean that the Real should be conceptually equated with materiality. Such a solution, while admittedly elegant, overlooks the fact that for Lundberg, the question of the nature of the Real is not a question of materiality, but rather of *the limits of the Symbolic*. Of course, it is easy to jump from the latter to the former. After all, should not the limits of language mark the beginning of the material? However, such a view

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 497 (emphasis in original).

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

presupposes the seamless transition from language to things, so that together the pair forms a totality without remainder. But the Lacanian point in distinguishing apprehensible reality from the Real is precisely that reality is *not* seamless. The Real can and does intervene in reality, in moments when the Symbolic comes in conflict with itself, when the Symbolic breaks down.<sup>156</sup> Thus, to explore the limits of the Symbolic does not *necessarily* imply an exploration of the material. Indeed, *this* point is Lacanian rhetoric's most valuable contribution to the discipline's treatment of materiality. Broadly speaking, both rhetorical materialists and those focusing on rhetoric's materiality have uncritically presumed that materiality begins where language and rhetoric end. But by employing Lacan's register theory, Lacanian rhetoricians bring attention to the fact that the place of materiality in rhetoric is an issue separate from the limits of rhetoric. The former addresses reality, while the latter addresses the Real.

### **Žižek's Materiality**

The distinction between the Real and reality is essential to understanding Žižek's conception of materiality, because this distinction corresponds to the specific foci of the two halves of his overall project: his development of a transcendental materialist theory of subjectivity,<sup>157</sup> and his theorizing of the contemporary workings of ideology. In turn, this

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<sup>156</sup> According to Lacan, the Real can impinge on reality "on the basis of an impasse of formalization"—that is, in moments of inconsistency internal to the Symbolic. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore, 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998), 93.

<sup>157</sup> For this phrase, along with the accompanying interpretation of this portion of Žižek's work, I am heavily indebted to Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008).

split corresponds to a further pair of elements that, like materialism and materiality in rhetoric, are often blurred together—namely, subjectivity and subjectification. That is to say, the distinction between the Real and reality (that is, between the limits of rhetoric and the place of materiality) is bound to a number of other distinctions: For Žižek, questions concerning the Real are tied to questions concerning subjectivity, and questions about the nature of (Imaginary-Symbolic) reality are tied to questions concerning subjectification.

So what, for Žižek, is the subject? In *The Ticklish Subject*, his first systematic attempt “to reassert the Cartesian subject,”<sup>158</sup> Žižek writes:

The subject is strictly correlative with the ontological gap between the universal and the particular—with ontological undecidability, with the fact that it is not possible to derive Hegemony or Truth directly from the given positive ontological set: the ‘subject’ is the *act*, the *decision* by means of which we pass from the positivity of a given multitude to the Truth-Event and/or to Hegemony. This precarious status of the subject relies on the Kantian anti-cosmological insight that reality is ‘non-All,’ ontologically not fully constituted, so it needs the supplement of the subject’s contingent gesture to obtain a semblance of ontological consistency. ‘Subject’ is not a name for the gap of freedom and contingency that infringes upon the positive ontological order, active in its interstices; rather ‘subject’ is the contingency that grounds the very positive ontological order, that is, the ‘vanishing mediator’ whose self-effacing gesture transforms the pre-ontological chaotic multitude into the semblance of a positive ‘objective’ order of reality.<sup>159</sup>

In other words, for Žižek, because reality is “non-All”—that is, reality is not an internally consistent whole<sup>160</sup>—positive ontological reality requires some initial push, the subject’s

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<sup>158</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2009), xxiv.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 184–185 (emphasis in original).

<sup>160</sup> By positing reality as internally inconsistent, Žižek is following in the footsteps of Hegel’s radicalization of Kant. Whereas Kant famously identified antinomies of reason, and explained these through epistemological limitations (i.e., as finite humans, we simply cannot grasp the whole of reality), Hegel noted that Kant makes the unwarranted assumption that reality itself is a consistent whole. Thus, Hegel and Žižek see the antinomies not as epistemological limits indicative of human finitude, but rather as

“act,” to be present for the subject. This is not to say that Žižek adopts an idealist stance here—it is not that positive ontological reality is *created* by the subject—but rather that, according to Žižek, there is no ontological *guarantee* that the subject’s apprehension of reality is accurate or true. To return to Žižek’s “Cartesian” point of departure: Žižek rejects Descartes’ famous solution to the problem of radical doubt, in which “the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends uniquely on [Descartes’] awareness of the true God.”<sup>161</sup> For Žižek, there is no God or other entity that guarantees certainty and truth; at base, all rests on the subject’s primordial decision to act *as if* there is certainty and truth. And since the subject is necessarily a purely negative entity at the moment of this decision, insofar as the decision is itself pre-ontological, this means that the subject is *nothing more* than this act. The subject is, as Žižek writes elsewhere, “a *hole* in reality”—that is, the Real gap that prevents a smooth transition to reality.<sup>162</sup>

However, this conception of subjectivity should be distinguished from *subjectification*—that is, from the positive identity that occupies the gap of subjectivity, after the fact:

One should avoid the fatal trap of conceiving the subject as the act, the gesture, which intervenes afterwards in order to fill in the ontological gap, and insist on the irreducible vicious cycle of subjectivity: [...] the subject ‘is’ the very gap filled in by the gesture of subjectification. [...] In short, the Lacanian answer to the question asked (and answered in a negative way) by such different philosophers as Althusser, Derrida, and Badiou—‘Can the gap, the opening, the Void which precedes the gesture of subjectification, still be called “subject”?’—is an emphatic ‘Yes!’—the

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ontological limits indicative of the structure of reality. See Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology*, 129–130.

<sup>161</sup> René Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy,” in *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 110.

<sup>162</sup> Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 174 (emphasis in original).

subject is, both at the same time, the ontological gap [...] as well as the gesture of subjectification which [...] heals the wound of this gap.<sup>163</sup>

For Žižek, subjectivity is a pure negativity emerging from the non-All nature of reality, a negativity that precedes subjectification proper. In contrast, subjectification is the ongoing process explicated by Charland's notion of constitutive rhetoric; it is the filling in of the negativity of subjectivity with some positive content ("I am male, white, American," etc.). As such, subjectification is a fundamentally *rhetorical* process, and so for Žižek, rhetoric does not produce subjects, but rather subjective positions. Rhetoric, whether understood as interpellation (Charland), fantasy (Gunn), or trope (Lundberg) is a masking, a response to the pure negativity of the subject.

But what does Žižek mean by his claim that the subject is *both* a "gap" and "the gesture of subjectification which [...] heals the wound of this gap"?<sup>164</sup> To make sense of this apparent contradiction, it is necessary to recall that Žižek's theory of subjectivity is ultimately materialist, in that it attempts to trace how "cogito-like subjectivity ontogenetically emerges out of an originally corporeal condition as its anterior ground."<sup>165</sup> This means that Žižek's theory of subjectivity is not static; there is a temporal dimension at work here. Subjectivity is, as noted above, a founding act, but it is an act that disavows and erases itself. The subject's primordial decision to act *as if* there is certainty is a moment that retroactively moves from contingency to necessity, so that looking back, the subject's decision cannot help but appear totally determined. The decision thus fits with Lacan's logic of the forced choice: Just as the robber's demand of "Your money or your life!" has

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<sup>163</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 185.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, xxiv.

only one meaningful response, so the subject's primordial decision necessarily appears, in retrospect, forced.<sup>166</sup> So when Žižek writes that the subject is both an ontological gap and the healing of this gap, his point is a temporal one: Subjectivity always-already appears as subjectification. Even if the subject is pure negativity, this negativity is a singular moment, instantly eclipsed by the positive content of subjectification. After the primordial decision, subjectivity is perpetually contaminated with subjectification.

