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Conspiracy and Paranoid-Cynical Subjectivity in the Society of Enjoyment: A Psychoanalytic Critique of Ideology

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ABSTRACT

This essay offers a critical study of contemporary culture of conspiracy. The whole essay starts with Freud's clinical, theoretical assessment and Lacan's later reconceptualization of Schreber's case of paranoia in order to examine the relevance or irrelevance of the category "paranoia" to contemporary cultural, political analyses, and how its analytical value of properly psychoanalytic origin has been distorted, undermined or redefined. Then, paranoid-cynical subjectivity is analyzed in light of Žižek's theory of ideological fantasy, which highlights how ideology grips the subject through the structuration of enjoyment and the split of belief and actions. Accordingly, whether paranoid cynicism transgresses or supports the dominant power system and status quo is brought into discussion. The final section of this essay, through interpreting films like *The Truman Show* and *Fight Club*, relates conspiracy and paranoid-cynical subjectivity to contemporary society of enjoyment and examines the difficulty, if not impossibility, of desiring, free choice and ethico-political agency under the impact of the pervasive superegoic commands to transgress and enjoy.

Keywords : conspiracy, cynicism, enjoyment, fantasy, *Fight Club*, ideology, paranoia, Schreber, *The Truman Show*

快感社會中的陰謀論與偏執／犬儒主體性： 精神分析意識形態批判

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摘 要

本文針對當前陰謀論文化進行批判性研究。第一部分討論弗洛伊德如何從臨床和理論的層面審視史瑞伯偏執症之個案，拉崗如何再論此個案，以檢視「偏執症」對於當前文化、政治分析有何價值，其精神分析之原意在諸多論述中如何被扭曲、貶抑或重塑。本文接著以齊傑克意識形態幻想之理論分析偏執／犬儒主體性，突顯意識形態如何透過快感之構築、信念與行動之斷裂掌控主體。在此論述脈絡之中，偏執症之犬儒主義是否僭越或支撐權力體系與既有現況將是分析之重點。最後一部分透過電影《楚門的世界》與《鬥陣俱樂部》之詮釋，將陰謀論與偏執／犬儒主體性之議題置入當前快感社會之範疇，檢視在超我之僭越與享樂律令影響之下，慾求、自由選擇與倫理政治行動所遭遇之困境。

關鍵詞：陰謀論，犬儒主義，快感，幻想，《鬥陣俱樂部》，意識形態，偏執症，史瑞伯，《楚門的世界》

Conspiracy and Paranoid-Cynical Subjectivity in the Society of Enjoyment: A Psychoanalytic Critique of Ideology

Han-yu Huang

In the shattered world of multiple perspectives, the “grand views” of the whole, in fact, belong more to simple souls than to those who are enlightened and educated by the given order of things. No enlightenment can occur without destroying the effect, thinking-from-a-point-of view, and without dissolving conventional morals. Psychologically this goes hand in hand with a scattering of the ego, literarily and philosophically, with the demise of critique.

Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* xxxiii

In a time when it is hard to dichotomize Left and Right-wing politics and a sense of political disillusionment pervades (Huysen x-xi), when the Enlightenment “critique-through-unmasking” ranging “from the public exposure of lies to the benign correction of error to the triumphant unveiling of structurally necessary false consciousness by ideology critique” (Huysen xii) is exposed of a deep ambivalence, in Sloterdijk’s words, “in the middle of a snarl of factual self-preservation with moral self-denial” (22), when claims to universal Truth, Law, Unity and Totality are susceptible to satirical, cynical derisions, and when multiplicity, becoming, particularity, or the typical multiculturalist call for “respect for the Other” are elevated to the status of cultural icons . . . does any ideology critique not sound like an anachronistic, irrelevant and self-defeating gesture? Is it not an irony of fate that the Enlightenment episteme of doubt and critique turns out to be a weapon against itself and that “Do not unmask, lest you yourself be unmasked” functions as the unspoken rule in academies (Sloterdijk 18)? The traditional critique of ideology is likely to stand at a loss in the face of cynicism, as Sloterdijk maintains; however, is ideology critique *per se* thus doomed to be subjective, prejudiced cynicism? No matter how validly it works in factual descriptions, has the perspective that the attempted step out

of ideology only inverts itself into the more ideological emptied all the possibilities of today's political, social and cultural analysis?

The critical predicaments as insinuated in the above queries pertain to contemporary postmodern society of enjoyment, as is characterized with a pervasive sense of political disillusionment, excessive drive to transgression and, more relevant to the arguments of this essay, ubiquity of conspiracy theories. As Peter Knight comments, "The possibility of a conspiratorial explanation has come to be taken for granted (or at least cynically evoked), from the darkest recesses of the Internet, right up to the White House" (*Conspiracy Culture* 1). Conspiracy theories, in other words, no longer merely circulate among extremist politics or amateur groups of ufology and alien abduction; they are publicly staged in entertainment and literary culture—mainstream or popular, serious nor non-serious—and never cease to supply the enjoyment however intimate to the public; they distrust the power system and universal truth but are certain of the dark plots and scenarios no less universal: in fact, they embody what is most paradoxical about paranoid-cynical ideological fantasy, namely, *belief through disbelief*. The attempted psychoanalytic ideology critique of conspiracy, paranoia and cynicism in this essay aims at an effective intervention in the current debates on the status of truth claim and knowledge, ethico-political agency and subjectivity, and Law and its transgression in the society of enjoyment. The references to psychoanalytic terms like paranoia in this essay should not be misconstrued as pathologizing, demonizing the objects of critique. Paranoia, rather, is extended from a purely clinical context to the intricate entanglement of fantasy, enjoyment and symptom, of which Slavoj Žižek offers a sophisticated theorization in his Lacanian ethico-political and cultural critique.

This essay starts with Freud's clinical, theoretical assessment and Lacan's later reconceptualization of Schreber's case of paranoia in order to examine the relevance or irrelevance of the category "paranoia" to contemporary cultural, political analyses, and how its analytical value of properly psychoanalytic origin has been distorted, undermined or redefined. Then, paranoid-cynical subjectivity is analyzed in light of Žižek's theory of ideological fantasy, especially the supposed subject of ideology, which highlights how ideology grips the subject through the structuration of enjoyment and the split of belief and actions. Accordingly, whether

paranoid cynicism transgresses or supports the power system, authority or *grand views* is brought into closer observations. The final section of this essay, through interpreting films like *The Truman Show* and *Fight Club*, relates conspiracy and paranoid-cynical subjectivity to contemporary society of enjoyment and examines the difficulty, if not impossibility, of desiring, free choice and ethico-political agency under the impact of the pervasive superegoic commands to transgress and enjoy.

The Strange Case of Dr. Schreber

Schreber's case under Freud's and Lacan's formulations demonstrates the ambivalence in/of psychoanalytic discourse *par excellence*, and opens up the view to the ideological contradictions of paranoid-cynical subjectivity concerning the status of knowledge, psychical mechanism, fantasmatic structure and, fundamentally, relation to the Other. Although Freud throughout his study never reveals any doubt about Schreber's fixation in ideas of pathological origins which are formed into a system and beyond correction and judgment of external facts (15), he also repeatedly points out Schreber's personality traits of, for example, good memory and sound judgment and the fact that the reconstruction of such personality does not deteriorate the ability to meet the demands of everyday life (14). That the differentiation of the normal and pathological (or reason and madness) no longer holds in Schreber's case may be a blatant misreading; precisely, however, two (or even more) parallel systems of world can be found in paranoia.

The parallel, alternative existence in question here thoroughly saturates body, soul, ideas and language. In his autobiography, Schreber confirms his long-term experiences of sensory and supra-sensory phenomena: mainly, conversations with accusatory voices, which Freud diagnoses as the instance of self-accusation (17, 52-53), evacuation of organs and intestines, and then soul purification (23, 26). Freud's diagnosis, however, does not downplay or denigrate all these paranoiac experiences as purely unreasonable; in fact, he finds a *method* in Schreber's madness. To be more specific, Schreber's paranoia first takes the *form* of delusion of persecution by God, which originates in his ambivalence toward his first physician, Prof. Flechsig of Leipzig (38, 41), and develops around two main plots: "assumption of the

role of Redeemer” and “transformation into a woman” (18), the latter being the *means* to achieve the former. These methods, forms and means, albeit consistent to a great extent, work together with certain ineradicable paradoxes. Schreber’s God in many respects forms a unity, but in others is divided into separate Beings, “each of which possesses its own particular egoism and its own particular instinct of self-preservation, *even to the other*” (24, original emphasis): hence, God Almighty on the one side and some *personal* Gods on the other, a paradoxical configuration of unity and variety. Besides, though bitterly complaining that God does not understand him as a living man, Schreber is sure that he is in direct communication with God, who subjects him to severe ordeals (25): hence, the necessity of the transformation into woman to experience the state of voluptuousness and bliss and to breed new human species (29, 31). Although Schreber’s delusion of fundamental transformation into female being persists after his temporary cure, it only occurs when he is by himself (21).

