



ART AS SYMPTOM

ZIŽEK AND THE ETHICS OF PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM

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This paper tackles a problem that is exemplified by, but not restricted to, Slavoj Žižek's work: the tendency to treat aesthetic artifacts as symptoms of the culture in which they were produced. Whether or not one employs the vocabulary and methods of psychoanalysis to do so, this approach to aesthetics has become so widespread in the humanities that it qualifies as a contemporary critical norm. As a norm, it may be subject to debate and even contestation. Today it is normative to read literature, film, and other cultural texts primarily as evidence about the societies that made them—evidence that necessarily requires our hermeneutic labor in order to yield its significance. This methodological protocol remains in place whether one inhabits critical perspectives as ostensibly disparate as historicist, materialist, or psychoanalytic modes of thinking; it is also a grounding assumption of cultural studies, irrespective of how one defines that critical practice. Indeed, the issue I want to address is quite as much a Marxist problem as it is a psychoanalytic one, and therefore the way in which Žižek articulates Lacan with Marx makes his work especially fertile terrain on which to engage this matter. As Žižek reminds us in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Lacan claimed that Marx invented the symptom [SO 11]—an observation that Žižek has been keen to exploit from the very beginning of his work.

Žižek's combining psychoanalysis with Marxism in novel ways has helped make Lacan more palatable to contemporary critical sensibilities by politicizing psychoanalysis, demonstrating how it offers less an account of the individual than of society and culture. In Žižek's hands psychoanalytic theory appears less vulnerable to the standard criticisms that it is ahistorical and apolitical. While a number of critiques of Žižek have reiterated these common objections, nevertheless his politicizing of psychoanalysis has been particularly important during a period that witnessed the rise of new historicism, the institutionalization of cultural studies, and the escalating importance of "the political" as a sign—perhaps *the* sign—of humanities professors' seriousness.¹ Žižek's work has gone a long way toward making Lacan seem indispensable to cultural studies, just as Juliet Mitchell's and Jacqueline Rose's work a decade earlier made Lacan seem indispensable to theoretically rigorous feminism. At a moment when the poststructuralist variant of Lacanian theory was being displaced by historicist modes of thought, Žižek emerged on the scene to revivify psychoanalysis and make it exciting again. Thus his work's appeal has an historical basis quite apart from Žižek's own personal charisma and his remarkable productivity. It is his politicizing of psychoanalysis, as much as his

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1. For significant considerations of the politics of Žižek's work, see Bellamy; Chow; Guerra; Miklitsch; Resch, "Running"; Resch, "Sound." Whereas these studies focus on the political implications of Žižekian thinking, the present study concerns the different (though related) question of the ethical ramifications of his work.

rendering Lacan newly accessible, that has made Žižek popular. I want to argue, however, that his style of politicizing psychoanalysis carries a significant ethical cost, one that follows partly as a consequence of Žižek's failure to work through his theoretical relation to Althusser, from whom he derives the practice of symptomatic reading while claiming to displace the latter's version of psychoanalytic Marxism. Thus I shall be arguing for a significant distinction between a political and an ethical psychoanalysis, suggesting that we have been cultivating the former at the expense of the latter.

Spaghetti Psychoanalysis

The notion of the symptom is central to Žižek's thinking about politics and culture. Although in his work and in psychoanalytic theory more generally the term *symptom* carries a range of conceptual meanings, symptomatology remains the governing trope of Žižek's oeuvre. Following Lacan, who continued to modify the concept of the symptom throughout his career, Žižek argues that just about anything can be understood as symptomatic:

[I]n the final years of Lacan's teaching we find a kind of universalization of the symptom: almost everything that is becomes in a way symptom, so that finally even woman is determined as the symptom of man. We can even say that "symptom" is Lacan's final answer to the eternal philosophical question "Why is there something instead of nothing?"—this "something" which "is" instead of nothing is indeed the symptom. [SO 71–72]

If, for reasons to be elaborated, virtually anything can be considered a symptom, then this conceptual move illuminates how Žižek can write about everything, how he seems able to render all cultural phenomena as grist to his theoretical mill. Having grasped the structural logic of the symptom, one may submit practically anything of interest to its explanatory grid. And while Žižek expounds more than merely one logic of symptom formation, his structural logics—like his many books—tend to remain variations on a single theme.

If, according to Lacan at the end of his career, the symptom has become a condition of subjective existence rather than a contingent problem, then there can be no possibility of *curing* symptoms in the manner that Freud envisioned when he invented psychoanalysis. Yet while this universalizing of symptomatology sidelines the question of cure, it does nothing to diminish the psychoanalytic zeal for diagnosis and interpretation. Instead, the opposite is true: universalizing the symptom fuels the motive for diagnosis and interpretation, since symptoms are no longer localized and self-evident but lurking everywhere. A hermeneutic operation becomes necessary before we can see how, for example, woman is the symptom of man.² By shifting symptoms from the category of the exception to that of the rule, Žižek to some extent depathologizes the symptom, converting it into a subjective norm. But to the degree that his method requires a diagnostic stance (insofar as it encourages an intensified hermeneutic vigilance vis-à-vis the cultural field), Žižek's symptomatology raises questions about the ethics of diagnosis. While Lacan's universalizing of the symptom provokes fundamental

2. Žižek elaborates this particular example in *Enjoy Your Symptom!* [31–67]. The characterization of woman as the symptom of man may be understood as a heterosexist correlate of the Lacanian axiom that there is no sexual relation ("il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel"). Although space prevents me from taking up this example of the symptom, I have pursued some of the issues it raises for sexual politics in Dean, "Homosexuality."

epistemological questions too, my primary concern lies with the ethical implications of a critical approach that regards the universe as perpetually in need of interpretation. Reading one's world in terms of symptoms positions one as a hermeneut with a particular relation to the world—a relation of suspicion and putative mastery. Although Žižek repeatedly points out that one can never master one's "own" symptom (but only enjoy it), his method nonetheless situates the critic in a position of hermeneutic mastery over the social and cultural symptoms he or she diagnoses. One cannot help noticing that in his dozen or so books no cultural artifact poses any resistance to Žižek's hermeneutic energy; there is no social system or movie or opera or novel that he cannot interpret. We might say that there seems to be no cultural phenomenon that, with his Lacanian schema, Žižek cannot master.³

Žižek's hermeneutic voracity—what Tom Cohen characterizes as his approaching "the vast samples of American popular culture with vampirelike urgency" [356]—could be understood as but one more instance of psychoanalysis's imperialism, its tendency to find exemplifications of its principles everywhere it turns [see Derrida; Meltzer]. I would suggest, however, that viewing cultural phenomena through the lens of symptomatology points to a larger problem, one that pertains to not only psychoanalytic criticism but also Marxism, historicism, and cultural studies. The problem lies in the way that treating aesthetic artifacts as cultural symptoms elides the specificity of art, making cultural forms too readily apprehensible as what Žižek, in one definition of the symptom, calls "the point of emergence of the truth about social relations" [SO 26]. Of course, the category of art—and, more broadly, that of aesthetic experience—does not appear in Žižek's work; speaking of "art" when discussing post-Lacanian ideology critique may appear as quaintly anachronistic. But that is exactly my point. Despite his interest in Kantian philosophy and his evocation of the sublime, Žižek's approach to culture and society leaves little conceptual space for any consideration of aesthetic effects or their significance.⁴