The key point here is that subjectification is fundamentally a process of *restriction*: The radical freedom of the purely negative (Real) subject is limited in exchange for the stability of Imaginary-Symbolic reality. Even when one modality of subjectification supersedes another—i.e., a new subjective position is rhetorically constituted—this new modality never returns to the primordial moment of pure subjectivity. Once a subject undergoes subjectification, there is no escape from the constraints of Imaginary-Symbolic reality.

But where is materiality in all of this? If materiality, as part of Imaginary-Symbolic reality, is to be located not on the side of the Real, then materiality is not a relevant factor for subjectivity—but it *is* relevant to subjectification. And if subjectification is a process of restriction, then it follows that materiality is, for Žižek, *only* a meaningful concept in its relation to the restriction of the subject. In other words, even if materiality constitutes some external reality, this reality is only known to the extent that it contaminates and conflicts with the subject's radical freedom. Again, this is not to posit some kind of discursive idealism—it is not the subject's choice that *creates* the material—but rather to specify the point at which materiality intervenes in the experience of the subject. It is this

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<sup>166</sup> Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 212.

specification that makes it possible to offer a Žižekian definition of materiality: *Materiality is that which resists the pure negativity of the subject.*

This definition of materiality resonates with aspects of all three aforementioned conceptions of materiality. Like McGee's conception of extra-discursive materiality, this definition claims that materiality, whether of words or of rocks, exists *for us*—that is, it exists in our inability to avoid it. Materiality is thus a relationship rather than a place, and McGee's mistake is assuming that the former required the latter (i.e., an external world where trees are chopped). But a Žižekian definition of materiality does not necessitate a *place*; rather, it marks a failure of the subject's radical freedom—a kind of negated negativity. Similarly, Žižekian materiality shares common ground with the conception of materiality as rhetoricality, insofar as *all* material contributes to the process of subjectification. To Cloud's accusations regarding the "discursivity of the material," a Žižekian conception of materiality responds, "Guilty as charged!"—albeit with a caveat. Even if all subjectivity is contaminated with subjectification (i.e., subjectivity is always experienced as *subjectified* subjectivity), this does not mean that there exists no moment of pure subjectivity (i.e., a pre-ontological, "founding gesture"). And finally, Žižekian materiality resonates strongly with the conception of materiality as infrastructure: As that which resists the subject, non-discursive materiality secures the otherwise arbitrary practices and relations that make the subjectifying processes of other discursive materialities (e.g., rhetoric) possible.

In other words, the physical world, communications media, and even rhetoric conceived in the most traditional and conservative sense—all of these are, by a Žižekian definition, material. But materiality is not *only* to be located outside of discourse (extra-

discourse), or in the subjectification of discourse (rhetoricity), or in the conditions of possibility for discourse (infrastructure). Materiality, as the subjectifying element that resists pure subjectivity, may operate at *all* of these levels, and it may do so at all levels simultaneously. And with this conception of materiality, it is possible to see how Žižek's understanding of rhetoric—a process that involves the careful management of the audience's ability to articulate a response—may be generalized beyond his own rhetorical practices of transference and self-contradiction. If effective persuasion involves the management of the audience's ability to articulate a particular subjective position, then this management is essentially the manipulation of the material, insofar as it is the manipulation of that which effects subjectification. In such a conception of rhetoric, there is no priority of the realm of language over the realm of things, so an effective response to perversion need not rest on the particular formulations of transference and self-contradiction that Žižek employs. To return to the example from the beginning of this chapter: For the rhetoric of the analyst, the position of the analysand's couch is *just as important* as expressly symbolic or discursive means of managing subjective positions (e.g., the fundamental rule). Both are equally material and equally active within the same rhetorical instance. Put differently, analysis that limits visual feedback via the couch's position is *not* rhetorically the same as analysis that does not. The rhetoric of analysis is not reducible to discourse alone.

## CHAPTER THREE: TECHNOLOGY

### **From Theory to Criticism**

In the first chapter, I argued that perversion, as a subjective response to a given rhetorical appeal, constitutes a problem for rhetoric. I also offered a solution, drawn from Žižek's work, to this problem: Because perversion must be *articulated*, effective rhetoric should preemptively manage an audience's ability to articulate their perverse disavowal. In the second chapter, I explored how such management may occur through discursive means (e.g., rules, prohibitions), as well as through non-discursive means (e.g., the analysand's couch as a limiter of feedback). I also explored how a Žižekian approach to rhetoric holds bold the discursive and non-discursive to be equally "material," insofar as they both function as mechanisms of subjectification. There is, in this view, no priority of the discursive over the non-discursive, or vice versa; both may be active at the same time in the same rhetorical appeal.

The aim of this third and final chapter is to explore the implications of the previous two chapters for the practice of rhetorical criticism. That is to say, this chapter investigates, however tentatively, what a Žižek-inspired rhetorical criticism might look like. To facilitate this investigation, I proceed in two stages. First, I situate the understanding of rhetoric developed over the last two chapters alongside a related strand of scholarship—namely, approaches to rhetoric that foreground the role of technology and media. While this may, at first glance, seem to be an odd pairing, both share a common concern for the relationship between human agency and material constraints, and by examining the manner in which their respective analyses of this relationship diverge, it is possible to draw attention to the ways in which discursive and non-discursive rhetoric are *equally material*, but not

necessarily *materially equal*. In other words, by “looking awry” (to borrow a Žižekian phrase) at a Žižekian conception of materiality through the lens of technology, it is possible to see how, even though discursive and non-discursive rhetoric are both material, they are not material in the same way.

This raises the question that dominates the second half of this chapter: If discursive and non-discursive rhetoric are not materially identical—even if they are identically material—what are the possible relationships between these two elements, and how might these relationships be taken up by rhetorical critics? To explore this question, I offer a series of case studies, each demonstrative of a particular relation between discursive and non-discursive rhetoric.

### **The Question of Agency**

At base, the problem of perversion draws attention to a distinct area of the rhetorical process. This is not to say that it points to a unique or unusual rhetorical *object*—the rhetoric of book margins or USB drives or tree-chopping, for example. Instead, perversion points to an area of rhetoric that affects all rhetorical objects: the response of the audience. And while rhetorical scholars have paid much attention to the role of the audience in rhetorical processes, such scholarship consistently equates the work of the audience with *interpretation*, rather than with the articulation of a response.<sup>167</sup> Here the psychoanalytic response to perversion stands distinct: Even though audience interpretations are important, the audience does not necessarily have total freedom to

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<sup>167</sup> See, for example, the debates over the nature of polysemy, outlined in Leah Ceccarelli, “Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84, no. 4 (1998): 395–415, doi:10.1080/00335639809384229.

articulate these interpretations, insofar as the audience's very ability to respond may be structured by the speaker. Ultimately, then, the problem of perversion draws rhetorical criticism to a specific question: What responsive *agency* does an audience have in a given rhetorical situation?

This question resonates strongly with approaches to rhetoric that foreground the role of media and technology. In part, this is due to the extent to which studies of technology, despite terminological differences from rhetorical studies, have centered on the question of agency. At the broadest theoretical level, this can be seen in the tension between deterministic and constructionist theories of technology. Technological determinism asserts that technologies shape and structure social relations, and that this shaping and structuring occurs, at least to some degree, outside of the purview of the social itself. Put differently, for technological determinists, technology is in a unique position to enact social change, and thus serves as a material limit to human agency.<sup>168</sup> In contrast, social constructionist theories of technology claim that a given technology is always situated within and structured by a particular historical, cultural, and social milieu. Technology does not impose demands on the social, nor does it follow some inner technical logic; instead, it is always subject to the agency of humans to use particular technologies in particular ways.