As mentioned above, the ambivalence toward the paternal figure stands as the kernel of Schreber’s delusional structure, or his methods and means of madness, and it is from this aspect that Freud further explores the psychical mechanism at work in Schreber, which may extend from a case of paranoid psychosis to the unconscious *per se*: namely, repression, by which internal perception is first suppressed and enters the consciousness in the external form (66), or so-called “the return of the repressed” (68).¹ Specifically put in the scenario of Schreber’s delusion, “[t]he person he longed for now became his persecutor, and the content of his wishful phantasy became the content of his persecution” (47). What we see through Freud’s interpretation is the defensive mechanism against homosexuality and feminine wishful fantasy (enacted in the transformation into female being and copulation with God). And the plot of Schreber’s case moves to the compensation in megalomania which, according to Freud, involves three contradictions to (or negations of) “I love him”: delusions of persecution (“I do not *love* him, I *hate* him”), erotomania (“I do not love *him*—I love *her*, *she loves me*”), and jealousy (“It is not *I* who love the man—*she* loves him,” “It is not *I* who love

¹ In other words, the psychical mechanism involved here is more complicated than “projection”: rather than the projection of internal repressed feelings, it is such “return of the repressed in the external form” that most accurately characterizes the case of paranoia. This also makes possible Lacan’s rereading of Schreber’s case through “foreclosure.” I owe special thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers of this essay for clarifying this point.

the women—he loves them,” “*I do not love at all—I do not love any one*” (63-65). Here we encounter not only psychological ambivalence in its various manifestations but also the displaced gaps between the subject, act, and object, as manifested in Lacan’s formulation of the three forms of alienation: inversion, diversion and conversion (*Seminar III* 42-43), respectively corresponding to the above three contradictions. The ambivalence, contradiction/negation, displacement and alienation in question here reach their climax or extreme in the illusion of the end of the world as the projection of internal catastrophe and the withdrawal, detachment of libido from the world, while the detached libido returns to the ego and is “made to the stage of narcissism . . . in which a person’s only sexual object is his own ego” (Freud, “The Case of Schreber” 72): hence, the short circuit of the most aggressive and regressive.

To what extent Freud’s psychoanalytic diagnosis and interpretation as depicted above illuminates a strange case like Schreber’s paranoid psychosis, however, remains debatable. In fact, Freud is not unaware of the insufficiency of psychoanalytic theory in explaining the instinct, as the psychological representation of somatic forces, and parallel worlds (of delusion and reality) at work in Schreber (43, 74). Albeit with such insufficiency in view, we must observe that Freud’s reading of Schreber’s case does not reduce paranoia to individual pathological hallucinations but, instead, brings forth some themes relevant to the unconscious mechanism *per se* and the social, political, and cultural analysis of conspiracy and paranoid subjectivity on the collective dimension: apocalyptic world-vision and fantasy, repression of internal ambivalence and antagonism, paradox of doubt/certainty and aggressiveness/regressiveness.

It is undoubtedly Lacan that bridges the conceptual, theoretical gap opened up by Freud. Lacan’s interpretation of Schreber’s paranoid psychosis simultaneously supplements the necessary psychoanalytic theorization to and differs from Freud’s in several significant ways. Referring to Ida Macalpine, first of all, Lacan does not diagnose homosexuality as the decisive factor of paranoid psychosis; he inverts the causality between them and conceives the former as the latter’s symptom (“Question,” *Écrits* 455). In Lacan, the mental defense mechanism against homosexuality as qualified by Freud no longer pertains to the case of paranoid psychosis; it functions only in neurosis when the subject presents

both the signifier and the signified and the link between them is likely to be reconnected (*Seminar III* 45, 61, 79, 86). In other words, unlike in neurosis, no symbolic compromise can be identified in psychosis (*Seminar III* 87). Such absence of defense mechanism and symbolic compromise synecdochically points to the way of understanding the clinical paranoid-psychotic fixation in hallucinations with the tripartite knot of the Real, Imaginary and Symbolic. In “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” Lacan offers a comprehensive directory of a stereotypical paranoid-psychotic’s mirages including poisoning, evil spells, telepathy, physical intrusion, abuse, injury, spying and intimidation, defamation, character assassination, damages and exploitation, and so on (*Écrits* 90), which do not lack their more dramatic counterparts in contemporary horror genre and conspiracy narratives. These various hallucinations haunt the psychotic subject mainly through voices, as already clear in Freud’s reading of Schreber’s case. With a more theorizing tone than Freud’s, Lacan continues to qualify psychosis as a problem of discourse, in which the psychotic speaks to an imaginary other as if it really exists in front of him but actually “tend[s] towards the unreal” (*Seminar III* 53), or “falls under the sway of a suggestion, voice or the other’s discourse that is not [his] own” (“Question,” *Écrits* 447). Though ignorant of the languages he speaks, the psychotic speaks *as if* he understands everything: namely, the unconscious floats at the surface (*Seminar III* 11).

The hallucinations and absence of ignorance as depicted above are made possible by *foreclosure*, a concept through which we can perceive Lacan’s unprecedented contribution to the exploration of psychosis. One of the most often quoted Lacanian mottos explicitly articulates the causality at this point: “whatever is refused in the symbolic order, in the sense of *Verwerfung* (foreclosure), reappears in the real” (*Seminar III* 13). The foreclosure, through which the subject is refused the access to its symbolic world, or “something primordial regarding the subject’s being does not enter into symbolization” (*Seminar III* 81), does not work in the same way as repression, which always returns in neurotic symptoms and, at its least, represents the subject’s struggle for reaching symbolic compromise, establishing intersubjective relationship or sending messages to the Other. It is from the working of foreclosure that we can see Lacan’s elaboration of Schreber’s case: foreclosure means the radical rejection of the symbolic

Other, the Name-of-the-Father (Lacan, "Question," *Écrits* 465), or the "paternal function" (Fink, *Clinical Introduction* 79). Such a condition also excludes the possibility of taking on culturally determined intersubjective pact and sexual identity (Nobus 17, 19). In other words, the psychotic subject is captured in the vortex of the most narcissistic, primordial and chaotic drives.

As made clear in the previous discussions, the psychotic subject is possessed by an alien language, hears and speaks to voices as if they really exist but are actually the subject's imaginary creation, which manifests the relevance of the Lacanian mirror stage or Imaginary to our understanding of psychosis. The psychotic subject is enthralled by and fixated on the mirror images and relations which are closed to symbolic exchange and dialectical composition, and alienate the subject from itself ("Mirror Stage," *Écrits* 76, "Aggressiveness" *Écrits* 92, *Seminar III* 15, 22), and identifies with its imaginary others that are purely its own creation, and is entangled in the ambivalent rivalry and competition with them (Nobus 20). And the images, as can be seen in Schreber's psychotic delusion, include "castration, emasculation, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, and bursting open of the body" ("Mirror Stage," *Écrits* 85). The return of the Real in these images of fragmented body also engenders a hole or gap in external reality (*Seminar III* 45). Unlike a neurotic who flees from (psychical) reality, a psychotic is certain of what he experiences as reality. As Lacan argues, "Even when he expresses himself along the lines of saying that what he experiences is not of the order of reality, this does not affect his certainty that it connects him" (*Seminar III* 75). It is exactly such certainty that best distinguishes a neurotic from a paranoiac-psychotic: both may be haunted by hallucinations, but the former somehow reveals some doubt about them, while the latter is certain of them (Fink 82), just as he speaks a language which he does not understand and which does not belong to him, but speaks *as if* he understands it and can make it understood.

The psychotic's alienation from intersubjective, symbolic communication (or the Other) and external reality and his regression into narcissistic, self-enclosed hallucinations or vortex of primordial drives can be observed from *his* language. When the Name-of-the-Father qua the quilting point loses its proper function, no link can be instituted between the signifier and signified, expression and affection (Lacan, *Seminar III* 34; Nobus 14-15);

this explains away the psychotic's ignorance of the language he speaks. The psychotic language, then, is neologistic in nature and composed of the chain of signifiers belonging to no shared linguistic domain and referring to nothing but themselves, lacking any anchor in signifieds or knowable, explainable meanings (Fink 95; Lacan, *Seminar III* 33; Nobus 13). In other words, it is signification emptied of symbolic values but *too full* in the Real.

As indicated previously in this essay, indiscriminately inflating the efficacy of psychoanalytic reading of Schreber's case in particular and paranoia in general is likely to fall into the conceptual and interpretative lapse. Nor do we need to go so far as Deleuze and Guattari in their *Anti-Oedipus* to intentionally twist Freud's reading of Schreber's case and valorize it as the postmodern parable of the schrizonphrenic "body without organs," of experiences of deterritorialization of body, identity, space and power system. Paranoiac-psychosis as depicted so far may be an extreme case in social, political and cultural analysis of conspiracy. From Freud's and Lacan's clinical and theoretical assessments of Schreber's paranoia, we may highlight certain themes relevant to the concerns of this essay: apocalyptic world-vision, repression of internal ambivalence and antagonism, paradoxes of doubt/certainty, aggressiveness/regressiveness, and fragmentation/fixation, and so on. More fundamentally, we may also come to the understanding that fantasy works to cover up internal antagonism qua the Real and displaces it to others, but what is covered and displaced never ceases to return to the surface and disrupts the subject's reality. Psychoanalytic ideology critique of conspiracy and paranoid-cynical subjectivity includes a wide variety of possibilities in terms of ethico-political judgments depending on the specific social, political and cultural contexts. Undoubtedly we should depart from the gesture of pathologizing, demonizing the object of analysis and critique. However, denying the significant and fruitful potentials of psychoanalysis is a gesture no less pathologizing.