This is an ethical problem because it eradicates dimensions of alterity particular to art, making any encounter with the difficulty and strangeness of aesthetic experience seem beside the point. Rather than finding any moments of opacity or resistance to his hermeneutic schemes when engaging aesthetic artifacts, Žižek finds only a familiar scenario—one that his readers now recognize quickly too. Although he speaks almost continuously about otherness, no actual instances of otherness are permitted to interrupt his interpretive discourse. And while Žižek's approach exemplifies this problem especially strikingly, it is far from limited to his work. Business as usual throughout the humanities proceeds as if thinking about art symptomatically—as a "point of emergence of the truth about social relations"—were the only credible alternative to thinking about art as

3. See, for example, Žižek's analysis of *September 11*, which began circulating online merely weeks after the event [Welcome]. As Louis Menand points out apropos of Žižek and others, the intellectual certainty manifested on the Left in the wake of 9/11 is itself rather troubling:

The initial response of most cultural and political critics to the attacks of September 11th—a completely unanticipated atrocity carried out by an organization that few people in the West had ever heard of and whose intentions are still not entirely comprehensible—was: It just proves what I've always said. . . . The surprising thing about most of the published reflections on September 11th is how devoid of surprise they are. They are so devoid of surprise as to be almost devoid of thought. [98]

4. Rey Chow notes, in passing, this feature of Žižek's work: "Whether he is reading literature, film, jokes, comics, science fiction, philosophy, or anything else, Žižek is seldom interested in the problem of aesthetic form and its relation to (the construction of) subjectivity as such" [7].

the creation of transcendent genius. I find both of these alternatives unsatisfactory because both effectively make art transparent, reducing its alterity to more familiar terms. In what follows, I elucidate the epistemological implications of Žižek's notion of the sociocultural symptom, before pursuing its ethical implications and suggesting how psychoanalysis might provide some conceptual resources for a more ethically defensible approach to aesthetics.

Arguing for the Real

Thus far my critique of Žižek has argued that his combining Hegelian Marxism with Lacanian psychoanalysis conduces to a critical perspective on cultural matters that makes aesthetic forms overly familiar, rendering them instantly recognizable as the products of ideological conflict. Were it not that symptomatic reading constitutes the approach I wish to critique, I would say that Žižek's work itself stands as the symptom of a much larger critical problem. In other words, I have suggested that Žižek makes art too familiar and that this critical tendency itself can be seen as dispiritingly familiar. But it must be acknowledged that the appearance, in 1989, of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* inaugurated an innovative approach in the history of psychoanalytic criticism. It was not something familiar but a wonderfully strange new critical voice that we heard when we began reading Žižek. He revived psychoanalytic criticism by making it more political, more philosophical, and ultimately more popular; and he achieved all this by shifting the emphasis from analyses of imaginary and symbolic representations to an engagement with that which resists representation: the real.

Following Jacques-Alain Miller's systematic periodization of Lacanian thought, Žižek focuses his sharpest attention on the "late Lacan," wherein the concept of the real—along with the notions of drive, *jouissance*, Thing, and *objet petit a* associated with it—comes to the fore. Lacan's insistence throughout the 1950s on the subjective importance of the signifier gave way (circa 1960) to a growing interest in what the signifier could not accommodate and, indeed, what animates the symbolic universe in the first place.⁵ With the waning of structuralism and its emphasis on the quasideterminist role of symbolic structures in human life, Lacan began expending greater speculative energy on the *underdetermination* of subjectivity by symbolic forms. Whereas the concept of overdetermination derived from psychoanalytic hermeneutics (specifically, *The Interpretation of Dreams*) had promised a theory of subject formation that seemed compatible with Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, in fact the multiply determining relations created by chains of signifiers connected in a symbolic network could never *completely* determine the subjective effects they were invoked to explain. There is always something left over, something unexplained by symbolic determination. Hence Freud's observations about the enigmatic "navel of the dream"; hence, too, Lacan's attempts to theorize this subjective underdetermination via a range of terms and concepts (principally that of *l'objet petit a*).

Paradoxically the Freudian understanding of overdetermination leads to a radically nondeterminist theory of subjectivity; Lacan's account of the symbolic order's constitutive effects does not revoke all notions of subjective agency, as often has been assumed in Anglo-American debates about the ideological consequences of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

5. Žižek locates this shift in Lacan's seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–60* [Žižek, "Undergrowth" 7]. The publication of this seminar in 1986 and its translation into English in 1992 provide dates that circumscribe the period during which Žižek was in the process of emerging as the intellectual figure that we know today.

To discredit the notion of individual autonomy is not to nullify agency *tout court*. Much of the confusion on this score stems from a reluctance to engage the theoretical debates of psychoanalytic Marxism, particularly Althusser's account of the overdetermination of social contradictions and the consequent relative autonomy of various social practices, including the aesthetic [Althusser, "Contradiction"]. The Althusserian concept of "relative autonomy" is one to which I shall return; for now I want to register simply that it is the implications of symbolic *underdetermination* for an account of political agency that Žižek has been intent on developing throughout his work.

He has tried to accomplish this by explaining the Lacanian real—that which resists representation—in terms of a notion of antagonism drawn from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's post-Marxian theory of radical democracy. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), Laclau and Mouffe employ the term *antagonism* to describe an ideological field's discursive failure to fully constitute itself. Rather than being considered incidental, such failure actually structures the ideological field, while also providing opportunities for political struggle and, in principle, the possibility of social change. Inspired by this constellation of ideas, Žižek proceeded to rewrite Laclau and Mouffe's notion of discursive failure in terms of the Lacanian real, arguing that any symbolic universe is structured by that which it cannot accommodate and therefore necessarily excludes. We might say that Žižek pumps up the concept of the real, developing it from a relatively passive notion of inherent limit to something like the *raison d'être* of all discursive activity—ideological, cultural, and otherwise. He does this by redefining the connection between the symbolic and the real: more than as a relation of heterogeneity, in which the symbolic cannot apprehend and therefore by definition does not include the real, Žižek pictures the symbolic's exclusion of the real as constitutive, as its founding instance and that which fuels symbolic machinery even as it threatens to disrupt it. It is this *relation* that Žižek describes using the term "antagonism" (or "deadlock" or "impossibility," as he also often characterizes it). Thus whereas Laclau and Mouffe conceptualize antagonism somewhat deconstructively in terms of discursive failure or contradiction, Žižek conceptualizes antagonism more insistently in terms of the unsymbolizable real, thereby shifting the accent in a way that has generated considerable debate among these thinkers.⁶

When Žižek characterizes the ideological field as constituted around a deadlock that by definition does not admit of discursive or practical manipulation, the possibilities for political struggle and melioration start to seem bleak. Skepticism concerning the political implications of Žižek's psychoanalytic account of ideology has led to disagreement over the status of the Lacanian real as *constitutively* excluded from symbolic formations. For example, Judith Butler has argued that what is constitutively excluded from the sociosymbolic order should be subject to political rearticulation, and therefore that to hypostasize the real as definitively unsymbolizable is effectively to secure a social system that excludes various minorities (including queers) by shunting their lives