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<sup>168</sup> Notably, not all scholars who subscribe to a determinist view of technology are in agreement over the exact nature of this determinism; there are both "hard" and "soft" determinists. The former position assigns agency to technology itself, while the latter holds that the technology can develop—and may have *already* developed—to a kind of historical point of no return, at which "its determinative efficacy" is "sufficient to direct the course of events." See Leo Marx and Merritt Roe Smith, "Introduction," in *Does Technology Drive History?: The Dilemma of Technological Determinism*, ed. Leo Marx and Merritt Roe Smith (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), xiv.

At a more concrete level, the question of agency is taken up by studies of technology that emphasize the various affordances and constraints offered by particular technologies.<sup>169</sup> This includes work explicitly oriented toward the terms “affordances” and “constraints”—for example, Donald Norman’s study of design<sup>170</sup>—but also other scholarship as well. For example, both Harold Innis’s notion of media bias and Marshall McLuhan’s conception of media as “extensions of man” ultimately hinge on the relation between material structures and human agency with regard to those structures.<sup>171</sup>

But rhetorical studies’ reception of such theories of technology and media, along with their various conceptions of agency, has not been without its caveats.<sup>172</sup> Kenneth Rufo, for example, in his aforementioned essay on rhetoric and media, acknowledges that media “determine the possibilities of rhetorical construction”<sup>173</sup>—that is, they enable or disable

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<sup>169</sup> By “affordances,” these studies designate aspects of a technology that extends human agency (e.g., the telephone allows me to speak across greater distances). Conversely, “constraints” are technological limitations of agency (e.g., the telephone limits my communication to verbal expression).

<sup>170</sup> Donald A. Norman, *The Psychology of Everyday Things* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

<sup>171</sup> Harold Innis, *Empire and Communications* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007); and Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

<sup>172</sup> One study of technology and persuasion that does *not* amend “affordances and constraints” theory is B. J. Fogg’s *Persuasive Technology*, which conceptualizes the persuasive force of technology in terms of agency-restricting “captology.” Unfortunately, Fogg’s study represents the worst form of disciplinary isolation, insofar as it is so mired in the specifics of experimental psychology that it fails to acknowledge the existence of theories of persuasion developed in other disciplines. This failure means that Fogg spends much of his time reinventing the proverbial wheel, and consequently has little to offer scholars situated within the humanistic tradition of rhetoric. See B. J. Fogg, *Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do*, The Morgan Kaufmann Series in Interactive Technologies (San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann, 2003).

<sup>173</sup> Rufo, “Shades of Derrida,” 229.

certain modalities of communication—and yet “the material distinctions between different media remain of lesser consequence than the general structure of iterability through which they posit communication.”<sup>174</sup> For Rufo, it is not enough to explicate the affordances and constraints of a given medium, because we never encounter those affordances and constraints *directly*, without the baggage of a whole host of norms and expectations—in short, without histories—that influence how we relate to the extensions or limits of a given medium or technology.

Ian Bogost advances a similar position with respect to a specific media phenomenon: videogames. As part of his exploration of the ways in which “videogames open a new domain for persuasion,” Bogost develops *procedural rhetoric*, which he defines as “the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures.”<sup>175</sup> For Bogost, videogames stand out as particularly interesting rhetorical artifacts because their primary mode of persuasion is procedural—that is to say, it occurs through the rule-based simulation of relationships. Bogost’s analysis of *The McDonald’s Videogame*, an “anti-advergame,” offers a useful example of such rhetoric:

*The McDonald’s Videogame* is a critique of McDonald’s business practices by Italian social critic collective Molleindustria. [...] The player controls four separate aspects of the McDonald’s production environment, each of which he has to manage simultaneously: the third-world pasture where cattle are raised as cheaply as possible; the slaughterhouse where cattle are fattened for slaughter; the restaurant where burgers are sold; and the corporate offices where lobbying, public relations, and marketing are managed.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>175</sup> Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, ix.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 29.

Each of the game's four sections necessitates difficult business and moral decisions. For example, "in the pasture, the player must create enough cattle-grazing land and soy crops to produce the meat required to run the business."<sup>177</sup> But the land required to support the cattle is in limited supply, and the player must make choices about how to increase their supply of land: They may "bribe the local governor for rights to convert his people's crops into corporate ones," or "bulldoze rainforest," or even "dismantle indigenous settlements to clear space for grazing."<sup>178</sup> By offering these specific choices—that is, by offering a specific set of affordances and constraints to the player—*The McDonald's Videogame* produces a specific rhetorical appeal. Through its very simulation of McDonald's as a business, it "mounts a procedural rhetoric about the necessity of corruption in the global fast food business."<sup>179</sup>

At this point, it may seem that Bogost is articulating a kind of non-representational rhetoric, one that consists solely of the affordances and constraints of a given videogame or simulation. But like Rufo, Bogost introduces a caveat to his understanding of technology: Bogost insists that there is a gap between the rules of a system (e.g., the choices available in a videogame) and the subjective experience of those rules (e.g., the player's understanding of how the system works).<sup>180</sup> This gap is particularly evident in Bogost's favored object of study, videogames, because part of the process of gameplay is the player's gradual adjustment of their mental representation of the game's rules to the *actual* affordances and

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 29–30.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>180</sup> Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 107.

constraints of the rules. For example, a player may know that their game character can jump in the game, but it is through the trial and error process of play that the player comes to learn exactly how far and under what conditions their character can jump.

Thus, the common theme of rhetorical considerations of media and technology is that, even though the agency of the audience (or user or player) is shaped by the affordances and constraints of a given technology, these affordances and constraints are always mediated by their own representation. For example, in his study of design, Donald Norman points out the respective affordances of two types of doors: One door design features a “flat horizontal bar [which] affords no operations except pushing,” while a second design “has a different kind of bar on each side, one relatively small and vertical to signify a pull.”<sup>181</sup> But as anyone who has experienced the embarrassing misuse (i.e., pushing when pulling was required, or vice versa) of the second kind of door can attest, there is an element beyond the object itself at work here—namely, the door opener’s *expectation* about how the door will work. Both Rufo and Bogost point to the importance of this expectation, to the fact that it is not enough to consider, on its own, the agency afforded or constrained by a given technology. One must also consider how that agency is represented—and by extension, experienced.

### **The Limits of Representation**

Yet all of this seems to run counter to the conceptions of rhetoric and materiality developed in the previous chapter. Is this not simply a return to a kind of “discursivity of the material,” to a rhetoricality of sorts—albeit one focused on technology? Though Rufo

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<sup>181</sup> Norman, *The Psychology of Everyday Things*, 10.

and Bogost seem to point in this direction, they both miss a crucial point regarding affordances, constraints, and representation: Although some kind of representation is needed for humans to interact with the materiality of a given technology, these two dimensions are not symmetrical. They do not *equally* shape agency.

Two points bear out this asymmetry. First, while material configurations can both extend and restrict human agency—the telephone, for example, both allows me to speak across great distances and limits such communication to verbal expression—representations can *only* restrict the existing affordances of a given technology. No matter how elaborate my representation, I will never be able to use more than spoken language on the telephone without fundamentally altering the material constraints of the technology, or by supplementing one technology with another to maneuver beyond the constraints of the first (e.g., the telephone supplemented with a modem). This limitation of representation can be seen, for example, in the history of the automobile. As Ronald Kline and Trevor Pinch describe, early automobiles were often put to (retrospectively) unusual uses, and a rural automobile owner at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century might use a vehicle not only for transportation, but also to power pumps, saws, washing machines, or butter churns.<sup>182</sup> But this “interpretive flexibility” of the automobile (i.e., its lack of a clearly defined and widely accepted use) does not indicate the power of representation over materiality. To the contrary, each of these unusual functions necessitated some material alteration of the car (e.g., augmenting the automobile’s axle with a connection to a butter churn). Unusual representations of the automobile cannot extend the affordances of the automobile without

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<sup>182</sup> Ronald Kline and Trevor Pinch, “Users as Agents of Technological Change: The Social Construction of the Automobile in the Rural United States,” *Technology and Culture* 37, no. 4 (1996): 775.

material alterations of those affordances. Representing the automobile as a butter churn does nothing without *materially* enabling the automobile to do so. Thus, representation can only restrict, never extend.