Conspiracy, Conspiracy Everywhere!

Will the exclamation that conspiracies are everywhere be a conspiracy itself? On what grounds can we label "conspiracy" on this or that? If there are any ideas, perspectives, positions, or theories to be labeled as conspiratorial, does it mean that they are all the same? What is "conspiracy," anyway?

Conspiracy is undoubtedly being invoked, debated, suspected, rejected, embraced, fantasized and enjoyed in contemporary analyses and critiques of various fields and disciplines. Its status of being a discursive or fantasmatic construct hardly possible to be conceptualized or verified definitively, however, does not constitute any reason to claim its unreality. Not any researcher of conspiracy, or *culture of conspiracy*, loses sight of its current ubiquity. As a matter of fact, conspiracy theories pervade in politics (right or left), culture (high or popular, serious or non-serious), entertainment, various media (fiction, non-fiction, the Internet, TV, cinema, journalism), New Age mysticism, and so on, and cover various agendas, subjects, and objects: assassinations, WTO and New World Order, UFOs, alien abduction, holy grail, virus, CIA, Bill Gates, terrorism, fundamentalism, immigrants, chemical weapons, contaminated food. . . .² The paranoid anxiety that danger and threat are all around us or there are always dark plots behind the public political drama seems to be the most circulated, privileged (or enjoyed?) ethos nowadays.

Researchers of conspiracy theories, who attempt to identify the causes of their ubiquity and popularity in contemporary America, usually highlight some specific events: the assassinations of J. F. Kennedy and Dr. King, Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal . . . and, more recently, the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 (Kellner 2006). These theories, usually intermingling heterodox religions, occult beliefs and fringe sciences,³ arise on the outside of mainstream culture and, to some extent, can be interpreted in psychoanalytic terms as the anxious responses to shocking experiences (Barkun 1-2). However, we must be cautious about positing any direct, mechanical determinism or causality between traumatic events and conspiracy theories: we must not, on the one hand, overestimate, bloat the historical effects and revelations of those events and, on the other,

² For comprehensive lists of specific examples, see Parker 191, and Dean, *Aliens in America* 143.

³ Michael Barkun, for example, succinctly enumerates the conspiratorial reports prevailing on the Internet in the aftermath of September 11:

Among them were that Nostradamus had foretold the attacks; that a UFO had happened near one of the World Trade Center towers just as a plane crashed into it; that the attacks had been planned by a secret society called the Illuminati; that U.S. president George W. Bush and British prime minister Tony Blair had advance knowledge of the attacks; and that the attacks signaled the coming of the millennial end-times prophesied in the Bible. (1-2)

underestimate the complexities of the emergence and circulation of conspiracies. Instead, as Michael Barkun, Peter Knight, Timothy Melley, and many other researchers hold, conspiracy is always-already an essential part of American everyday life. In spite of their idiosyncratic concerns and agendas, we can identify certain denominators of various conspiracy theories: Mannichaen worldviews of struggle between good and evil (Barkun 2-3), beliefs in the ubiquity of apocalypses (Coale 21), and self-confirming systems that could be “decidedly rationalist in their ramified logics” (Parker 195) but ascribe causes to and, thus, connect everything (Parker 193-94).

Rather than mechanically determined by specific shocking, traumatic historical events, conspiracy theories in contemporary America arise as the *symptomatic* reactions to postmodern conditions and late capitalist culture (O’Donnell 11), where social space and civil society are replaced by the hegemony of mass communications and civil engagements are displaced to “the privatized realm of consumption, which has emerged as a model for political, social, and cultural activity as individual ‘choice’ in the marketplace serves as an increasingly pervasive notion of ‘freedom’” (Fenster 69-70).⁴ Such realities, together with the pervasive political disillusionment invoked at the very beginning of this essay, are inextricably bound up with the transformation of the conception of identity: hence, the postmodern, paranoid conspiracy that rebels against the Enlightenment transcendental and autonomous subjectivity and strives to relocate the subject among the spatio-temporal experiences within a larger plot, structure and narrative of events (Coale 4-6) or, on a more collective level, remap the national into global orders (O’Donnell 13). The transformation of the conception of subjectivity and epistemic mapping in question here, however, opens up the controversies over the efficacy or legitimacy of conspiracy theories with respect to ethico-political agency. For example, critics who tend to sympathize with, if not embrace, conspiracy theories may hold the stance like Coale’s to see them as an antidote to or survival strategy in postmodernity that incarnates a transcendent design but, paradoxically, literalizes experiences, sees connections in coincidence, and fixes the fluidity,

⁴ “Symptom” here designates no necessity of pathology but, according to Žižekian formulation, the subject’s signification formation within definite fantasmatic framework to organize its enjoyment and perceive social realities. And these postmodern late-capitalist realities can be elaborated through Žižek’s “the decline of the Symbolic,” a theme to be pursued later in this essay.

fragmentation of spatio-temporal experiences (4). Those on the oppositional side may reject conspiracy theories as a “degraded version of cognitive mapping” and “misrecognition that produces an illegitimate form of knowledge” (Mason 40) and mutually exclusive knowledge systems which form no conceptual unity, contradict each other, and, worse, end up with nothing but paralogic, bottomless interpretations and purely contingent play of signifiers. To disentangle these controversies, we need to conduct a more sophisticated critique of ideology, an effort to be completed in this essay. At this point, we at least can bear in mind the caution against indulging ourselves in a Beyond to cultural paranoia and, accordingly, “a false utopianism that complies all too easily with uncritical notions of postmodern identity as fluid, heterogeneous, carnivalesque” (O’Donnell x). The significance of an ideology critique of paranoid-cynical subjectivity, if any, lies in exposing certain rigidity beneath such postmodern fluidity and heterogeneity.

One fruitful point of departure for intervening in contemporary debates on conspiracy theories is Richard Hofstadter’s “paranoid style.” Hofstadter’s significance lies in the polemics he provokes for later researches. At the very beginning of his “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” Hofstadter differentiates a clinical paranoiac and a paranoid spokesman in politics:

[A]lthough both tend to be overheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic in expression, . . . [the former] sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directly specifically against him; [*sic*] whereas . . . [the latter] finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself but millions of others. (4)

Hofstadter undoubtedly attempts to conceptualize his “paranoid style” in collective, symbolic rather than individual, clinical terms, but we must not misconstrue it as nothing but an empty style or rhetoric with no real effects or with nothing whatsoever to do with real, clinical pathology and madness. He explicitly relates it to distorted taste and judgment, and points to “the possibility of using political rhetoric to get at political pathology” (6). Paranoid style for him, in other words, is not just a style/form: it converts

concrete issues into ideological problems with moral and emotional charge, and what matters is not only the fear it provokes but also its perverted, pathological explanatory or fantasmatic framework. “Political paranoia” turns out to be a polemically functional label ascribed to those who stand on the political stance incompatible with or opposite to Hofstadter’s own: in Fenster’s words, it designates “a pathology suffered by those existing outside of the pluralist consensus who promoted fears of conspiracy” (3).

However polemical it is, Hofstadter’s analysis does help to delimit the discursive, conceptual boundary for intervening in contemporary debates on conspiracy theories. One of the reasons is that he abstracts some basic elements of political paranoia. First of all, a political paranoiac holds on to “a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life” (29). Conspiracy theorists in this sense posit an apocalyptic struggle with their imaginary political others, a cosmic war between good and evil for the life and death of values and orders (29, 31). Within such scenarios of, in Žižek’s terms, “theft of enjoyment,” the figure of Enemy works to channel, organize and fix the signifying and desiring process. It is in this aspect that we can perceive the difficulty of severing clinical/individual from collective/symbolic paranoia, as the latter also involves mental mechanism of, for example, defense, negation, projection and abjection, or put in more succinct terms, fantasy and structuration of enjoyment. As Hofstadter comments, “This enemy seems to be on many counts a projection of the self: both the ideal and the unacceptable aspects of the self are attributed to him. A fundamental paradox of the paranoid style is the imitation of the enemy” (32). Somehow Hofstadter consciously or unconsciously downplays the inextricable, ambivalent or uncanny doubling between a paranoid subject and its Other qua the Enemy to whom the former’s desire and anxiety are displaced through a series of historical or current conspiratorial—actual or imaginary—plots, conflicts, and catastrophes.