6. In his *afterword to Laclau's New Reflections*, Žižek is explicit about this distinction, insisting that "[w]e must then distinguish the experience of antagonism in its radical form, as a limit of the social, as the impossibility around which the social field is structured, from antagonism as the relation between antagonistic subject-positions: in Lacanian terms, we must distinguish antagonism as real from the social reality of the antagonistic fight" [Žižek, "Beyond" 253; original emphases]. The question of the relation between Žižek's use of the notion of antagonism and Laclau's is one of the topics addressed in Butler, Laclau, and Žižek's *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. See also Laclau ["Theory," esp. 15], where he makes clear the limits of his agreement with Žižek's construing antagonism in terms of the real. In his most recent thinking, Laclau wishes to align the real with his concept of dislocation and to retain an understanding of antagonism as discursive, not real.

into zones of the unthinkable and unlivable.⁷ The problem in this debate is—and always has been—the ideological implications of the real; thus the aspect of Lacanian psychoanalysis that Žižek has brought to the fore, theorizing it in book after book, is still the source of greatest misunderstanding.⁸

Having intervened in this debate on more than one occasion, I now see better than I did previously how Žižek's success in explaining the concept of the real is also paradoxically what has enabled misunderstandings to occur and, indeed, continues to reinforce rather than diminish them. Because Lacan's real can be defined only negatively (as "impossible" and *suchlike*), it is an infuriatingly abstract concept. Žižek has made the concept more accessible by illustrating it with innumerable examples, many of them drawn from the familiar world of popular culture. Thus although he maintains (correctly, in my view) that the real is inherently nonsubstantial and has no necessary positive content, he repeatedly argues this philosophical point through examples that lend the real any number of quite memorable positive contents. The appeal of Žižek's work—but also one of its greatest rhetorical drawbacks—lies in his substituting, by way of explanation, very concrete instances for highly abstract ideas. Thus we should not find it quite so puzzling that Butler seems unable to grasp this elementary concept and keeps insisting that the constitutive exclusions through which the sociosymbolic founds itself must be understood in terms of racial and sexual discrimination. She attributes to the real one kind of positive content because Žižek keeps explaining it by way of exemplifications that lend it other kinds of positive content.⁹

Enjoying the Idea of the Symptom

Another way of stating this problem would be to say that Žižek's argument about the real as nonmeaning (or resistance to meaning) tends to be accompanied by a frenzy of meaning-making activity—a dazzling hermeneutic spectacle—on his part. Resistance to meaning is one of Žižek's perennial themes, but it is never allowed to interfere with his own discursive performance. Thus although he claims that "late Lacan" takes us beyond hermeneutics (by taking us beyond the world of interpretable signifiers to that of the uninterpretable because unsymbolizable real), Žižek seems most in his element when he is busily interpreting the products of mass culture and gaily revealing their hidden significance. This disjunction between what he says and what he does suggests more than a contradiction in Žižek's idiosyncratic critical practice: it indexes the limits of symptomatic reading as an approach to culture. The hermeneutic quest for meaning assumes that true significance remains concealed until it is revealed by an interpretive act; and the notion of *symptom* embodies this assumption. There can be no symptom without an interpretant. To diagnose something as a symptom is to posit a hidden

7. Butler first took issue with Žižek's account of ideology formation in "Arguing with the Real," and developed her argument in *The Psychic Life of Power*. I discuss Butler's critique of Žižek and her misunderstanding of the real in "Bodies That Mutter."

8. In his final contribution to the exchanges collected in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, Žižek notes this problem: "Perhaps the ultimate object of contention in our debate is the status of the (Lacanian) real" [308].

9. This also sheds some light on Butler's sophistic contention that "[t]o claim that the real resists symbolization is still to symbolize the real as a kind of resistance" ["Arguing" 207]. As I demonstrate in *Beyond Sexuality* [182–83], Butler is quite mistaken here; yet in making her erroneous argument she is picking up on a significant problem in Žižek's work and throwing into relief just how difficult it is to discuss the real without in some way familiarizing and thereby betraying it.

significance that must be elicited via interpretation. Hence Lacan's early definition of the symptom as "structured like a language"—that is, as meaningful without being fully transparent [Lacan, "Function" 59].

By bringing out the semiotic aspect of the symptom—"the symptom being a metaphor in which flesh or function is taken as a signifying element"—Lacan lays the groundwork for vastly expanding the traditional psychoanalytic conception of what qualifies as a symptom [Lacan, "Agency" 166]. If a symptom can be understood as a metaphor in which part of the body or a somatic function *takes the place of a signifier*, then interpretation consists in determining what signifier or message has been replaced by that portion of the anatomy and why. The symptom's true message lies hidden behind its corporeal surrogate. In this account we observe the steps of an argument about the relation between language and organic phenomena that founds psychoanalysis, namely, that a physiological ailment (for instance, Dora's cough) may be considered a message; that the message is concealed because a substitution has occurred; and that therefore the message requires decoding via interpretation. Behind this psychoanalytic logic lies the metaphysical assumption that truth is hidden, and it is this assumption that undergirds the hermeneutic enterprise. The correlative assumption is that whatever is hidden must be true, that the subject's truth resides in what he or she conceals. Hence Lacan's remark that "[t]he symptom is in itself, through and through, signification, that is to say, truth, truth taking shape" [*Seminar 2* 320].

This account represents the early period of Lacan's theory of symptom formation, but we can see how his defining it semiotically already initiates a process of universalizing the symptom. Structured like a language, the symptom is first and foremost a sign of the unconscious; its primary message is general, not specific: *the unconscious is here, and it has something to say*. By aligning the symptom with the unconscious (both of which are defined as "structured like a language") and by identifying the truth of the symptom as concealed thanks to a metaphoric substitution, Lacan aligns subjective truth with the unconscious and implies, moreover, that this truth is hidden. Hence the necessity for interpretation to bring it out. But if the unconscious is hidden, this is not because it lies concealed inside the individual, in the depths of her mind or the recesses of his soul. Rather, the unconscious is hidden in plain view, like the purloined letter in Poe's story [Lacan, "Seminar"].¹⁰ Lacan considers the unconscious to be a property of surfaces, not of depths; hence his distinguishing psychoanalysis from depth psychology and his interest in topology, particularly the mathematical transformation of surfaces. Exterior to the self, the unconscious is that "other scene" that emerges as an effect of symbolic life and differentially affects us all. Once it too is conceived in terms of language, the symptom can be understood to afflict not only hysterics but everybody. Thus Lacan's redefinition of the symptom as *sinthome* late in his career, though it has been taken to mark a radical shift in his thinking, was always a latent possibility insofar as his description of symptoms as "structured like a language" and characterized by metaphoric substitution universalized the symptom from the start.