Second, the process of representation is not at work in *all* levels of technology. Admittedly, Bogost might quarrel with this point, since for Bogost, the task of successive levels of technology is to represent one level to another.<sup>183</sup> For example, the code of a given piece of software, for Bogost, is a kind of symbolic condensation that represents hardware functions. And here Bogost is correct in a sense. Code *does* represent the architecture of a given set of hardware. But this begs the question: To *whom* does code represent? The answer, simply put, is that technological representation is always localized to those moments when technical processes come into contact with humans—that is, at the level of *interface*.

This is true even in cases one might consider to be outside the purview of “interface,” even at the level of code. For example, the simple commands to “add the data in memory location 1 to the data in memory location 2,” and to “multiply the data in memory location 2 by the data in location 3” may be rendered in a particular machine-language as:

```
11000000 000000000001 000000000010
11110000 000000000010 000000000011184
```

The same commands, written in an assembly language, are much more condensed:

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ADD 1, 2
MUL 2, 3185
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<sup>183</sup> Bogost, *Unit Operations*, 73–89.

<sup>184</sup> Gary J. Bronson, *C++ for Engineers and Scientists*, 4th ed. (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2013), 29.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

And the same instructions (i.e., to add two numbers, and then multiply the result by a third number), rendered in C++, a high-level programming language, are:

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result = (first + second) * third;186
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The functional result of all three sets of code is the same—“add, then multiply”—so from a programming standpoint, they are all more or less equal. But there is an obvious distinction to be made between low-level languages (e.g., the machine-language binary) and high-level languages (e.g., C++), insofar as the high-level language is more easily interpreted according to the grammatical structures of the English language. And this trend toward easier, “natural” intelligibility is indicative of the function of code in this setting: Code represents hardware functions, but it represents them *to the programmer*. Code is as much an interface system as is the keyboard with which it is typed.

N. Katherine Hayles has addressed the representational nature of code at length. Code, she argues, can be understood in terms of the Saussurian division between signifier and signified, so that the *signifiers* of code are the unit to which computing is ultimately reducible: the voltages processed by hardware.<sup>187</sup> In turn, the *signifieds* of code are

the interpretations that other layers of code give these voltages. Programming languages operating at higher levels translate this basic mechanic level of signification into commands that more closely resemble natural language. The translation from binary code into high-level languages, and from high-level languages back into binary code, must happen every time commands are compiled or interpreted, for voltages and the bit stream formed from them are all the machine can understand. Thus voltages at the machine level function as signifiers for a higher level that interprets them, and these interpretations in turn become signifiers for a still higher level interfacing with them. Hence the different levels of code consist of

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>187</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 45.

interlocking chains of signifiers and signifieds, with signifieds on one level becoming signifiers on another.<sup>188</sup>

This may sound like Bogost's claim of inter-technological representation. Does not the continual interpretation of signifiers along various levels of code suggest a process of representation? But Hayles is quick to clarify the unique nature of these "interlocking chains of signifiers and signifieds":

In the worldview of code, the generation of meaning happens in ways that scholars trained in the traditional humanities sometimes find difficult to understand and even more difficult to accept. At the level of binary code, the system can tolerate little if any ambiguity. For any physically embodied system, some noise and, therefore, possible ambiguities are always present. In the case of digital computers, noise enters the system (among other places) in the voltage trail-off errors discussed earlier, *but these are rectified into unambiguous signals of one and zero before they enter the bit stream.*<sup>189</sup>

In other words, code lacks the fundamental *ambiguity* that is inherent in representation. Even the most condensed programming language is ultimately reducible to voltages, which are "unambiguous signals." This means that code is a kind of language distinct from the representational languages humans use to communicate. Code, unlike human language, does not convey meaning; rather, code *executes*.<sup>190</sup> It is not even quite right to say that code is a set of instructions—that image still implies an interpretative entity.<sup>191</sup> Code is more like the arrangement of collapsing dominoes: As each domino falls, its impact is either received by the next (and so the next one falls), or it is not (and the cascade of pieces

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 46 (emphasis added).

<sup>190</sup> Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 165.

<sup>191</sup> In this sense, Hayles' description of the various levels of code "interpreting" one another is somewhat misleading shorthand for a process entirely foreign to the work of interpretation.

ceases). The falling of the dominoes is not a matter of meaning; it is a matter of physics. In the same way, the reduction of code to voltages is not a matter of interpretation, but rather one of electronics. So code, as a technology, does represent the functioning of hardware—those building blocks of voltages—but only insofar as it functions as an interface. In the same way, the affordances and constraints of a given technology are supplemented by representation at the level of human interaction, but not at a level of inter-technological interaction. Voltages do not “represent” to code, just as a mechanical gear does not “represent” its interaction to another gear.

### **Toward a Žižekian Criticism**

This asymmetry between the affordances and constraints of a technology and the representation of those affordances and constraints means that the two levels can and must be understood as distinct entities. To study *only* the representation of a technology is to miss the ways in which the material possibilities of a technology may diverge from their representation. This does not mean that one level is more important than the other. Rather, an insistence on the asymmetry of the two levels is actually a consequence of the conceptual equality of the two, since filtering all aspects of affordances and constraints through representation is a privileging of one level above the other.

But this emphasis on asymmetry also clarifies an important point about the Žižekian conception of materiality from the previous chapter: The insistence on the radical, material equality of discursive and non-discursive elements in rhetoric does not mean that these elements play an equal role in a given rhetorical instance. The discursive and non-discursive may be equally material, *but they are not necessarily materially equal*. Just as the

technology of the telephone offers a set of affordances and constraints entirely separate from those offered by representations of the telephone, non-discursive elements of a given rhetorical appeal may offer a set of affordances and constraints for an audience's responsive agency that are distinct from those offered by discursive elements.

This has important implications for rhetorical responses to perversion. If, in certain instances, the responsive agency of an audience is more strongly structured at a non-discursive level than at a discursive level, then it is possible for a perverse subject position to be maintained regardless of the discursive content of an appeal. For example, if an analyst conducts psychoanalytic treatment face-to-face with an analysand, any discursive refusal of the analyst to signal meaning to the analysand will necessarily be undermined by the non-discursive structure of the analyst-analysand interaction. The analysand would still be able to interpret the analyst's nonverbal feedback as signaling meaning, regardless of whether this feedback was consciously or unconsciously "sent" by the analyst. Thus, the analyst's discursive attempts to preemptively manage the analysand's subjective response to analysis would be challenged at a non-discursive level.

In other words, the perverse analysand marks a point of *conflict* between discursive and non-discursive rhetoric. But the potential for material inequality and conflict between the two levels is not only a concern for perversion within the constraints of clinical practice. This potential also points to the line of inquiry unique to a Žižekian rhetorical criticism—and by extension, the full weight of psychoanalysis's contribution to rhetoric. Put simply, if discursive and non-discursive elements are distinct, and if they can in fact work against each other, then any criticism of discursive *and* non-discursive rhetoric must ask: *In a given instance, what is the relationship between the two?*

I have already discussed one form of this relationship, perversion as it applies to analytic practice, at length. In the remainder of this chapter, I want to demonstrate the critical utility of this line of inquiry by exploring three further configurations:

1. The discursive and non-discursive levels of a given rhetorical appeal may make the *same* argument.
2. The non-discursive level may make a *primary* argument, while the discursive level may make a *secondary* or supplementary argument.
3. The non-discursive level may make a *secondary* or supplementary argument, while the discursive level may make a *primary* argument.