We are tempted to suspect that Hofstadter imputes the label “paranoid style,” in spite of its applicability to Nazism and Stalinism, and all of its negative implications onto his political others. Does Hofstadter not betray his own paranoid anxiety in his apocalyptic vision that the United States stands as an outpost of pragmatic rationality among a threatening world of dangerous ideologies like fascism, totalitarianism and communism, his

belief in American liberal-pluralist democracy as composed of a multiplicity of different competing groups advancing their own interests through rational discourses, and his hostile view that mass media society mobilizes mass man, extremism and, hence, the paranoid style (Fenster 4, 6, 14-16)? How can his democratic Master signifiers like “plurality,” “negotiation” and “consensus” generate meanings and effects, and how can the internal antagonisms of American liberal-democratic society be repressed, if not through excluding those on the side of conspiracy theories out of the pale of rational political discourse?

In addition to the above queries, it is easier for the critics of Hofstadter to retroactively underestimate his significance or relevance through the factual proof that conspiracy theories do not prevail in the time of crises and catastrophes, not as Hofstadter claims. And today we can no longer limit any “paranoid style” to conservative and extremist politics; it has permeated contemporary American everyday life and becomes inseparable with desire, fantasy and enjoyment: the Other, pathologized or not, can be the object of multiculturalist respect and love, as well as global capitalist commodification and consumption. Surely all these constitute the reasons for neglecting or opposing to Hofstadter, to some extent. But we should not fail to see that his stress on the rituals and symbols of popular practice and, more significant, his conceptualization of conspiracy and paranoia as delusional systems and plots provide a crucial precedent for intervening in current studies and debates on conspiracy theories (Barkun 8; Fenster 10).

Most critics of Hofstadter classify his critique of “paranoid style” into the anti-conspiracist campaigns which demonize, reify and pathologize conspiracy theories as a plague virus likely to spread all kinds of social and political illness anytime and anywhere, and thus “end up replicating the very mode of paranoid thinking they seek to condemn” (Knight, *Conspiracy Culture* 7).⁵ And they take different paths to redeem conspiracy theories

⁵ Peter Knight’s critique that studies like Hofstadter’s “get caught uneasily between literal and metaphorical ascription of paranoia” (*Conspiracy Culture* 14) does not help clarify anything, for he does not really deal with the tie of conspiracy and paranoia; he just refers to some faulty cases of polemically imputing “paranoia” to conspiracy theories to reach such a conclusive remark. In fact, Hofstadter himself consciously makes the efforts of differentiating paranoia in the clinical/individual and collective/cultural/political sense. His problem, as well as Knight’s, lies in the refusal or failure to conceptualize, get involved in the entanglement between paranoia in its different sense.

out of the trivial, fanatical and pathological, and sever “paranoia” from its psychoanalytic, clinical tie and explore its potentials of being a survival strategy or cognitive mapping in the postmodern, late-capitalist conditions. Mark Fenster, for example, cautions us against seeing conspiracy theories as a pathological political Other (xii). Fenster is aware of the possibility that conspiracy theories may draw on ideologies as dangerous as fascism, racism or anti-Semitism; however, he redefines what appear to be pathological for those opposing to and condemning them, and see in them a “normal” response to “a withering civil society and the concentration of the ownership of the means of production” within the bureaucratic and capitalist order (67). At their more progressive, conspiracy theories for Fenster address real political, social and economic structural inequalities and injustice, and embody a utopian, albeit ideological, drive to arrest the unlimited semiosis, to relocate political subjects within a vast structure of signs, to resist the capitalist-bureaucratic omnipresent destructive power system and to imagine a better collective future (xiii, 67, 80, 94).

With his gesture of *de-pathologizing* conspiracy theories as an effective strategic position within power struggle, is Fenster, we are tempted to suspect, not imagining them as an outside to the capitalist power system, the Other of the Other? Is it really possible to draw such a clear-cut opposition? What is most ideologically problematic about conspiracy theories, as well as paranoid-cynical subjectivity, if not the fantasy of “the Other of the Other”? What if the transgressive or subversive stances of conspiracy theories are already included within the power system, or they support what they claim to transgress or subvert? All these queries lead us to ideological fantasy at its purest, which is the way the antagonistic fissure qua impossibility of Society and identification is masked, since, in Žižek’s words, “*fantasy is a means for an ideology to take its own failure into account in advance*” (SOI 126, original emphasis).⁶

⁶ Abbreviation of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Other abbreviations of books by Žižek include *C* (*Conversations with Žižek*), *DSST* (*Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion*), *EYAWK* (*Everything you Always Want to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*), *EYS* (*Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out*), *FA* (*The Fragile Absolute*), *ME* (*The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*), *PD* (*The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*), *PF* (*The Plague of Fantasies*), *TN* (*Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*), *TS* (*The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology*), *ZR* (*The Žižek Reader*). For publication data, see Works Cited.

Not merely de-pathologizing conspiracy theories, Jodi Dean radicalizes their populist subversive and liberatory potentials in struggling with the capitalist power mechanism and knowledge system. Dean breaks with theorists like Hofstadter, Fenster and Žižek, who, according to her interpretation, see in conspiracy theories a will to totality (“If Anything” 90). The postmodern conditions she delimit for contextualizing the pervasion of conspiracy theories, especially abduction discourses—for example, the disappearance of the public, cultural and political paranoia, and technological complexity, uncertainty and interconnection (*Aliens* 14-15)—do not look too different from the ones identified by other researches. What actually distinguish Dean from others are her cynical belief in the meaninglessness of choices and decisions and her sympathetic identification with the marginalization, stigmatization of conspiracy theories. Certain common themes run through abduction narratives however divergent: abductees reported that they had been abducted on the road or at home by aliens onto UFOs and were subject to hypnosis, forced extraction of eggs or sperm, mind scans, implantation of tracking devices, and so on. They are, according to Dean, likely to suffer some symptoms throughout their life including “sleep disorders, waking up with unusual bodily sensations, feeling monitored or watched, unexplained marks on the body, missing time, and anxiety about aliens” (*Aliens* 51). Some scenarios often seen in science fiction and horror which attest to the postmodern paranoid fear of everyday life, however, are taken seriously by Dean as stigmatized political knowledge contesting with the constraining legitimacy of the authority, consensus reality, and status quo (*Aliens* 6, 8, 42). UFO abductees, for example, never trust the system; their marginalization and traumatization bring them the enjoyment of knowing something that others do not know. Moreover, densely saturated in rhizomic networking of information, as Dean maintains, conspiracy theory takes no form in any conceptual unity; it is always “making links and sifting through evidence” (“If Anything” 90): it is “permanent media” (*Aliens* 10), “a mutating, morphing informational assemblage” (“If Anything” 91), or, in Lacanian terms, play of signifiers lacking any anchoring in signifieds. How such *overidentification* with the (overloaded) flow of information without any epistemological grounding may lead to valid knowledge and agency, of course, remains debatable. But, perhaps, that is never the concern of conspiracy theory, and Dean’s

either. What constitutes the interpretative difficulty, critical conundrum or “the demise of symbolic efficiency” for others becomes the cynical rationalization, acceptance of the status quo, since the impossibility of judging the rationality of the paranoid knowledge and truth claims of conspiracy theory “points to the lack of widespread criteria for judgments about what is reasonable and what is not” (*Aliens* 9). Ultimately, the status of conspiracy theory as the outside to the dominant ideology and power system is problematized, and so are its potentials, since it ends up with reinscribing what it challenges, or appears to challenge, as Dean is fully aware of (*Aliens* 44). At most, conspiracy theory “provides a window to the ideological supports of networked technoculture” (“If Anything” 103).

Like Fenster and Dean, albeit with their own particular stances and concerns, Peter Knight also departs from Hofstadter’s alleged pathologization of conspiracy theories, dissociates their links to extremist and conservative politics, and sees them as a necessary, sometimes creative reaction to or strategy of survival in the rapidly changing techno-cultural conditions and everyday, mundane operation of bureaucracy in America since 1960s (*Conspiracy Culture* 35): hence, the shift from collective paranoia to paranoia of everyday life or, more particularly, from anxieties about the aliens’ invasion into body politics and national defense system to fears about body itself, namely, body panic (*Conspiracy Culture* 169; “ILOVEYOU” 18), as can be seen in William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon, David Cronenberg and horror genre in general.⁷ Paranoid conspiracy (or conspiratorial paranoia), upon closer observation, is not merely de-pathologized but empowered, hegemonized by Knight as the worldview and the “epistemological quick-fix” of counter-cultural generation since 1960s (*Conspiracy Culture* 8) and its “necessary and understandable default approach” (“ILOVEYOU” 24), if not the solution, to the complex technological realities and life in risk society.