One significant difference between early and late Lacanian conceptions of the symptom is that the *sinthome* is said to block rather than to elicit interpretation—though the idea of the *sinthome* doesn't seem to inhibit Žižek's hermeneutic energy. In principle, however, the *sinthome* stymies interpretation because "late Lacan" shifts symptoms from the symbolic register to the real, recognizing in the symptom that which binds the subject to his or her *jouissance*. As Žižek glosses this shift: "The symptom is not only a

10. A recent instance of the idea that the unconscious involves hiding something in plain sight is offered by the British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, who describes a five-year-old girl who initiates every session by walking into his consulting room, closing her eyes, and urging Phillips to find her [Phillips 3–9].

cyphered message, it is at the same time a way for the subject to organize his enjoyment—that is why, even after the completed interpretation, the subject is not prepared to renounce his symptom; that is why he ‘loves his symptom more than himself’” [SO 74]. In this view, our symptoms are what keep us going, and therefore they cannot be removed without the risk of subjective dissolution. Symptoms provide a certain kind of satisfaction, as well as a measure of discomfort and pain. Here the symptom is no longer the result of a metaphorical substitution but rather functions as a sign of the unsubstitutable real. Lacan’s shift from thinking of symptoms in primarily symbolic to primarily real terms appeals to Žižek, who summarizes his understanding of it thus: “This, then, is a symptom: a particular, ‘pathological,’ signifying formation, a binding of enjoyment, an inert stain resisting communication and interpretation, a stain which cannot be included in the circuit of discourse, of social bond network, but is at the same time a positive condition of it” [SO 75]. Here we have encapsulated the structural logic of symptom formation that Žižek employs throughout his work.

It is remarkable that in this synopsis of the symptom’s logic Žižek makes no mention of the unconscious. Whereas for Freud and Lacan the symptom functions first and foremost as a sign of the unconscious—whether of an unconscious wish or an unconscious message—for Žižek the symptom functions as a sign of the real, “an inert stain resisting communication and interpretation.” For Freud the symptom represents a compromise formation, a product of the conflict between unconscious wishes and the forces of repression; for Žižek, however, the symptom is a product of antagonism between language and the real. Thus Žižek converts the central Freudian idea of compromise (*der Kompromiß*) into a modified notion of Laclauian antagonism. He nevertheless remains in accord with classical psychoanalytic theory when it comes to the dimension of satisfaction that consolidates the symptom and makes it so hard to dislodge. What Žižek describes as “a binding of enjoyment” (or *jouissance*), Freud locates in the symptom as a “substitute-formation,” whereby the satisfaction found in the symptom has replaced the instinctual process that has been affected by defense [Freud, *Inhibitions* 145]. In Freudian terms, this substitution can be understood *economically* as a process in which the symptom provides an unconscious wish with a surrogate satisfaction; and it can be understood *symbolically* as the process through which one unconscious idea is replaced by another according to certain chains of association [Laplanche and Pontalis 434]. Thus both “early” and “late” Lacanian accounts of the symptom—the symptom as a metaphorical substitution (a “ciphred message”) and the *sinthome* as a condensation of *jouissance*—can be regarded as latent in Freud.

Thanks to its theory of the unconscious, psychoanalysis tacitly universalizes symptomatology from its inception. Epistemologically this universalization problematizes the symptom’s medical status, while at the same time facilitating symptomatology’s transposition from the clinical to the cultural realm. Indeed, originally the symptom was just as much a cultural idea as a medical one, according to Marjorie Garber in *Symptoms of Culture*, so we should not trouble ourselves unduly about its epistemological status from a clinical point of view.¹¹ All it takes to extend the logic of

11. See Garber: “It might be supposed that the word symptom itself began as a medical term and became more broadly and metaphorically applied, over time, to other realms of inquiry, but in fact this is not the case. Symptoms were from the beginning broadly defined cultural indicators; it is symptomatic of our own desire to classify, categorize, and limit, that we should think of them in a more restricted pathological sense” [3]. While Garber’s approach to culture, in this and other books, exemplifies the kind of critical method that is the target of my critique, I would like to distinguish her perspective from Žižek’s. Although she alludes to Žižek in *Symptoms of Culture*, Garber is interested more in symbolic networks and their metonymic displacements than in the real. She claims as her inspiration the hermeneutical model laid out in *The Interpretation of*

symptom formation to culture and society is to conceive of the social as a space of conflict, since symptoms are the result—and hence a sign—of conflict. As soon as one dispenses with a functionalist sociological perspective and instead views the social in terms of power relations, it immediately becomes clear that society is conflictual. Thus the link to Marx is easily made, and any lingering uncertainty about why Lacan credited him with inventing the symptom rapidly dissipates. Since from a psychoanalytic perspective the unconscious stands as a sign of subjective conflict, Lacan's reconceiving the unconscious in terms of language—that is, as a social rather than an individual dimension of experience—also situates symptoms beyond the merely personal realm. Hence it seems little more than critical common sense when Žižek begins his inaugural work by announcing that culture in its entirety should be considered a compromise formation, the symptomatic outcome of a conflict: “All ‘culture’ is in a way a reaction-formation, an attempt to limit, canalize—to *cultivate* this imbalance, this traumatic kernel, this radical antagonism through which man cuts his umbilical cord with nature, with animal homeostasis” [SO 5].¹²

Once culture is conceived of in this manner, there can be but one politically progressive approach to it, namely, demystification. The conflict that has given rise to culture in general—and the more local conflicts that produce as their symptoms various cultural phenomena—must be interpreted so that their ideological stakes become apparent. In this way cultural criticism has come to be considered a form of political work. Indeed, demystification has become the quintessential critical gesture when responding to cultural artifacts; it tends to be regarded as the only responsible alternative to either uncritical veneration (of art) or mindless consumption (of mass cultural entertainment). The politically progressive critic is always about the business of unmasking, attempting to unveil the ideological struggles behind a seemingly innocent or harmonious work of art. Whereas traditional psychoanalytic criticism decoded the neurotic conflicts of individual artists (finding in writers' and painters' characters the surrogates of warring parts of their selves), contemporary psychoanalytic criticism demystifies the transindividual struggles (whether social or ideological) that the work of art is understood to encode.

Of course, psychoanalytic Marxism in literary studies precedes Žižek and may be traced at least to Althusser, who in *Reading Capital* coined the term “symptomatic reading” to argue not only that he was approaching Marx's text symptomatically, but also that he was deriving his method from Marx's own technique of reading the political

Dreams, arguing that cultural symptoms may be read according to this method by tracing their associations in much the way that Freud does when interpreting dreams. Garber thus draws an analogy between Freudian dreamwork—the psychical translation process that involves condensation and displacement—and cultural work, suggesting that reading cultural artifacts in an associative manner may be preferable to the primarily quantitative, empirical approach that dominates sociology and certain versions of cultural studies. Her neopsychoanalytic method enables greater attention to particularity and specificity, including the specificities of literary works; unlike Žižek, Garber is inclined to bracket questions about the representativeness or exemplarity of the cultural artifacts she considers. Perhaps as a result, Garber shows herself to be a subtler reader of culture than Žižek, even as she is a weaker theorist.