### ***The McDonald's Videogame***

In the first configuration, both the discursive and non-discursive levels of a rhetorical instance make the same argument. A strong example of this is *The McDonald's Videogame*.<sup>192</sup> As noted above in the discussion of Bogost's procedural rhetoric, *The McDonald's Videogame* mounts an argument via the "rules" of the game: To sustain McDonald's as a business, the player must choose between various unethical practices—bribery, theft, etc. And unlike the rules of a non-computer game, which ultimately rely on the player's acquiescence (e.g., in chess, the agreement that the knight may only move in a certain pattern), the rules of *The McDonald's Videogame* are firm, material constraints to the player's agency. The decisions that the game presents to players have a limited, non-negotiable range of responses—and all of them are ethically problematic. Thus, *The McDonald's Videogame* presents an argument about the inextricable links between

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<sup>192</sup> Molleindustria, "The Game," *The McDonald's Videogame*, accessed October 1, 2013, <http://www.mcvideogame.com/index-eng.html>.

McDonald's and unethical practices, all via the non-discursive structuring of the player's agency within the game.

But *The McDonald's Videogame* does not *only* mount its argument at a non-discursive level; it mounts a discursive argument, too. This level of argumentation is evident from the game's opening English-language page,<sup>193</sup> which presents the following introduction:

Making money in a corporation like McDonald's is not simple at all! Behind every sandwich there is a complex process you must learn to manage: from the creation of pastures to the slaughter, from the restaurant management to the branding. You'll discover all the dirty secrets that made us one of the biggest company [*sic*] of the world.<sup>194</sup>

So the game begins by highlighting the complexity of McDonald's as a business—McDonald's is not “simple”—and this complexity is tied to a binary of appearance and truth, since even the simplest sandwich is the result of a complex process involving pastures, slaughterhouses, restaurants, and branding. In other words, what *seems* to be merely a hamburger is actually much more; it is a distillation of an elaborate configuration of productive forces. Of course, on its own, this claim of complexity says nothing about the ethics of McDonald's, but this changes with the final, promissory sentence of the game's opening page: “You'll discover all the dirty secrets that made us one of the biggest company

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<sup>193</sup> *The McDonald's Videogame* is available in nine languages. For the purposes of this study, I have restricted my analysis of the game's content to the English version. However, a cursory comparison of the English, French, and German versions suggests that there are no major differences between the versions. Indeed, some word choices in the English version (e.g., “McDonald's [...] has been heavily criticized for his negative impact” instead of “its negative impact”) seem to indicate a rather direct and literal translation process. See Molleindustria, “Why This Game?,” *The McDonald's Videogame*, accessed October 1, 2013, <http://www.mcvideogame.com/why-eng.html>.

<sup>194</sup> Molleindustria, “The Game.”

[sic] of the world.”<sup>195</sup> Here the tension between appearance and truth takes a more sinister turn. The simple McDonald’s hamburger is not merely a commodity whose tasty use-value obscures its complex origin; its apparent simplicity also obscures “dirty secrets.”

Another of the game’s pages echoes this argument. In a kind of preface to the gameplay proper, Ronald McDonald, the famous McDonald’s mascot, directly addresses the player:

For decades McDonald’s corporation has been heavily criticized for his [sic] negative impact on society and environment.

There are inevitably some glitches in our activity: rainforest destruction, livelihood losses in the third world, desertification, precarization of working conditions, food poisoning and so on...

Denying all these well founded accusations would be impossible so we decided to create an online game to explain to young people that this is the price to pay in order to preserve our lifestyle.

We’ll continue on our way, with our well-known determination. Join us and have fun with us!<sup>196</sup>

Again, the complexity of McDonald’s as an enterprise is linked to unethical behavior. The use of “glitches” to describe losses of livelihood, desertification, and the like—even if it is delivered with Molleindustria’s collective tongue firmly planted in their collective cheek—suggests a systemic orientation: If McDonald’s is a complex system, then doubtless there will be “bugs” and “glitches.” But far from being exceptions to the logic of this system, Ronald’s address claims that these phenomena are all part of the larger “price to pay.”

Thus, *The McDonald’s Videogame* constitutes an agreement of two levels of rhetoric. The argument is presented at the level of discursive content, but the non-discursive structure of the gameplay itself also exerts a rhetorical force, insofar as there is no room for the audience to distance themselves from the critique of McDonald’s (e.g., “I know very well

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Molleindustria, “Why This Game?”.

that McDonald's is unethical, but nevertheless I will play the game according to a certain ethical standard..."). But the rhetorical "catch" of the game, and the one area in which its argument is particularly vulnerable, is that by *so* rigidly structuring the options of the audience, *The McDonald's Videogame* risks complete audience rejection. The key challenge for the game, then, manifests in a dynamic similar to psychoanalytic transference: Just as the analyst must draw the analysand into analysis while treading a careful line between overinvestment and no investment at all, *The McDonald's Videogame* must balance too much restriction of audience agency and too little.

In turn, this need for balance suggests two points at which the rhetoric of *The McDonald's Videogame* might be strengthened. First, because the game relies on the player's navigation of the game's rules (i.e., the exploration of the game's limitation of player agency), it is essential that *The McDonald's Videogame* be able to draw the player into this exploration. That is to say, there must be an affective attraction to the game; it must be "fun" or satisfying to some degree. Without this initial draw—a draw much in parallel to the analysand's affective investment in the analyst—the player will not be exposed to the game long enough to engage the procedural aspect of its rhetoric.

Second, because too rigid a structuring of the player's agency might cause the player to disengage from the game, *The McDonald's Videogame* might benefit from offering a limited number of entirely *ethical* responses to the game's dilemmas, which nevertheless produce undesirable outcomes.<sup>197</sup> In this way, the player's need to employ unethical practices, while still delineated by the mechanics of the game, would be a realization that

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<sup>197</sup> This dimension of gameplay already exists to some degree, insofar as it is possible to bankrupt McDonald's. However, bankruptcy is reached not by choosing ethical actions, but rather by refraining from action at all.

the player seemingly comes to on their own. In this way, the necessity of unethical behavior is an argument of which the player may take ownership, rather than one that is forced upon them. Yet this strategy would itself require another dimension of balance, since it risks making the necessity of unethical behavior appear as a feature of the game exclusively, and not the real-life business. Here the critical treatment of discursive and non-discursive rhetoric as distinct is again useful: *The McDonald's Videogame's* discursive argumentation could aid the non-discursive level by making sure the audience connects the game to historical, real-world decisions (e.g., McDonald's ties to the devastation of a specific ecosystem).

**“I mourn the loss of thousands...”**

In the second configuration, discursive elements advance an argument supplementary or secondary to non-discursive elements. A short quotation serves as a useful example of this relationship:

I mourn the loss of thousands of precious lives, but I will not rejoice in the death of one, not even an enemy. Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.  
— Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>198</sup>

Shortly after Osama bin Laden's assassination, this quote circulated widely on Facebook and other social networking sites. Though it was only a small part of the broader public reaction to bin Laden's death, the quote nevertheless drew special attention from various news outlets and commentators, largely because the quote, it turned out, was partially

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<sup>198</sup> Melissa Bell, “Martin Luther King, Jr. Misquoted After Osama Bin Laden Killed,” *The Washington Post*, May 3, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/martin-luther-king-jr-misquoted-after-osama-bin-laden-killed/2011/05/03/AFNKPjff\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/martin-luther-king-jr-misquoted-after-osama-bin-laden-killed/2011/05/03/AFNKPjff_blog.html).

fabricated.<sup>199</sup> While the second, third, and fourth sentences are from King's *Strength to Love*,<sup>200</sup> the first sentence reportedly came from a Facebook user named Jessica Dovey.<sup>201</sup> Dovey composed the first sentence, supplemented it with the King quote, and posted the combination to her Facebook. It was then passed from Facebook friend to Facebook friend, until somewhere along the line the quotation marks expanded to include Dovey's commentary along with King's words.