In spite of their divergences, Fenster, Dean, Knight and many others commonly avow a radical break with Hofstadter in their respective

⁷ Though not necessarily concerned with body panic, Philip K. Dick, Joseph Heller, Don DeLillo, Margaret Atwood, Paul Auster, and more recently Dan Brown are always on the list of contemporary American novelists of conspiracy and paranoia. In spite of their idiosyncratic characteristics, paranoid doubt about conspiracy in their works functions as a centering device for the subject to explain random events and to relocate its own consistent existence within the mega-system of the society and world (Mason 47).

researches of conspiracy theory; they aim at not only delivering “paranoia” out of its clinical—for them pathologizing—assessments but also reconceptualizing, radicalizing it as a politically epistemic and interpretative, albeit symptomatic strategy in confrontation with the complex postmodern bureaucratic power system and techno-cultural realities. What’s more, they are rather explicitly reserved about, even hostile toward psychoanalytic theory *per se*. The following statement by Fenster sufficiently exemplifies the reservation and hostility in question:

The problem of a purely psychoanalytic approach is that it would posit [the interpretive desire of conspiracy theory] as simply symptomatic of some greater individual trauma: the subject does not know what it wants, but the cause of this ignorance and the resulting pathologies can be found by the analyst and theorist. (93)

For researchers of conspiracy theory like Fenster, psychoanalysis is a theoretical, interpretative framework that pathologizes the objects under its examination: for example, people who cling to whatever conspiracy theory merely project their internal problems of sexual nature to external causes, while conspiracy culture is a collective malady to be cured. In a similar vein, Melley relegates psychoanalysis to determinism (72) and even directly diagnoses it as a form of paranoia for its formulations of the categories of the Real as “unmediated access to reality” (67). Like other anti-psychoanalytic critics, Melley does not give up “paranoia” once and for all; the case he makes for paranoia, however, does not apply to *the* paranoia under psychoanalytic formulations: “[U]nlike Freud, the paranoid finds the idea of being dispersed into an ineffable system of control . . . wholly intolerable. Paranoia is therefore not merely an interpretative stance, but part of a discourse about agency” (72).

The above criticisms that psychoanalysis pathologizes the subject as well as the society within an ineffable deterministic system and excludes any possibility of agency are blatantly misleading. Is the idea that only the analyst knows the truth of the analysand’s desire and trauma not the fantasy (of the subject supposed to know) to be broken down in psychoanalysis? Does the Real in a truly Lacanian sense not designate the disruption of, rather than immediacy to reality, which thus points to the fragility and hence

transformation of reality, of the parameters of the impossible and possible? We cannot help suspecting that those anti-psychoanalytic criticisms simply replicate what they claim to break with: namely, the pathologizing gesture which they impute to psychoanalysis as well as all the studies hostile to conspiracy theories. In fact, we can see certain symptomatic, ambivalent negation at work in them. And what is negation in psychoanalytic terms, if not the way of disowning, defending against, not wanting to know but still clinging to the repressed thoughts or the Real of desire? It is not that those critics find psychoanalysis essentially unwarranted but that they do not or would not pursue far enough the psychoanalytic themes germane to their works. For example, we are justified to put Fenster's observation that conspiracy theories desire dissatisfaction by making infinite links among information (89-90) in more explicitly Lacanian terms: conspiracy theories take details as the object *a* qua the index to some enigmatic X or some small piece of the Real around which their interpretative drives circle, and they always see details as lacking and *something in them more than themselves* at the same time. Do we not see in conspiracy theories conceived this way the working of ideological fantasy as such that takes into account its own impossibility in advance (Žižek, *SOI* 126)? Somehow, Ragle's paranoid-conspiratorial reflections on the shrinking realities in Philip K. Dick's *Time out of Joint* already substantiate what is at issue here: "We can put everything we know together, he realized, but it doesn't tell us anything, except that something is wrong. And we knew that to start with. The clues we are getting don't give us a solution; they only show us how far-reaching the wrongness is" (109). What if such "impossibility of knowing the Other" is merely the counterpart of the fantasy of knowing the whole truth of the Other, or the Other of the Other, albeit in an apathetic, disillusioned way? And how are we to clarify all the issues here if not through a more sophisticated theory that brings together symptom, fantasy and enjoyment, a theory absent in those anti-psychoanalytic criticisms?

Critics of the psychoanalytic approach to conspiracy theories as illustrated above are obviously conceptualizing their own type of *good*, progressive paranoia in contrast to the *bad*, pathologizing psychoanalytically-informed one, but are likely to end up with indiscriminately pathologizing psychoanalysis and valorizing paranoia as an effective political/epistemic/cultural strategy. We may or may not agree with the view that "paranoia"

today has extended far beyond personal, pathological disorder and is no longer used as nothing but a clinical concept (Coale 5), or that we are moving from the time of *secure paranoia* to *insecure paranoia*, a time characterized with not so much any single, rigid system of beliefs as “a more diffuse belief in conspiring forces which are everywhere but which can’t be located anywhere in particular in a decentered global economy” (Knight, *Conspiracy Culture* 32) and, therefore, “an often uncoordinated expression of doubt and distrust” (44). And we may or may not agree with Kellner that there is any *critical paranoia* analogue to the postmodern sublime that “provides a mode of representing the unrepresentable, of articulating the horrors of the present” (219) or *populist paranoia* that “demonizes irrationally dominant institutions and often projects evil onto occult and supernatural figures” (Kellner 205). But we are certain of the relevance of “paranoia” to studies of contemporary conspiracy theory with respect to subjectivity, fantasy, enjoyment and ethico-political agency. It is by no means an ideologically-neutral category: hence, the necessity of ethico-ideological critique. Without such an understanding as the point of departure, we either bloat the transgressive, liberatory potentials of paranoia or replicate the pathologizing gesture that we impute to the objects of our critique.

The Unbearable Ideological Contradictions of Paranoid-Cynical Subjectivity

One effective point of departure for an ideological critique of paranoid conspiracy is to recapitulate the lesson of Freud’s and Lacan’s reading of Schreber’s case as presented in the first section of this essay: paranoia forms a paradoxical configuration of doubt and certainty, fragmentation and fixation, regressiveness and aggressiveness. In other words, a psychoanalytic critique of ideology does not reduce paranoia to sexual inversion in the purely clinical situation but relates it to the problems of subjectivity, epistemology and ethico-political agency. Within contemporary postmodern conditions, as O’Donnell argues,

the libidinal investment in mutability, in being utterly other, contests with an equally intense investment in the commodification of individual subjects: this contradiction pertains both to the formation

of individual subjects and to the national and political bodies into which they are interpellated as collective subjects. (14)

Paranoid subjects in such a context are interpellated by the capitalist/multiculturalist calls to “respect/become/consume . . . the Other” and at the same time seek for self-identity in collective bodies or larger national, historical narratives. They straddle between the *inside* and *outside* of the master plot of the society and history: they claim to see through the secret power mechanism that others do not, but identify with the marginalized, powerless majority (Mason 47). Are these not the implied ideological messages in Oliver Stone’s *JFK*, in which “Where were you when Kennedy was assassinated?” works as the shibboleth to include everyone into the “plot” (in its double sense), of which everyone is asked to offer his or her perspective, witness or lie but is not able to provide the final piece of detail to close the jigsaw puzzle always-already with its whole picture? Exonerating no one, the film clings to the fantasy of the *subjects supposed to know* (enjoy?) and places upon them the unknowing complicity or the complicity of unknowing with the conspiracy against America, the murder of the Father.

The “plot” of *JFK* complicatedly interweaves divergent perspectives, assumptions, postulates or blatant lies circling around the Real of the assassination, and manifests the ideological contradictions of doubt/certainty, inside/outside, fragmentation/fixation, unknowing/knowing, and connection/disconnection typical of contemporary conspiracy theories and cultural paranoia. Everything and everyone can be put into question, but the fantasy of the subject supposed to know and enjoy, the fantasy that there must be someone (or an Other) possessing the final piece of evidence to complete the whole picture, persists to the last minute. The TV series *The X-Files* simply enacts such ideological contradictions in a more episodic way. Through its indeterminate, constantly shifting and escalating conspiratorial plots and plotting, or “dense weaving of information, misinformation and disinformation” (Bell and Bennion-Nixon 134), *The X-Files* questions the binary oppositions between science and faith, the irrational and rational, natural and supernatural, human and technology (Kellner 207, 222-23, 227), and keeps deferring the revelation of the final truth, which is assumed to be always-already out there but can only be circled around and can never be arrived at.

What *real* impacts the conspiratorial, paranoid questioning of truth and reality as exemplified by *JFK* and *The X-Files* brings forth remains questionable, given their fixation in the ideological fantasy of *the subject supposed to know and enjoy*, in Žižekian terms. But what can be ascertained is the danger, if not necessity, of regressing into self-enclosed, self-perpetuating, and undifferentiated suspicion (Barkun 169; Featherstone 38; Knight, *Conspiracy Culture* 27), an abyssal source of enjoyment structured by the paranoid conspiratorial fantasy. As Barkun comments, “[T]he more sweeping a conspiracy theory’s claims, the less relevant evidence becomes” and “belief in a conspiracy theory ultimately becomes a matter of faith rather than proof” (7). In other words, the enjoyment that sustains or interpellates the conspiratorial-paranoid subject is beyond skeptical verification. Thus we return to the Žižekian definition *par excellence* that ideology qua a means of structuring enjoyment takes into account its failure in advance, as I have drawn on previously. To be more specific, doubt becomes a ritualized, automatized material practice that supports the conspiratorial-paranoid ideological fantasy.⁸ We are thus tempted to suspect that the conspiratorial-paranoid fantasy of the (self-)marginalized Otherness, of an outside to the power system, or the Other of the Other, turns out to be an essential part of postmodern individuals’ mass consumption of and obsession with Otherness (Featherstone 32). Will it be possible that all the postmodernist-multiculturalist ethical calls for “Love Your Neighbor!” and “Respect the Other!” not only shrink critical distance but also, paradoxically, invert themselves into the claustrophobic solipsism, as Featherstone also suspects (31)?