12. Technically we should distinguish between a compromise formation (of which symptoms are an instance) and a reaction formation, since the reaction formation defends against a wish while the compromise formation includes the substitutive satisfaction of a wish. But, as Laplanche and Pontalis argue, in practice this distinction is hard to sustain, because the unconscious wish is often discernible in the reaction formation, as well as in the compromise formation [378]. With respect to Žižek's characterization of culture as a reaction formation in the context of an argument that universalizes the symptom, I doubt that he is placing any weight on this particular technical distinction.

economy of David Ricardo and Adam Smith. Althusser characterizes Marx's strategy as "a reading which might well be called 'symptomatic' (*symptomale*), insofar as it divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads, and in the same movement relates it to a *different text*, present as a necessary absence in the first" [Althusser and Balibar 28; original emphases]. In this regard, Althusser already was claiming in 1965 that Marx invented the symptom—a point that Žižek overlooks in order to promote his version of psychoanalytic Marxism as definitively superseding Althusserianism. Yet while appropriating from Althusser the notion and practice of symptomatic reading, Žižek does not adopt with it the crucial concept of "relative autonomy," at least as far as aesthetic practice is concerned. Although he argues for "the autonomy of the psychic domain" [*Metastases* 7], Žižek does not seem prepared to concede even *relative* autonomy to the aesthetic domain, either in principle or in practice. The result is that he borrows from Althusser what from my perspective represents one of the most problematic aspects of his theory. The concept of relative autonomy may offer a partial solution to the problem I've been delineating, insofar as it adumbrates how aesthetic forms are never *only* an expression of ideological or cultural conflicts; and therefore it suggests that art cannot be fully determined by—or reducible to—its contextual matrix.¹³

However, the problem I'm sketching exceeds Žižek's hastiness vis-à-vis Althusser or the absence in his theory of a viable conceptual space for specifically aesthetic effects. Ongoing reactions to New Critical formalism in literary studies have generated profound skepticism regarding *any* notion of autonomy when it comes to aesthetic practice—to the extent that claims on behalf of "relative autonomy" provoke allergic responses from left-leaning humanities professors, who seem to regard Althusser's concept as a dangerously anti-Marxian idea. In order to retrieve what Althusser meant by relative autonomy, I want to develop his commitment to discursive specificity in terms of aesthetic alterity, or what I call the otherness of art. By showing how discursive specificity entails considering that dimension of irreducibility or alterity particular to distinct cultural domains, I wish to emphasize the degree to which ethical as well as epistemological issues are involved in these debates over critical approaches to aesthetics. While I concede that treating works of art (or, more broadly, textual artifacts) in less individualistic ways represents a measure of critical progress, I remain troubled by the unquestioned assumption that any cultural text should be understood as a compromise formation, the symptomatic product of a conflict whose terms are at least partly unconscious. Whether one approaches textual forms in the context of an authorial or a cultural unconscious, the conviction still holds that the work of art is duplicitous or ignorant of something, that it exhibits contradictions of which it is unaware and therefore needs the critic to help reveal. Neither artists nor their cultures are considered masters of the conflicts that produce their work; instead the role of mastery—of interpreting the symptom—falls to the demystifying critic.¹⁴ Hence my suggestion that there is something ethically suspect

13. Althusser makes clear what he means by relative autonomy when he argues that "[t]he fact that each of these times and each of these histories [including the history of aesthetic forms] is relatively autonomous does not make them so many domains which are independent of the whole: the specificity of each of these times and each of these histories—in other words, their relative autonomy and independence—is based on a certain type of articulation in the whole, and therefore on a certain type of dependence with respect to the whole" [Reading *Capital* 100; original emphases]. A useful critique of Žižek's relation to Althusser may be found in Bellamy. For his relation to Lacan, see Althusser, *Writings*. A very enlightening critique of Althusser's appropriation of Lacan for his theory of interpellation is given in Barrett.

14. A notable exception to this way of thinking may be found in a brief but suggestive essay by Colette Soler, a Lacanian psychoanalyst who argues the following:

about this ostensibly progressive approach to cultural forms—in other words, that there is a significant disjunction between the politics and the ethics of cultural study.

Suspecting Hermeneutics

The position that my critique has targeted thus far—and which I have taken Žižek's work to exemplify—goes under the general rubric of the hermeneutics of suspicion, a phrase originally coined by existential phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur to describe the interpretive protocols of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, but these days more often employed by cultural conservatives such as Harold Bloom to inveigh against politicized literary criticism.¹⁵ Interpretation is subject to greater contestation in modernity, according to Ricoeur, because no universal canon remains to govern exegesis. In the wake of “the death of God,” the position that authorized hermeneutics has dissolved. Where once a scriptural or textual double meaning had been understood as the form through which divinity manifested itself, now double meaning tends to be apprehended in terms of dissimulation, and hence interpretation becomes coeval with demystification. “Fundamentally,” Ricoeur argues, “the *Genealogy of Morals* in Nietzsche's sense, the theory of ideologies in the Marxist sense, and the theory of ideals and illusions in Freud's sense represent three convergent procedures of demystification” [34]. Viewing Marxism and psychoanalysis as operating with homologous hermeneutics, Ricoeur probably would agree that “Marx invented the symptom,” though he would be less sanguine than Althusser or Žižek about the implications of this homology.

Like Žižek and Garber after him, Ricoeur focuses his examination of psychoanalytic hermeneutics on *The Interpretation of Dreams*, particularly the mechanisms of distortion that Freud names the “dream-work” (*die Traumarbeit*). We might recall that, according to Freud, a dream is structured exactly like a symptom (“our procedure in interpreting dreams is identical with the procedure by which we resolve hysterical symptoms” [*Interpretation* 528]), and therefore to characterize aesthetic artifacts as cultural symptoms implies that those artifacts are formed through the same mechanisms of distortion that produce dreams. Indeed, the pervasive critical notion of “cultural work”—that is, the kind of effects we often take literature to be performing unbeknownst to its authors—derives by homology from this basic postulate of psychoanalytic hermeneutics, even when those critics who employ it are more likely to regard themselves as practicing Marxist rather than psychoanalytic criticism.¹⁶ Just as Garber initiates *Symptoms of Culture* by claiming that her method extends the hermeneutics outlined in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, so Žižek begins his explanation of how Marx invented the symptom by pursuing a disquisition on not symptoms but dreams. Following Freud, Žižek insists that neither latent nor manifest contents of the dream should distract us

Psychoanalysis does not apply to literature. Its attempts in doing so have always manifested their futility, their unfitness to lay the grounds for even the most meager literary judgment. Why? Because artistic works are not products of the unconscious. You can well interpret a novel or poem—i.e., make sense of it—but this sense has nothing to do with the creation of the work itself. This sense has no common measure with the work's existence, and an enigma remains on the side of the existence of the work of art. This would even be a possible definition of the work in its relation to sense: it resists interpretation as much as it lends itself to interpretation. [214]

15. For more progressive critiques of the hermeneutics of suspicion, see Armstrong; Sedgwick.

16. For a representative range of instances, see Morris; Poovey; Reynolds and Hutner; Tompkins.

from the formal process of distortion performed by the dreamwork, since it is in that set of formal transpositions, rather than in the hidden content, that unconscious desire is to be found:

We should not reduce the interpretation of dreams, or symptoms in general, to the retranslation of the “latent dream-thought” into the “normal,” everyday common language of intersubjective communication (Habermas’s formula). The structure is always triple; there are always three elements at work: the manifest dream-text, the latent dream-content or thought and the unconscious desire articulated in a dream. This desire attaches itself to the dream, it intercalates itself in the interspace between the latent thought and the manifest text; it is therefore not “more concealed, deeper” in relation to the latent thought, it is decidedly more “on the surface,” consisting entirely of the signifier’s mechanisms, of the treatment to which the latent thought is submitted. In other words, its only place is in the form of the “dream”: the real subject matter of the dream (the unconscious desire) articulates itself in the dream-work, in the elaboration of its “latent content.” [SO 13; original emphases]

Accurately reprising Freud’s argument in *Die Traumdeutung*, Žižek brings out two significant points. First, classical psychoanalytic hermeneutics is more properly formal than generally is assumed, insofar as its interpretive ingenuity exercises itself upon the distinctive mode of translating one set of ideas (the latent dream-thought) into another set (the dream’s manifest content). Unconscious desire becomes visible in the set of transformations that converts one content into another, rather than residing in either the earlier (latent) or subsequent (manifest) representations.