In one sense, there is nothing particularly remarkable about this bit of misquotation. The circulation and corruption of information are part and parcel of Internet culture. But when viewed from a rhetorical perspective, this specific case raises a number of questions. A large number of people somehow felt compelled to repeat this particular piece of discourse—why? Who or what compelled them? Is it possible to understand this mangled quotation as a rhetorical appeal?

The text of the quotation itself does not go very far in answering these questions. Clearly, the quote voiced a particular reaction to both bin Laden's death and the manner in which this death was received in the United States. As one commentator put it:

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<sup>199</sup> For examples of the coverage of the quote's spread, see Megan Gibson, "After Bin Laden's Death, (Mostly) Fake MLK Quote Goes Viral," *TIME.com*, May 3, 2011, <http://newsfeed.time.com/2011/05/03/after-bin-ladens-death-mostly-fake-mlk-quote-goes-viral/>; Megan McArdle, "Anatomy of a Fake Quotation," *The Atlantic*, May 3, 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/05/anatomy-of-a-fake-quotation/238257/>; Eoin O'Carroll, "How Osama Bin Laden's Death Sparked a Fake Martin Luther King Quote," *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 3, 2011, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Innovation/Horizons/2011/0503/How-Osama-bin-Laden-s-death-sparked-a-fake-Martin-Luther-King-quote>; and Dean Praetorius, "Fake Martin Luther King Jr. Quote Goes Viral After Osama Bin Laden Death," *The Huffington Post*, May 3, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/05/03/fake-martin-luther-king-jr-quote\\_n\\_857044.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/05/03/fake-martin-luther-king-jr-quote_n_857044.html).

<sup>200</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 47.

<sup>201</sup> McArdle, "Anatomy of a Fake Quotation."

After a wild night of jubilation, Americans started waking up to the realization that perhaps, just perhaps there was something a bit overly excessive in the celebrations of a man's death—even if that man had killed thousands of people around the world.<sup>202</sup>

In this sense, the essential piece of the text is the quotation itself, not its attribution; what mattered was the manner in which these specific sentences captured a particular sentiment. Yet at the same time, the very importance that was attached to the question of whether or not the quote was “real” in the subsequent news coverage suggests that the essential piece of the quotation was, in fact, its attribution. The quote needed the legitimacy of King's name, of his ethos, and if it came from another source, it was not worth repeating. But neither the quote nor its attribution function as an argument for *replication* of the quote. At best, the quote may be read in an epideictic vein—as a kind of demand *not* to celebrate bin Laden's death—but there is nothing in the text itself that moves the audience to *spread* this injunction. At a discursive level, then, the passage of the King quotation from one Facebook friend to another remains a puzzling phenomenon.

This puzzle is resolved, however, by considering the relationship between the discursive and non-discursive elements of the King quote. At the non-discursive level, it is essential to note that the quote circulated on social networking websites—particularly, Facebook.<sup>203</sup> These websites, like all media platforms, extend and constrain the agency of their users, and these extensions and constraints constitute non-discursive, procedural

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<sup>202</sup> Bell, “Martin Luther King, Jr. Misquoted.”

<sup>203</sup> Though Facebook was not the *only* site on which this quote circulated, I have limited my discussion to this platform for two reasons: First, the quote originated on Facebook; and second, the quote's migration to other platforms introduced additional dimensions of representation. For example, the quote consists of over twice as many characters as the maximum limit for a single Twitter post, which would necessitate that the quote be split in half when transferred from Facebook to Twitter.

rhetorics independent of the discursive content of the sites themselves. On Facebook specifically, this can be most plainly seen in the way that users' relationships are structured: All relationships are initially treated as fundamentally equal (i.e., all bonds between users are "friendships"), and differentiation between relationships must be subsequently implemented by the use. In other words, even though Facebook allows for the cultivation of different kinds of social links (e.g., privacy settings that vary by social group), the platform's default is a radical equivalence of social connections. This stands in contrast to the approach that other social networking sites take—for example, on Google Plus, connections are initially registered on the platform not as generalized "friends" but as members of specific groups—and points to the ways in which the non-discursive structuring of relationships on a social networking site itself constitutes an argument for what counts as sociality.

But Facebook does not only advance a non-discursive, procedural argument with regard to social relationships; it also structures the ways in which users may relate to their own communication on Facebook. The basic interface of Facebook consists of a presentation of discrete segments of content—posts from friends, etc.—paired with specific affordances for users to respond to this content: Users may "like" content, share content, or comment on it. It is entirely possible, of course, for users to respond to content in a number of other ways—for example, through a private message to another user—and no response is *required*. But the fact that Facebook, as a platform, consistently pairs every discrete portion of content with these three avenues of response means that the platform encourages a particular relation to that content: To respond is to like, share, or comment.

But the key point is not simply that Facebook privileges this trio of responses. Rather, it is that this trio contributes to a common relationship between users and their own communication: “Like,” “share,” and “comment” blur the boundary between informative and phatic communication.<sup>204</sup> This is most evident in the case of the “like” link, which may very well indicate actual enjoyment—but in the absence of its binary opposite, may function instead as merely a confirmation that a message has reached an audience. This same ambiguity carries over to the share function—is sharing an endorsement of the shared content, or perhaps just a marker of the sharer’s momentary disposition? And even comments may be disavowed—e.g., “I didn’t say that; I was hacked.” So it is not just that Facebook pushes users towards these three forms of response, but also that it pushes them towards responses which are easily disavowed, responses that may be understood as phatic rather than informative. This relationship to communication, combined with the ease at which content may be duplicated—either through the “share” function or the slightly more laborious copy and paste—means that the structure of Facebook advances a procedural argument about how users should respond to content: Sharing is easy, and the user need not bear the weight of what they have shared.

Of course, there are obvious economic reasons for this. As a business, Facebook depends on its users in the same way that broadcast media platforms depend on audiences: Television produces an audience-commodity, and Facebook produces an analogous

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<sup>204</sup> See Vincent Miller, “New Media, Networking, and Phatic Culture,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 14, no. 4 (2008): 387–400, doi:10.1177/1354856508094659; and Michele Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media: How We Use Language to Create Affiliation on the Web*, Continuum Discourse (London: Continuum, 2012), 28–30.

commodity, albeit one centered on users.<sup>205</sup> This production of user-commodities includes the passive use of Facebook (e.g., users' viewing habits are commodified) as well as more active use. But this passive use itself depends on a steady supply of new content, so it makes sense that Facebook should be biased toward activity that will in turn spur further activity: Users add content for other users to like, and so on. The key point of this structure, from a rhetorical perspective, is that Facebook advances a procedural argument for understanding Facebook use as active, *regardless of the content of that activity*. The platform does not specify *what* users should share, only that they *should* share. Economically, all that matters for Facebook is that its users are active, and the platform advances its argument accordingly. Thus, at a non-discursive level, at the level of the structure of the platform itself, the demand of Facebook is: Share!

With this background of the non-discursive, procedural rhetoric of the platform established, it is possible to make sense of the King quotation on a discursive level. The spread of the King quote, as a social phenomenon, emerges not out of a rhetorical appeal within the text of the quote itself (i.e., at a discursive level), but rather from the structure of the platform on which it was originally shared (i.e., at a non-discursive level). The procedural rhetoric of Facebook is a demand to like, comment, and share content, and the discursive content of the King quotation only functions secondarily to this non-discursive rhetoric. The quotation itself draws on both the timeliness of its content (i.e., it voices a particular sentiment) and King's ethos, but it draws on these only to supplement an already-existing rhetoric within the platform itself.

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<sup>205</sup> For a consideration of the notion of the audience-commodity as it relates to Facebook, see Christian Fuchs, "The Political Economy of Privacy on Facebook," *Television & New Media* 13, no. 2 (2012): 139–159, doi:10.1177/1527476411415699.