That paranoid conspiracy theory as a self-marginalized, self-perpetuating, if not self-alienated, system of belief is beyond rational verification and does not give rise to any effective universal knowledge entails no downright irrationality or stupidity. What should be put in focus, rather, is the close tie between conspiratorial-paranoid subjectivity and cynicism, which is already implied in the above references to *JFK* that highlight the ideological contradiction of identifying with the powerless

⁸ Obviously, the arguments here have much to do with Pascal’s illustration of the nature of belief: “[I]f you do not believe, kneel down, act as if you believe, and belief will come by itself” (Žižek, *PF* 6). But the repetitious ritual of kneeling down is in its turn already determined by a pre-subjective kernel that is beyond ideological interpellation: hence, the subject beyond subjectivization. The latter part of this essay will elaborate on what is involved here.

unknowing majority and persisting in the fantasy of the subject supposed to know/enjoy, and doubt as a ritualized practice of ideological interpellation as well. The paranoid-cynical subject in question does not trust any form of universality except the universalized hidden agendas behind the public Law. As made clear by the reference to Sloterdijk at the very beginning of this paper, typical postmodern cynics are skeptical about and disillusioned with the Enlightenment and its promise of universal reason. Moreover, they can be understood as, in Sloterdijk's own words, "borderline melancholics, who can keep their symptoms of depression under control and can remain more or less able to work. . . . Their psychic apparatus has become elastic enough to incorporate as a survival factor a permanent doubt about their own activities" (5). In other words, cynics are not exceptional figures but average individuals able to survive in the ordinary world (Huyssen xii). For what do the paranoid-cynical subjects rely on "doubt" qua their survival strategy, or in what does ideology interpellate, grip the paranoid-cynical subjects, if not the enjoyment of fantasizing the obscenity of Power and Law, the dimension of the subject beyond subjectivization? It is on such a ground that ideology is not so much about blind obedience as about all those retroactively constructed rationalizations. The paranoid-cynical subjects posit that all ideologies except their own position are deceptive; they are unaware of their uncanny doubling with ideologies: they cannot enjoy without ideologies being posited as deception. Thus said, however, we do not need to follow Sloterdijk's cynical, pathologizing comment that contemporary cynics are doomed to be "eternal losers" who exploit their self-victimizing position for disguised aggression and "medical and political hypochondriacs who lament that conditions are so terrible that it is a great sacrifice on their part not to kill themselves or emigrate" (58). At least, we must not fail to see that paranoid cynics (unconsciously) misrecognize their position within power relations or disguise their position as non-position (Fenster 67; Featherstone 39). Their (pseudo-)detached, objective distance by way of doubt, disillusionment and irony, in Žižek's words, "is just one way . . . 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*" (SOI 33, original emphasis). It is in this sense that cynicism embodies, in Sloterdijk's term, *enlightened false consciousness*, or

that “enlightened cynical false consciousness” forecloses the Real of social antagonism and functions as an ideological support of the status quo.

The paranoid cynics’ ideological fixation in conspiracy theories and misrecognition of *all* ideologies except their own position as deception can be also observed in their reduction of the complex historical process to instrumental power (Fenster 63). Paranoid cynicism is a form of fetishism that freezes the process of exchange and circulation (of commodity, signifiers, desire, etc), abstracts a certain object (or part of its content or property) and endows it with whatever mystic aura. Paradoxically, the paranoid-cynical subject is ideologically gripped not so much through any form of instrumentality as in the dimension of drive and enjoyment—namely, the subject beyond subjectivization—that is beyond all instrumentalist, utilitarian calculations of pleasure and pain, gain and loss, the most passive kernel of the subject underneath the semblance of excessively radical doubt and irony. In other words, paranoid cynicism now provides a commodified, stylized survival strategy for getting adapted to, rather than changing, the status quo, in which “Otherness” has been elevated to the *sublime object* of mass consumption; it is, as Birchall comments on *The X-Files*, “a nonradical investment in the radical” (238). The fetishistic and commodified paranoid-cynical subjectivity, to the most extent, perfectly fits in contemporary political realities or, in Bewes’s term, “the impoverishment of the political process”:

Politics, governed increasingly by an ethos of supply and demand, has become a realm of consumer sovereignty in which the concepts of leadership and inspiration are important polemical commodities, but are maintained only in this mediated way. Cynicism appears in the space left empty by the mass cultural retreat from politics itself. (3)

We are tempted to suspect that paranoid-cynical subjectivity is symptomatic of the pervasive anxiety toward the shrinking of public sphere and the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of making political choice and imagining political collectivity, a symptom that is densely permeated with enjoyment and, thus, grips the subject evermore than downright prohibitions. What is the repressed ideological message of Neo’s gesture of “waking up to reality” at the final scene of *The Matrix* and his reminder that we can hang up the

phone, get disconnected with the Matrix and change the rule of game, if not “Doubt/transgress/play whatever you like, and leave the Matrix, the fundamental structure of domination and fantasy as they are,” when we still bear in mind Morpheus’s statement that we are all slaves blinded from the truth of being born into the prison of the omnipresent Matrix, the prison of our mind? Paranoid cynics take realities *as* they really are and despise all forms of power and ideology as deceptive fiction. They never learn that “the Truth has the structure of a fiction: what appears in the guise of dreaming, or even daydreaming, is sometimes the hidden truth on whose repression social reality is founded. . . . [R]eality is for those who cannot sustain the dream” (Žižek, *DSST* 198).

The above sketchy references to Žižek’s theory of ideological fantasy pave the way to understanding why conspiracy and paranoid-cynical subjectivity engender the difficulty for ideological critique as well as ethico-political judgment. Paranoid cynics clinging to conspiracy theories are obsessed with details, see them as always lacking, or *something in them more than themselves*; they are suspicious of the Other but certain of the whole truth of the Other or the Other of the Other. It is not so much that they no longer believe as that they “secretly believe much more than they are willing to admit, even if they transpose these beliefs onto (nonexistent) ‘others’” (Žižek, *PD* 8): they have other “subjects supposed to believe” in their place, to take on the burden of belief for them, or they disbelieve on the level of behaviors (e.g. doubt and irony qua materialized ideological practices) but believe in the unconscious.⁹ Therefore, their insight into the

⁹ It is at the point that we can perceive “the inherent reflectivity of belief” or “belief at a distance”: “in order for the belief to function, there *has* to be some ultimate guarantor of it, yet this guarantor is always deferred, displaced, never here *in persona*” (Žižek, “The Supposed Subject” 43). When the subject has the Other to believe in its place, when belief is displaced to the Other, the subject not only relieves itself of the burden of *believing too much* but also evades confronting the Real of its desire, the fact that it acquires or is fixated in the obscene enjoyment of power and ideology. As in the imaginary scenario of “theft of enjoyment,” we can see here the working of the fantasy of “the subject supposed to enjoy (the organic Wholeness)” or possess the Thing, which is retroactively constructed to be stolen and which can be infinitely circled around but can never be directly confronted. This explains away why the paranoid-cynical subject is maniac for details and for the Other of the Other along with the suspicion of some dark, obscene enjoyment behind the public political scenes. This also explains why enjoyment is always an Otherness to the subject, the most alien kernel of its being, something that the subject can never really claim as its own and belongs to the dimension of “the subject beyond subjectivization.” Also see Žižek, *TN* Chapter 6.

secret of the Other does not change anything for them; they end up with obedience and subjection to the Other more than ever (McGowan 121-22; Žižek, *PD* 8). In imagining an outside to the power system and misrecognizing its own position as an ironical, detached non-position, the paranoid-cynical subject appears to ridicule official ideologies, seeks refuge in the pleasures of everyday life and acts of indifference, but, in fact, clings to the obscene enjoyment of power and, therefore, is gripped evermore ideologically (McGowan 126; Žižek, *DSST* 91). For Žižek, the ideological effects in the subject rely on the support of enjoyment, which belongs to the dimension of the subject beyond subjectivization, a dimension of absolute Otherness always beyond the process of signification and historicization (*EYAWK* 245, *PF* 48-50). More fundamentally, paranoid cynicism forecloses the Real of social antagonism and symptomatically acts out an ideological will to closure and rigidity underneath the semblance of openness and fluidity through excessive doubt: hence, passivity toward the fundamental fantasy framework and status quo.