Second, by elaborating psychoanalytic hermeneutics as a kind of formalism in which the content of mental images remains utterly secondary when establishing their meaning, Žižek also clarifies the distinction between psychoanalysis and depth psychology. If meaning lies not in the latent dream-thought but in the mode of its transformation, then the truth of desire must be located not in the hidden depths of subjective inwardness but in the ostensibly superficial displacements that constitute the dreamwork. By thus reorienting the surface-depth model through which hermeneutics-as-demystification conventionally operates, Žižek goes some distance toward countering critiques of psychoanalysis as a metaphysics of the subject and hence as a hermeneutics of demystification. It is by virtue of its attention to the literalness of verbal utterances that psychoanalysis may be distinguished from psychology. Although Žižek never makes reference to Ricoeur’s important critique, he often claims that psychoanalytic interpretation remains irreducible to demystification, insisting that “we must avoid the simple metaphors of demasking, of throwing away the veils which are supposed to hide the naked reality” [SO 28–29]. Indeed, he argues that the standard psychoanalytic critique of ideology, which he associates with Althusser, “no longer works”: “We can no longer subject the ideological text to ‘symptomatic reading,’ confronting it with its blank spots, with what it must repress to organize itself, to preserve its consistency” [SO 30]. At moments such as these, Žižek’s argument appears to coincide with mine.

The problem is that what Žižek counsels against — “simple metaphors of demasking,” “symptomatic reading” — turns out to be exactly the interpretive method and rhetoric he adopts. He executes a twist on the standard critique of ideology as imaginary illusion, yet remains caught within the terms of that critique, as when he argues that “ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself: an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some

insupportable, real, impossible kernel” [SO 45]. While neatly inverting the relation between ideology and reality, Žižek nevertheless retains the Nietzschean notion of masking and thereby tacitly positions himself as the one who unmask, the one who will reveal to us the “impossible” truth of social relations. This apparent inconsistency is not Žižek’s problem as much as it is an inevitable consequence of his approach. Having established his critical method in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* via a strictly Freudian explication of dreamwork, Žižek remains caught within the logic of that hermeneutical model, despite his claims to be moving beyond hermeneutics. By definition dreamwork—or, analogically, cultural work, ideological work—is a process of distortion, and psychoanalytic interpretation generally follows this process in reverse, tracking the formal operations through which one scenario has been transformed into another. By tracing backwards a procedure of distortion or disguise, psychoanalytic hermeneutics situates itself in the realm of demystification. Even when its purpose is less to reveal a hidden content than to lay bare the surface mechanisms by which that content appears to have been hidden, psychoanalytic interpretation still represents a method of unconcealment.¹⁷ And while it redefines what truth consists in, Lacanian psychoanalysis holds onto the notion that some form of interpretation is required to access subjective truth.

The Psychoanalytic Critique of Hermeneutics

It might appear that psychoanalysis, inaugurated as a science of interpretation, could never escape the fundamental presuppositions of hermeneutics within whose terms Ricoeur and others have discussed it. After all, isn’t it the psychoanalytic zeal for interpretation that licenses—even for Freud himself—rapid extensions of its method from the clinical to the cultural domain? Yet two versions of psychoanalytic thought insist that it should not be understood as a hermeneutic; Jean Laplanche has gone so far as to argue that psychoanalysis should be recognized as an antihermeneutic. By considering further Žižek’s and Laplanche’s implicit and explicit refutations of Ricoeur, I want to challenge the basic assumption that a clinical method of interpretation can be readily transposed to the cultural realm. In other words, I want to take seriously the proposition that a certain style of psychoanalytic thinking represents a break with hermeneutics; but I also want to show how this break undermines the otherwise nearly irresistible logic whereby a clinical practice is extended to social and cultural analysis. On the basis of that argument, I shall suggest how Althusser might be articulated with Laplanche for the purpose of constructing a quite different psychoanalytic approach to aesthetics.

Žižek’s critique of hermeneutics objects to the assumption that everything can be translated into meaning, that full integration into the circuit of intersubjective communication is possible in principle. Opposing Habermas’s reading of Freud, Žižek contends that the former’s understanding of interpretation overlooks the “traumatic kernel” that constitutively resists translation into sense. “Here we confront the incommensurability between hermeneutics (‘deep’ as it may be) and psychoanalytic interpretation,” Žižek argues, since “Habermas can assert that distortions have meaning as such—what remains unthinkable for him is that *meaning as such results from a certain distortion*—that the emergence of meaning is based on a disavowal of some ‘primordially repressed’ traumatic kernel” [*Metastases* 27; original emphases]. By focusing on that

17. See Miklitsch: “If Žižek’s program cannot be labeled a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (if only because he has so little use for hermeneutics proper and, more importantly perhaps, because of a certain comic, even Chaplinesque, strain in his work), it is a politics of demystification for all that” [486].

which resists meaning (in other words, the real), Žižek aims to distinguish psychoanalytic interpretation from hermeneutics. In this respect he follows Lacan, who argues that psychoanalytic interpretation directs the patient to what cannot be interpreted, that which hermeneutics fails to grasp. As he explains in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*:

Interpretation is not open to any meaning. This would be to concede to those who rise up against the character of uncertainty in analytic interpretation that, in effect, all interpretations are possible, which is patently absurd. The fact that I have said that the effect of interpretation is to isolate in the subject a kernel, a kern, to use Freud's own term, of non-sense, does not mean that interpretation is in itself nonsense. . . .

Interpretation is not open to all meanings. It is not just any interpretation. It is a significant interpretation, one that must not be missed. This does not mean that it is not this signification that is essential to the advent of the subject. What is essential is that he should see, beyond this signification, to what signifier—to what irreducible, traumatic, non-meaning—he is, as a subject, subjected. [250–51; original emphases]

For interpretation to point not toward meaning or signification but “beyond . . . signification” pushes interpretation—paradoxically enough—beyond the framework of hermeneutics. Rather than making sense of trauma, psychoanalytic interpretation draws attention to its resistance to sense. In the clinical setting, then, *interpretation* represents something quite different from what hermeneutics conventionally understands by this term.