### **@Anti\_Racism\_Dog**

The third and final configuration reverses the relationship of the second; instead of the discursive supplementing the non-discursive, the latter supplements the former. This configuration of rhetoric can be seen in the short-lived Twitter account, @Anti\_Racism\_Dog, whose self-described purpose was “to sniff out and alert others to racism.”<sup>206</sup> The “sniffing” here was not metaphorical in the usual sense, because @Anti\_Racism\_Dog quite literally adopted the persona of a detection dog: Under this guise, @Anti\_Racism\_Dog would seek and respond to various Twitter posts that it deemed to be racist. Furthermore, these responses were fully in keeping with the non-linguistic character of the dog, in that @Anti\_Racism\_Dog’s tweets consisted of *barking*—for example, “AWOOO AWOOOO woof woof AWOOOOOOOO.”<sup>207</sup>

As Malcolm Harris notes in an essay on Twitter,<sup>208</sup> @Anti\_Racism\_Dog’s barking primarily responded to a specific form of racist speech: the “color-blind racism” theorized by sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva.<sup>209</sup> Such racism is “justified through appeals to supposedly objective discourses like science and statistics,” and it “defends itself by appeals to neutrality and meritocracy, [while] accusing its adversaries of being ‘the real

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<sup>206</sup> Since the @Anti\_Racism\_Dog account was shut down by Twitter, it is no longer accessible through the Twitter website. However, the account is archived at “@Anti\_Racism\_Dog’s (Anti-Racism Dog) Best Tweets,” *Favstar*, accessed October 16, 2013, [http://favstar.fm/users/anti\\_racism\\_dog](http://favstar.fm/users/anti_racism_dog).

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>208</sup> Malcolm Harris, “Twitterland,” *Overland*, accessed August 23, 2012, <http://overland.org.au/previous-issues/issue-208/feature-malcolm-harris/>.

<sup>209</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010).

racists.”<sup>210</sup> Harris further argues that color-blind racism is “hard to combat rhetorically” because it “feed[s] on good-faith debate,” while always attempting to ground the debate on some third-party, “objective” source. Exemplary of this strategy is the behavior of one Twitter user targeted by @Anti\_Racism\_Dog: After being accused (via *woof*) of racism, the user immediately offered a (literal) dictionary definition of racism as proof of the non-racist character of the original post.<sup>211</sup> Here the argumentative strategy may be abstracted to: “You say X is racist, but third-party entity Y says it is not racist. Therefore, X is not racist.” Left unquestioned in this strategy, of course, is the authority of Y—but in many ways, the specificity of Y is beside the point. The formula itself may be repeated *ad nauseam* with a new authority in the place of Y, and by this repetition the debate is sustained. Here color-blind racism intersects with the practice of Internet trolling: The maintenance of the exchange is an end unto itself.

But @Anti\_Racism\_Dog did something to disrupt this dynamic; it “inverted the usual balance of energy in online dialogs [*sic*] about race.”<sup>212</sup> Color-blind racism *depends* on the existence of a good-faith partner for debate—i.e., it needs the opportunity to justify itself as “objective” and distinct from other forms of “subjective” racism—and by adopting the persona of a dog, @Anti\_Racism\_Dog preemptively foreclosed this possibility. In other words, the dog persona allowed the account to intervene in the discourse of Twitter *without submitting to the demands of conversation and debate*. After all, how does one debate with a dog? Thus, @Anti\_Racism\_Dog worked rhetorically by feigning an

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<sup>210</sup> Harris, “Twitterland.”

<sup>211</sup> “Man Argues With Dog on Twitter (with Tweets),” *Storify*, accessed October 17, 2013, <http://storify.com/justSullivan/man-argues-with-dog-on-twitter>.

<sup>212</sup> Harris, “Twitterland.”

abandonment of rhetoric: Like any good detection dog, @Anti\_Racism\_Dog simply “smelled” racist speech and responded accordingly.

Of course, this thread of @Anti\_Racism\_Dog’s rhetorical strategy functions entirely at the level of discourse. The dog’s pre-symbolic *woof* is still represented by the signifier “woof,” and the meaning of this “woof” is still determined by @Anti\_Racism\_Dog’s discursive construction of itself as anti-racist. As such, the persona of @Anti\_Racism\_Dog is not tied to the specific non-discursive conditions of Twitter as a platform; the anti-racist dog persona could very well be adopted in a number of other media and communicative contexts. In other words, it is the *discursive* rhetoric of @Anti\_Racism\_dog that is primary here. The non-discursive is not an essential aspect of @Anti\_Racism\_Dog in the same way that it is, for example, in the positioning of the analysand’s couch.

But even if the non-discursive plays no essential role in the rhetoric of @Anti\_Racism\_Dog, there is a way to understand it as playing a secondary role. Specifically, this can be seen in the way that Twitter, as a platform, structures its users’ experience of their own communication as *objects* which may be subject to objective assessment rather than subjective interpretation. At the most basic level, this can be seen in Twitter’s presentation of user tweets as a searchable database, in the form of what Michele Zappavigna calls “searchable talk.”<sup>213</sup> Of course, Twitter is far from the only platform to present user communication in this fashion, and the database form is part and parcel of the management of a digital communication platform.<sup>214</sup> But even if tweets are searchable

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<sup>213</sup> Michele Zappavigna, “Ambient Affiliation: A Linguistic Perspective on Twitter,” *New Media & Society* 13, no. 5 (2011): 788–806, doi:10.1177/1461444810385097.

<sup>214</sup> For a consideration of the database as a foundational element of digital media, see Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Leonardo (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

“behind the scenes” (i.e., searchable by system administrators), it is not necessary that *users* be able to search. And by offering this particular affordance to users (i.e., the ability to search), by giving users the ability to explore algorithmically-defined relationships between search terms and tweet results, Twitter advances a procedural argument about the nature of tweets: They can be classified *objectively*. Unlike the communicative relationship between a question and an answer, which entails a modicum of interpretive complexity, the relationship between search terms and search results is a function of code, and therefore admits no ambiguity. Search results are never “wrong”; they correspond perfectly to that which requested them, even if this correspondence is not what the searcher originally had in mind.<sup>215</sup>

This push toward the objectification of communication is even more evident in Twitter’s most famous contribution to digital culture: the hashtag. In the context of Twitter and similar platforms, hashtags are

shared keywords or abbreviations preceded by the hash symbol ‘#’ which enable the manual or automatic collation of all tweets containing the same #hashtag, as well allowing users to subscribe to content feeds that contain only those tweets which feature specific #hashtags.<sup>216</sup>

Though hashtags were originally a user-devised mechanism, and drew their inspiration from the much earlier use of the # symbol in online chat rooms, the hashtag eventually became an integral part of the platform of Twitter, so much so that hashtags are treated as fundamentally different—and even *more* easily searchable—that other text in Twitter. Use

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<sup>215</sup> Of course, this correspondence itself may become ground for contention, as can be seen in the case of search engine optimization, and in the practice of Google bombing.

<sup>216</sup> Axel Bruns, “How Long Is a Tweet? Mapping Dynamic Conversation Networks on Twitter Using Gawk and Gephi,” *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 9 (2012): 1324, doi:10.1080/1369118X.2011.635214.

of hashtags on Twitter is optional, of course, but again the very possibility offered by this affordance advances an argument about how Twitter users should relate to their own speech: The hashtag is a means of explicitly marking speech as an object, as an explicit part of the Twitter database.<sup>217</sup> These markings are then captured by Twitter in the site’s “trends” list—a list of “topics that are immediately popular, rather than topics that have been popular for a while or on a daily basis”<sup>218</sup>—which again structures a relationship to speech-as-object: Particular hashtags *are* trending, regardless of their specific use (e.g., endorsement of the hashtag, ironic manipulation of it) in particular tweets. The trends list stands as an objective assessment—albeit an assessment filtered through an algorithm—of what people are tweeting, regardless of the meaning of the tweets.