The Society of Enjoyment or/and Age of Anxiety?

Conspiracy theory and paranoid-cynical subjectivity prevail as the symptomatic reactions to and survival strategies in the postmodern consumer society and global capitalism, which greatly rely on excessive mass consumption and are densely permeated with enjoyment or “injunctions to enjoy” (and transgress). Such a society of enjoyment, fundamentally, is motored by anxiety (toward self-image, social status, reality, and so on) (Salecl 55). Freud first defines anxiety as repressed and non-discharged libido, but later in his “Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety” (1926), he redefines it as part of the defense mechanism against realistic dangers, and then as the psychical preparedness for or affective reaction to the danger of castration, separation and anticipated loss of the object; it brings forth rather than results from symptom-formation and repression (126-29).¹⁰ Such reformulations pave the way for Lacan’s revision in his seminar on anxiety: anxiety is no longer viewed as a psychical response to the real or imaginary

¹⁰ “Symptom” in this context, according to Freud, arises when an instinctual impulse bypassing repression finds a reduced, displaced and inhibited substitute that brings no pleasurable satisfaction but has the quality of a compulsion to repeat (94-95). Also see Salecl 18-23.

loss of the object but designates the affect aroused by the overproximity of the Other; it emerges when the lack of lack—or when there is supposed to be a lack but is occupied by an object—perturbs the fantasy framework through which the subject perceives the reality, and endangers the order of symbolization and desiring, both of which rely on “lack” as the motivating principle (Salecl 24; Shepherdson xxxii). In the context of the society of enjoyment, when the subject is confronted with more choices of consumption and, therefore, more superegoic injunctions to enjoy and transgress, what it actually experiences is the “suffocating proximity of the object-cause of desire” (Žižek, *PD* 56), lack of lack and, therefore, more anxiety.¹¹

It is no wonder that conspiracy theory and paranoid-cynical subjectivity prevail as the symptomatic reactions to an age when new technology and expert knowledge do not alleviate anxiety but turn out to be the source of more uncertainty and threat (Parish 3; Žižek, *TS* 335): in Žižek’s term, an age of “the demise of symbolic efficiency,” the dysfunctioning of the Symbolic that channels the subject’s desiring and confers social identity upon it. As Žižek indicates, it is not that conspiracy theorists regress into paranoia and are unable to accept the reality, but that reality itself *is* paranoiac (“The Matrix” para. 13), when the Other/Symbolic that determines the subject’s sense of reality becomes more and more threateningly uncertain, obscure but proximal: details of everyday life however small could be risky, the society and human body are threatened or contaminated from within, reality becomes a fragile fiction

As mentioned previously, that the paranoid-cynical subject clings to conspiracy theories is symptomatic of the pervasive anxiety toward the disappearance of the public and the difficulty of making political choice and forming political collectivity, and the other side to this is more seclusion in the personal realm and fixation in the obscene enjoyment of Power: the paranoid-cynical subject’s fundamental fantasmatic framework is thus kept intact. Within such a context, the dysfunctioning of the Symbolic in channeling the subject’s desiring and signifying practices, therefore, attests to the *post-politics* in the society of enjoyment. Now the State, no longer a mega-apparatus of ideological antagonisms and contestations, is reduced to “a mere police-agent servicing the . . . needs of market forces and

¹¹ Also see Glynos 203; Žižek, *ME* 55.

multiculturalist tolerant humanitarianism” (Žižek, *TS* 199). Such a post-ideological move allegedly turns politics back to the regular track of things, to things *as they really are*, and away from ideological falsifications, a turn embraced by cynical realists; every part, voice, and claim have their own proper places, but radical politics, namely fundamental transformation of power relations, is disavowed (Žižek, “A Leftist Plea” 989, 1006). When antagonism qua the real, impossible kernel of the political and the social is precluded, as well as when the universal is cynically doubted, we are confronted with the uncanny return of the Real in the guise of more primitive, violent fundamentalism and racism, or “the speculative identity of [the] useless and excessive outbursts of violence [and] hatred of Otherness and the post-political multiculturalist universe of tolerance of difference” (*TS* 201).¹² When does the Other deserve a multiculturalist’s respect and love, if not on condition that it has to fit in multiculturalist parameters of reality and to be deprived of its radical Otherness? And does fundamentalist violence not act out such a will to “deprive the Other of its Otherness”?

As already clear in Schreber’s case, the dysfunctioning of the symbolic Other/Name-of-the-Father, the impotence of authorities, or “the demise of symbolic efficiency” does not liberate the subject. Rather, an obscene Father, new Master, crueler and more demanding, takes the place of the Law and haunts the subject with supereogic injunctions to enjoy (Žižek, *TS* 142, 345, 349). The subject is thus confronted with more choices of enjoyment, but, lacking the coordination of the Symbolic, is burdened with more anxiety and enjoys less freedom (Kay 141): the more the subject listens to the superego to obey the Law and repress its transgressive desire, the more superego demands and repressed desire return to make the subject feel guiltier for not enjoying enough (Kay 111; Lacan, *Seminar VII* 302; Žižek, *DSST* 100; *FA* 141). It is no wonder that everywhere we come across the excessive drive to blend enjoyment in duties: hence, ceaseless proliferation of committees and reinvention of rules teaching us how to ethically enjoy eating, dressing, drinking, exercising, working, sleeping, dying What is the most successful marketing strategy today, if not selling the commodity of

¹² For more details on the uncanny doubling between post-political multiculturalism and fundamentalism, between the ethical calls for “love your neighbor” and excessive, primitive violence, see Huang, *Horror and Evil in the Name of Enjoyment* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), Chapter 3.

the object *a* that arouses desire for dissatisfaction? And what may come out as the speculative result of such a society of enjoyment, if not the subject's narcissistic regression into self-enclosed hedonism, less enjoyment and freedom, more anxiety and subjection, since "the direct injunction 'Enjoy!' is a much effective way to hinder the subject's access to enjoyment than the explicit Prohibition which sustains the space for its transgression" (Žižek, *TS* 367)?

It is by no means difficult to find examples from films like *The Truman Show* and *Fight Club* to elaborate on the difficulty of ethico-political agency in the society of enjoyment and anxiety. At its most apparent level, Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998) (as well as "The Truman Show" within the film¹³) realizes the ideological effects of interpellating a collective body of individuals through the homogeneous, ritualized, commodified material practice of addictive viewing. "The Truman Show" appeals to the audience's dissatisfaction with their boring life experiences (of watching actors' phony emotions, pyrotechnics and special effects, as Christof points out at the very beginning), and everything on the show is for sale: the spectacle of artificial, technically-designed and simulated realities as *true* life is the ultimate commodity sold to a bunch of cultural dupes. Following such a critical logic, we are tempted to read the film an updated allegory for a Foucauldian panopticon or "totally-administered" society. Such an ideological critique, however, presupposes a too rigid differentiation between reality and simulation (qua faked reality or false consciousness), the powerful techno-elite and the powerless majority. Do we not encounter in the film something like cynical subjectivity as analyzed above: the citizens know the show is a show but they are still watching and acting it *as if* it is real life? And is it not exactly such cynical distance that supports the show or keeps their life going on with the show? Has watching "The Truman Show," in which they also play some parts, not already been an essential part of their ordinary life for thirty more years? Or, is it not the impossible act of gazing back at themselves through Truman?

It's wrong, however, to see "The Truman Show" as nothing but simulation and nothing to do with reality. Though set up, administered by the studio or the Big Brother behind cameras, the show is *real* in the sense that *something in it more than itself* sticks out of the scene, though the studio

¹³ The non-italicized title put in the double quotation mark refers to the show within the film.

strives but fails to repress it: those intruders from the outside, the advertising lines popping out from Truman's wife, and the "voices" that provoke Truman's paranoiac suspicion are all cracks in the simulated realities, and even Truman himself is the lack *par excellence*, a character out of joint that turns the plot astray. As O'Donnell comments, Truman's universe is originally presented to the audience as "replete with objects of desire to which he has immediate access" (7), but turns out to be a hole, gap in the audience's symbolic universe (7). Put in psychoanalytic terms, he is the object *a* of the national voyeuristic audience (Jagodzinski 67), the object cause and the signifier of lack of their desire. Are these lacks not exactly what capture the audience's attention, their fantasy that there could be something different and, therefore, point to the Real of their desire? When those lacks disappear or are filled out, their desire stops: as one character asks at the ending of the movie, "What's else on TV? Where is the TV guide?" Not even Truman himself, albeit naïve in some respect, is ideologically neutral, and we should not see the audience's and Truman's world and desire as ideologically oppositional to each other. His odyssey represents, in Žižek's words, "the ultimate American paranoiac fantasy" of an substanceless consumerist paradise deprived of material inertia and, at the same time, the symptom of that fantasy, the suspicion that the world is a faked spectacle, a gigantic show staged for him only ("The Matrix" para. 4-5). The paranoiac desire of living in the eternal present, immediacy, transparency, and control can never dispense with its internal contradiction: the subject desires seeing the whole show, but always lacks/suspects more.