Laplanche develops a related critique of hermeneutics by centering his account of human subjectivity—and hence of analytic technique—on the *enigmatic signifier*, a term he borrows from Lacan to designate a kind of resistance to meaning that roughly corresponds with the Lacanian real (or, more precisely, corresponds with the real as an effect internal to the symbolic). It is from a sentence I quoted earlier, in which Lacan defines the symptom as a corporeal metaphor, that Laplanche takes this term. Here is the complete—and completely slippery—sentence: “Between the *enigmatic signifier* of the sexual trauma and the term that is substituted for it in an actual signifying chain there passes the spark that fixes in a symptom the signification inaccessible to the conscious subject in which that symptom may be resolved—a symptom being a metaphor in which flesh or function is taken as a signifying element” [Lacan, “Agency” 166; emphasis added].¹⁸ Somewhat akin to this typically Lacanian sentence, the enigmatic signifier poses as meaningful yet irreducibly opaque—“inaccessible,” as Lacan says here. It does not form part of a signifying chain but instead causes something else to take its place; the enigmatic signifier therefore isn’t a signifier in any general acceptance of the term. While coining other terms (such as *message*) that are intended to be synonymous with, and thus to clarify, that of *enigmatic signifier*, Laplanche generalizes this concept, making it the cornerstone of his own distinctive psychoanalytic theory. Through elaborations of this idea, he has devoted much of his career to refuting Ricoeur’s phenomenological reading of Freud.

Yet it is with more than simply a Žižekian notion of the resistance to sense that Laplanche launches his refutation of Ricoeur. In sharp contrast to the Habermasian

18. “Entre le signifiant énigmatique du trauma sexuel et le terme à quoi il vient se substituer dans une chaîne signifiante actuelle, passe l’étincelle, qui fixe dans un symptôme,—métaphore où la chair ou bien la fonction sont prises comme élément signifiant,—la signification inaccessible au sujet conscient où il peut se résoudre” [Écrits 518].

paradigm of intersubjective communication, Laplanche pictures the origins of intersubjectivity in unintelligible communications; his norm for human relations is not simply misunderstanding (an idea that Habermas can accommodate easily enough), but more fundamentally communications that are understood by neither party. In other words, the enigmatic signifier remains enigmatic because it remains unconscious. As Laplanche explains when glossing this concept, “If I had to give up the term ‘enigmatic’ to my objectors, I should then coin the expression ‘compromised signifier,’ in the dual sense that it is *a* compromise, like the symptom, as well as being *compromised by the unconscious* of its originator” [“Interpretation” 158; original emphases]. In his reference to the symptom as a compromise formation, Laplanche harks back to the passage in which Lacan coins the term *enigmatic signifier* to explain symptom formation. He also emphasizes that intersubjectivity begins when human relations are at their most asymmetrical, inasmuch as children are surrounded by adults who already have an unconscious. It is not simply that an infant, whose cognitive skills are incompletely developed, fails to understand everything adults communicate to him or her; rather it is a question of how adults handling a child communicate messages they themselves do not understand and of which they are not aware. Laplanche calls this process generalized seduction. In so doing, he revives the seduction theory that Freud abandoned in 1897, while abstracting the idea of seduction from a contingent event and transforming it into the necessary condition of intersubjectivity. It is by virtue of receiving unintelligible messages from the other that one is seduced into relationality.¹⁹

Laplanche identifies his general theory of seduction as “the foundation of psychoanalytic anti-hermeneutics”: the enigmatic signifier thwarts interpretation even as it prompts it [Laplanche, “Psychoanalysis” 7]. He justifies this claim by not only locating the origins of intersubjectivity in that which resists meaning, but also arguing that the practice of analysis consists in working against rather than toward the consolations of sense. Engaging Ricoeur on his own turf—that of an account of psychoanalytic hermeneutics based on reading *The Interpretation of Dreams*—Laplanche shows how the original edition of this seminal work broke with hermeneutics by outlining a method that refused all syntheses of meaning. It was only in later editions (published after 1900), he suggests, that hermeneutical codes of symbolism and typicality were added to the text, in its burgeoning footnotes, addenda, and interpolations. Laplanche connects this eclipsing of Freud’s original insights—by Freud himself—with his abandonment of the seduction theory during the same period. As throughout his work, Laplanche reads the Freudian corpus in terms of an intellectual recentering whereby the most refractory ideas are disciplined by subsequent revisions that serve to conceal the radical implications of the unconscious’s decentering of subjective life. This intellectual recentering mimes the subjective centripetalism accomplished by the human ego, which in good dialectical fashion synthesizes, (mis)recognizes, and comprehends.

Countering this synthesizing agency, the method of free association breaks things down, dispersing attention in multiple, often contradictory directions. The free associative method represents Freud’s greatest discovery, according to Laplanche, because it is a method correlative to its object—the unconscious. Laplanche is fascinated by those passages in *The Interpretation of Dreams* where for pages and pages Freud laboriously traces the associations of discrete components of a single brief dream (such as the famous dream of Irma’s injection), without ever gathering together these associations into a

19. With respect to the question of the genealogical relation between Lacanian and Laplanchean psychoanalyses, it is notable that Laplanche connects this seduction-through-enigma to the enigmatic solicitation from the Other that Lacan discusses—and Žižek elaborates—using the phrase *Che vuoi?* (*What does it want from me?*). See Lacan, “Subversion” 312–13; Laplanche, “Interpretation” 146–47; Žižek, *Sublime* 110–21.

final meaning or interpretation. It is Freud's reluctance to specify one-to-one correspondences—his refusal to say: "the dream means *X*"—that permits Laplanche to argue that the associative method represents a break with hermeneutics. Rather than building up meaning, the analytic method breaks it down. But this antihermeneutical approach is domesticated by Freud's invention of dream symbolism (in which *X* means *Y*), typical dreams, and the complexes or scenarios (Oedipus, etc.) that Freud attempts to establish as the bedrock of unconscious significance. Laplanche regards dream symbolism and the predetermined meaning of family complexes as betrayals of the psychoanalytic method.²⁰ Symbolism and paradigmatic stories tell you what the enigma means, when the significance of the enigmatic signifier lies in the fact that you can never know what it means, since although it may be transmitted at least partly through discourse it does not pertain to the order of sense.

Mastering Engimas

A placeholder for that which defies sense, the enigmatic signifier both provokes and stymies interpretation. Laplanche views interpretation in the hermeneutical sense as a strategy directed toward mastering the other's enigma; by contrast psychoanalytic interpretation involves an effort to disrupt the forms of mastery with which we've made sense of our own and others' desires. The technique of free association remains indispensable to this enterprise because it fragments sense rather than maintaining its coherence. For Laplanche the antihermeneutical technique that accompanies free association consists in interpretation stripped down to pointing—a kind of pointing that works to punctuate the subject's discourse, cutting it into its discrete components:

*[T]he analyst's interpretation correlates exactly with the free associations, whose course it merely punctuates by emphasizing their overlaps or nodal points. . . . The German *deuten*, *Deutung*, is here much more eloquent, and much less "hermeneutic" than our word "interpretation": *deuten auf* means to indicate with a finger or with the eyes— "to point," as the Lacanians would say. ["Interpretation" 162]*

By simply pointing to elements of the subject's discourse, an analyst practicing antihermeneutical interpretation attempts to punctuate that discourse and thereby introduce some space into preexistent organizations of meaning. The controversial Lacanian practice of variable length sessions makes the temporal frame of analysis available for this punctuating work, since the choice of when to end a session marks as especially significant whatever has preceded that moment by introducing a caesura into the flow of discourse. In this way the end of each session is deroutinized and opened to greater reflection.