This logic of objectified communication is taken to the extreme in the case of Twitterbots—algorithmically managed Twitter accounts that, upon detecting a particular word or phrase in a given tweet, reply with a standard answer or set of answers. For example, the account @StealthMountain automatically sends the reply “I think you meant ‘sneak peek’” to tweets that include the misspelled phrase “sneak peak.”<sup>219</sup> Another account, styled as swordsman Inigo Montoya of *The Princess Bride*, responds to tweets containing the word “inconceivable” with the character’s memorable lines: “You keep using

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<sup>217</sup> As Twitter advises developers, “Think of [hashtags] like choosing what a Tweet is filed under.” See “Best Practices for Hashtags,” *Twitter*, accessed October 23, 2013, <https://dev.twitter.com/media/hashtags>.

<sup>218</sup> “FAQs About Trends on Twitter,” *Twitter*, accessed October 22, 2013, <https://support.twitter.com/articles/101125-faqs-about-trends-on-twitter#>.

<sup>219</sup> “Stealth Mountain (StealthMountain) on Twitter,” *Twitter*, accessed October 19, 2013, <https://twitter.com/StealthMountain>.

that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”<sup>220</sup> And though these accounts are meant as no more than amusing novelties, their very existence points to the objectified status of communication on Twitter: Replies on Twitter may not be replies at all, but rather algorithmic reactions—an objective assessment of whether or not a certain word is in a tweet.

The parallel between @Anti\_Racism\_Dog’s persona and the genre of the Twitterbot is clear: Both treat discourse as something that may be objectively assessed, apart from interpretation. The key difference is that the latter really *is* an objective, unbiased reaction to particular tweets; the Twitterbot fully objectifies the tweet. And it is against this backdrop—that is, against the potential for the objective assessment of tweets—that @Anti\_Racism\_Dog advances its own rhetoric. Even though @Anti\_Racism\_Dog *could* exist on other platforms, the non-discursive structure of Twitter—its treatment of discourse as object—supplements @Anti\_Racism\_Dog’s feigning of objectivity. It is not just that, as a detection dog, @Anti\_Racism\_Dog may make unbiased assessments about what is and is not racist. All of this rhetoric occurs on a platform where communication can and *is* objectified in this manner, and this only strengthens the rhetoric of @Anti\_Racism\_Dog’s persona.

### Three Articulations

The commonality of these examples is that they exert their rhetorical force through the management of audience responses—albeit at different levels—and in doing so, they promote a particular subjectification of the audience. In the case of *The McDonald’s*

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<sup>220</sup> “Inigo Montoya (iaminigomontoya) on Twitter,” *Twitter*, accessed October 19, 2013, <https://twitter.com/iaminigomontoya>.

*Videogame*, the audience response is articulated as *gameplay*, so both the rules of the game and the representation of those rules play a role in managing this response. In the case of the King quote, the audience's response to Facebook as a platform is articulated as *sharing*, so the quote only serves as a catalyst for articulation. And in the case of @Anti\_Racism\_Dog, the point is precisely to bar articulation completely, through use of both the extra-linguistic dog persona and Twitter's own structuring of searchable talk.

To make sense of these cases and their functioning, it is necessary to abandon the notion of the self-contained, harmonious rhetorical appeal. Multiple rhetorics may be active in any given instance, and they may work together or against each other in a number of ways. These rhetorics may be discursive, or they may be "material" and non-discursive, but they *all* exert rhetorical force—though not necessarily equal force.

When this range of forces is taken into account—when discourse and non-discourse are treated equally—rhetorical criticism is much better positioned to analyze hitherto problematic phenomena. Such a perspective allows rhetorical criticism to take into account perverse rhetoric—i.e., rhetoric that undermines itself and thus produces no action—instead of writing it off as a rhetorical "failure" due to some flaw in delivery or content. It also allows rhetorical criticism to account for phenomena, like the King quote, which seem not to advance a discursive rhetoric at all. And it enables an understanding of how particular discursive appeals may be especially effective—or, for that matter, ineffective—on certain platforms or non-discursive structures.

## CONCLUSION

According to Lacan, “psychoanalysis has but one medium: the patient’s speech.”<sup>221</sup>

This claim points not only to the technical foundations of psychoanalysis—the analysand, reclined on the couch, speaking freely to the analyst—but also to what Adrian Johnston calls “one of the most philosophically subversive features of psychoanalytic metapsychology”: the manner in which psychoanalysis erodes

the distinction between an ephemeral, intangible *Innenwelt* (as, for instance, the ideal realm of subjective mind, replete with its mental activities and insubstantial representational contents) and a tangible, weighty *Umwelt* (as, primarily, the “raw matter” making up everything that simultaneously opposes yet complements immaterial mind and its representations).<sup>222</sup>

It may seem that psychoanalysis is concerned with the inner life—with the mind—but

Lacan makes this clear that this is not the case:

If you open a book of Freud, and particularly those books which are properly about the unconscious, you can be absolutely sure—it is not a probability but a certitude—to fall on a page where it is not only a question of words—naturally in a book there are always words, many printed words—but words which are the object through which one seeks for a way to handle the unconscious. Not even the meaning of the words, but words in their flesh, in their material aspect.<sup>223</sup>

It is upon this “material aspect” of words that psychoanalysis ultimately places its bets. The wager of psychoanalysis is that “words in their flesh”—*saying* as it separates from *meaning*—are revelatory precisely because subjectification is something that exists in the world, something that is embodied in words as objects in the most material sense. Žižek

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<sup>221</sup> Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech,” 206.

<sup>222</sup> Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology*, 87.

<sup>223</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Of Structure as an Inmixing of Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever,” in *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), 187.

takes this materialism a step further by insisting on its most radical formation: Words and things are *both* material insofar as they form subjectifying restrictions on the freedom of the subject. And this equality between words and things—an equality that nevertheless preserves the ability of words and things to be materially distinct even if they are equally material—allows rhetoric to push into new arenas, to consider rhetoric beyond discourse alone.

In this thesis, I have endeavored to show how this materialist aspect of psychoanalysis may apply to rhetoric, and may respond to the discipline's need to engage with rhetoric beyond the limits of discourse. I began with the problem of perversion, and showed how a psychoanalytic understanding of this problem hinged on the question of *articulation*—that is, do the bounds of communication allow the articulation of a perverse subject position? In the second chapter, I turned to materiality, and demonstrated that in a Žižekian reading of subjectification, words and things may both play a role in determining whether a particular articulation of a subject position is permissible. And finally, in the third chapter, I added nuance to this claim, by showing how even if words and things may both play an influential role in shaping subjectification, they do not necessarily play the same roles—they may be in conflict, one may be secondary to the other, and so on. The end result of this is a theoretical apparatus that is able to consider rhetoric as it exists in discourse on an equal level with rhetoric as it exists outside of discourse. In other words, it is an apparatus that possesses equal facility with words and things. This opens a broad critical horizon: “Failed” rhetorical claims may be explained instead of dismissed, and seemingly non-rhetorical objects may be understood as offering a secondary rhetoric to a deeper, non-discursive rhetoric.

Once, in a work aimed at very different ends from this thesis, Walter Benjamin observed that psychoanalysis “enriched our field of perception”:

Fifty years ago, a slip of the tongue passed more or less unnoticed. Only exceptionally may such a slip have revealed dimensions of depth in conversation which had seemed to be taking its course on the surface. Since the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* things have changed. This book isolated and made analyzable things which had heretofore floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception.<sup>224</sup>

Ultimately, a Žižekian formulation of psychoanalysis has an effect on rhetoric much in parallel with Benjamin’s observation: This materialist psychoanalysis isolates and makes analyzable a whole host of rhetorical processes, both discursive and non-discursive, that have hitherto “floated along unnoticed” in rhetorical studies.

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<sup>224</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 235.

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