Here I'm interested less in debating the merits of Lacan's technical innovation than in distinguishing between interpretation as translation into another register of sense and interpretation as a form of minimalist punctuation that equivocates sense. Ultimately, however, my concern lies with whether or how the antihermeneuticist version of psychoanalytic interpretation can be transferred to the cultural realm. What I find so promising for cultural studies about Laplanche's theory of the enigmatic signifier is its insistence on the irreducibility of the enigma, its principled refusal to assimilate everything

20. "Reading through symbolism and typicality does not stimulate the associative method," Laplanche insists; "when one is present, the other is absent, and vice versa. . . . It is symbolism which silences association" ["Psychoanalysis" 9; original emphasis].



to the empire of sense. Although cultural studies (especially in its postcolonialist variants) has elaborated an ethical commitment to honoring the alterity of other cultures and their subjects—that is, a commitment to respecting the various ways in which different cultural ontologies might not make sense within the terms of hegemonic discourse—there has been less willingness to extend this ethical commitment to the aesthetic realm as such. Thus although social practices guided by the principle of others’ autonomy tend to be regarded as politically desirable, the possibility of according relative autonomy to something designated “art” tends to be regarded as politically suspect. Progressive critics claim to accept the impossibility of mastering the enigmas of other persons and other cultures, yet seem unable to accept the impossibility of fully mastering the enigmas of the aesthetic domain. While we try to respect the otherness of other persons, our interpretive practices do not respect the otherness of art. It is as if art needed to come from an alien culture before we could concede that some aspect of it remains untranslatable into meaning.

Insofar as it is transmitted discursively, the enigmatic signifier pertains not only to intersubjective relations but also to aesthetic relations; irreducible enigmas haunt our aesthetic experience as well as affecting our involvement with other persons. Extrapolating from Laplanche, I would suggest that as soon as one conceives alterity in symbolic terms, one sees that otherness exceeds intersubjective and intercultural dynamics; otherness is a property of discourse, and the enigmas of otherness are exacerbated by art. We might even say that art’s purpose lies in intensifying those aspects of alterity that otherwise remain dormant in everyday discourse and conventional intersubjective communication. From this perspective, the disruption of normative communication would signal a proximity to aesthetic experience, and art would be defined less as the secluded reserve of high culture than as the practice or experience of disruption through which something like the enigmatic signifier becomes palpable.

Of course, this definition represents a peculiarly modernist understanding of art—one whose institutionalization generated the shibboleth of aesthetic autonomy in the first place. But whereas the New Critical account of aesthetic autonomy entailed a view of art as harmoniously self-enclosed and ontologically distinct from mass culture, the psychoanalytic account of relative autonomy entails a view of art as disrupting harmonious self-enclosures of all kinds, and as troubling rather than reinforcing the boundary between high and low cultural forms. If we call “aesthetic” those experiences in which meaning is disrupted by an encounter with alterity, then the products of mass culture so beloved by Žižek may give rise to an experience whose *relative autonomy* from normative coordinates of sense requires acknowledging.²¹ By reading Althusser through Laplanche, I am suggesting that the concept of relative autonomy pertains to not only cultural production but also cultural reception: relative autonomy at the level of reception implies a fundamental irreducibility to sense or understanding. Putting this matter at its most schematic, I would say that Laplanche’s concept of the enigmatic signifier rewrites at the level of reception what Althusser meant by relative autonomy.

To the extent that art entails a practice or experience of defamiliarization in which otherness comes to the fore, it requires an ethical rather than an epistemological approach. From this perspective the ethics of psychoanalytic criticism would consist in refusing

21. Here I find myself in sympathy with Tom Cohen’s deconstructive critique of Žižek as inattentive to the textual materiality of the Hitchcock films he discusses: in attempting to go beyond the symbolic to the real, Žižek overlooks Hitchcock’s experiments with language, thereby reinscribing a fairly traditional method of film criticism that emphasizes the auteur, characters in the diegesis, the immediacy of the cinematic image, and suchlike [Cohen, “Beyond”]. It is undoubtedly the case that Cohen’s readings of individual Hitchcock movies are far more interesting than Žižek’s, despite the latter’s enthusiasm.

the imperative to overcome all enigmaticity through demystification. Such an ethics would encourage us to adopt a less knowingly superior attitude toward art by helping to allay the suspicion that meaning and motive lie concealed behind aesthetic expressions. In Lacanian terms, this would entail criticism registering the effects of the real on interpretation, rather than thematizing the real through interpretations that use aesthetic artifacts to illustrate psychoanalytic concepts.²² The hermeneutics of suspicion that characterizes interpretive practices running the gamut from psychoanalytic to materialist to historicist criticism promotes a paranoid relation to cultural forms, fueling the impulse to critically master opacity or uncertainty through rigorous interpretation. But just as psychoanalysis indubitably contributes to this project by way of its theories of a cultural unconscious and attendant cultural symptoms, so too can psychoanalysis make us less paranoid, less insistent on uncovering meaning and significance everywhere we turn. Psychoanalysis can help us tolerate resistances to meaning by enabling us to appreciate how enigmas aren't always puzzles to be decoded or obstacles to be overcome, but instead represent an ineliminable condition of existence. Thus whereas the concept of the unconscious licenses a critical commitment to demystification, the concept of the enigmatic signifier puts the brake on demystification.

Having claimed that the enigmatic signifier remains enigmatic because it remains unconscious, I want in closing to differentiate the implications for cultural criticism of the concept of the unconscious from those of the enigmatic signifier. The notion of the enigmatic signifier seems preferable for cultural criticism to that of the unconscious, since whereas the latter indexes a general limit to our intentional agency, the former indexes a more specific limit to our hermeneutic agency. It is particularly important to acknowledge the limits of interpretation when working in the aesthetic domain, and thence to see how one's relation to aesthetic experience may be ethical before it is epistemological. Diagnosing aesthetic artifacts as cultural symptoms tends to preempt the possibility of any such ethical consideration. Although my previous work has strenuously emphasized the need for cultural theory to retain a radically psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious as that which disrupts subjective and sexual norms, I have become skeptical about the viability for literary studies of a concept such as the cultural unconscious. The concept of the unconscious licenses interpretation as an interminable enterprise that permanently defers analysis of the disruptive impact aesthetic experience may have on us.²³ "Interpretation of a literary work is endless," maintains Jacqueline Rose in an exemplary work of psychoanalytic literary criticism [ix]; but the enigmatic signifier holds the potential to halt interpretation and thus to reorient the focus of criticism. If psychoanalysis has a future that consists in more than merely repeating itself in ever varying contexts à la Žižek, then interpretation may prove negligible to what we want to say next about art.

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22. This distinction marks the distance between what might be regarded as an ethics of the real that I'm advocating and that proposed by Alenka Zupančič, who follows Žižek in thematizing the real-as-impossible within the Kantian philosophical tradition [see Zupančič].

23. Although space prevents me from doing justice to Jameson's psychoanalytic Marxism here, by this point it should be clear that my critique is aimed also at the highly influential paradigm set forth in *The Political Unconscious*. While from a literary critical perspective it may be politically desirable to "always historicize" (as Jameson urges), ethically it may not invariably be so.

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