It is reasonable to see *The Truman Show* as a parable on contemporary reality soaps; both act out the anxiety toward not being sufficiently exposed to the camera/Other's gaze, which turns out to be the ontological guarantee of the subject's being (Žižek, *EYS* 203). But how we are to interpret the ending of the film requires more sophisticated qualifications. Does Truman move from "alienation" to "separation" in Lacanian sense, namely, does he traverse the fantasy as Jagodzinski indicates that "[he] is now not only suspicious of his 'cage' but is about to embark on a mission of self-discovery in unknown territory" (70)? Does the show as such really end at Truman's *leaving*, or is another season is about to begin? How are we to interpret Truman's routine lines "Good morning, and good afternoon, good evening and good night, in case I don't see you again" at the end, when he decides to

take the heroic move to quit the show? Is that a truly heroic gesture of traversing the fantasy, or just a mock-heroic parody? Where is he going, or is he going anywhere? To avoid embracing the truth-value of the film at its surface, perhaps, we should take the ending as a typical tragicomic one, in which the happy dénouement does not really solve the fundamental ideological tensions. Even if we do not downplay his decision, Truman is still imagining a Beyond to the show, the studio, the simulated realities and life, or the Other of the Other; he still falls prey to the fantasy of the subject supposed to enjoy and, therefore, the Other's gaze/obscene Father's superegoic commands to enjoy. If so, the film ultimately ends with a cynical detachment that leaves the fundamental fantasy and status quo intact, an interpassive gesture of being active to remain passive.

Like *The Truman Show*, David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999) also acts out the symptoms and ideological tensions inherent in the contemporary society of enjoyment, albeit in a more dramatic, violent and uncanny way. At its ground level, *Fight Club* is a monologic (or hallucinatory?) narrative by Jack (Edward Norton), who is maniac for Ikea's furniture, suffers chronic insomnia and depression, loses desire for his work and daily routine and feels overwhelmed by capitalist civilization. Jack's life is delivered out of the ordinary track and into the *underground*, alternative society and reality of Fight Club by Tyler (Brad Pitt), who appears to Jack as his "messianic alter-ego" but is later exposed as the pure creation of Jack's psychotic fantasy (Diken and Laustsen 349-50). Even though it is easy to take the film literally and downplay it as a story signifying nothing but "sound and fury," we should not foreclose the possibility of seeing the *method* in its madness, as what Freud and Lacan accomplish in their reading of Schreber's case: hence, the significance of *identifying with the symptom*, of "[recognizing] in the 'excess,' in the disruptions of the 'normal' way of things, the key offering us access to its true functioning" (Žižek, *SOI* 128).

Fight Club is symptomatic in the way that it stages the real ideological contradictions densely permeated with enjoyment beyond its explicit messages and characters' belief in and fantasy of what they are doing. Jack is accurate to a certain extent in revealing his as well as others' pathological, self-victimizing mania for attending all those support groups (of tuberculosis, melanoma, blood parasites, testicle cancer, etc.): namely, "to get attention when people thought you were dying." Undoubtedly, all those nearly

farcical presentations of support group activities—hugging each other, crying in each other’s arms, feeling almost choked by the partner’s “big tits,” soliciting some volunteers to make love, drinking coffee for free, etc.—can be read as an intentional parody of contemporary dominant culture of therapy and New Age spirituality which attest to the demise of symbolic efficiency as discussed above: the Symbolic gradually loses its binding effects, the subject not so much identifies with political collectivity as imagines itself as the master of its own life, traumatic experiences are thought to be susceptible to remodeling and alleviation, death can be ethically perceived and arranged in advance—in one word, the Real of desire, the impossible social antagonism, and the Otherness of the Other are all disavowed.¹⁴ Accordingly, in addition to seeking comforts, attention, or reinvention of their selves, those who indulgently frequent support groups, however, are enjoying each other’s trauma: they betray not only excessive fascination with but also anxiety toward the other’s enjoyment (qua a traumatic Thing in Lacanian sense). The film’s ideological critique thus unveils their “voyeuristic compassion” (Žižek, “An Ethical Plea” 180), a paradoxical inversion of their own internal aggression and antagonism, and the “narcissistic ideology of false tolerance” (C 119), both of which can be read as the ideological udnertext of contemporary multiculturalism. The populist violence of the *Fight Club* simply embodies one instance of such inversion.

What ideologically associate the support groups (as well as culture of self-therapy and New Age spirituality) and Jack/Tyler’s *Fight Club* are the superegoic injunction to enjoy, the awful freedom to consume, and the excessive anxiety in consequence (Diken and Laustsen 362), and these are

¹⁴ One episode of Oprah Winfrey Show that Salecl recounts in her *On Anxiety* exemplifies the arguments here. The famous therapist John Gary asked a woman suffering from low confidence to close her eyes and recall an especially traumatic childhood scene, and the woman remembered that her father often told her that she was stupid, and that constituted the cause of her later negative self-image. The somewhat melodramatic scenario continued:

Gray then asked the woman to return in her mind to the original childhood scene and imagine that her now dead father is standing next to her. With her eyes closed, the woman tells her “father” that he is wrong in calling her stupid . . . and that she knows she is intelligent. After a moment of crying, catharsis happens—the woman opens her eyes, Gray hugs her as a good father would and from now on her trauma is gone . . . (129-30)

exactly what make the ideological critique of the film itself difficult. Judged on its ideological surface-text, *Fight Club*, at least for Tyler, materializes the attempt to resist and break away with the inhibited life in the global capitalist market of Microsoft, Starbucks, Ikea, and so on. As Tyler keeps propagandizing, “It’s only after you’ve lost everything that you’re free to do anything.” Self-destruction (through excessive, desperate fighting) for *Fight Club* is the inescapable point of departure for speeding up large-scale disasters and evolving toward the final redemption or returning to the ground-zero. Through its terrorist activities of arson, mischief, assault and misinformation, in Diken and Laustsen’s words, “*Fight Club* seeks to attain a ‘Body without Organs,’ the zero-degree of symbolic difference, and undifferentiated body with not face, no privileged zones and forms” (353), and, ultimately, to blast the world free of history, to annihilate civilization from its root.

We may fully embrace the above analysis of the revolutionary, albeit nihilist, disruptions by *Fight Club*, as long as we intentionally leave Jack’s psychotic hallucinations unexplained. If we, instead, place the focus on this aspect, *Fight Club*’s transformation into a terrorist organization perfectly corresponds to the gradual deterioration of Jack’s mental state, which comes to its final psychotic collapse with all those paranoiac, megalomaniac apocalyptic visions/hallucinations of the end of the world. Then, everything subversive upon the first glance requires our second thought, especially when we consider how the working of capitalist system forms a homology with the paradoxical nature of the superego. As Žižek indicates, “Capitalism has no ‘normal,’ balanced state; its ‘normal’ state is the permanent production of an excess” (*TN* 209), and such a structural imbalance (between satisfaction and dissatisfaction, production and lack) also characterizes the superego: as explained previously, the more we follow the superego’s command, the more it demands and the guiltier we feel. Accordingly, *Fight Club*’s Mayhem Project can be understood in a new light: it simply stages the inherent excess and transgression in the capitalist system through the aestheticized but perfectly normalized violence (Žižek, “The Masochist Social Link” 121). To sustain this argument, we only need to recall that the dynamites used in the Mayhem Project are made of liposuctioned fat (qua the excess of capitalist market) stolen out of medical waste incinerators. The film’s anti-consumerism, in fact, is an allowed

transgressive fantasy that supports consumerism. And we thus come across what is also at work in paranoid-cynical subjectivity as analyzed previously in this essay: “*Fight Club* remains within the confines of what it criticizes. It criticizes capitalism for reducing everything to imaginary simulacra, but paradoxically it is entrapped within the imaginary register itself” (Diken and Laustsen 358). *Fight Club*’s staging of the catastrophic imaginary as well as those support groups’ self-victimization is predicated on the Other’s gaze; it is an acting-out for the Other to see. Does Jack’s beating himself in front of his boss not exemplify the argument here, a self-victimizing gesture that “blackmails” the Other (both literally and metaphorically) but is attached to its gaze and enjoyment evermore?¹⁵ Does this not also apply to the scene of Jack’s attempted suicide, where he is still reasoning with Tyler, still demanding a Master, the Other’s gaze and, therefore, still dominated by the superegoic commands to enjoy from the obscene Father-*jouissance*, who grows crueler the more one listens to him? Ultimately, “everything subversive turns out to be repressive: *Fight Club* is a comedy of subversion” (Diken and Laustsen 350).

The Truman Show and *Fight Club* illustrate two opposite but doubled symptomatic reactions to contemporary society of enjoyment: escapist fantasy of a Beyond on the one side, terrorist acting-out on the other. In spite of this divergence, the two films, though not lacking their critical attempts, do not dispense with interpassive paranoid-cynical subjectivity. In these two films, we see beneath the images of satisfaction and transgression or semblance of fluidity certain rigidity, foreclosure of real social antagonism, and passivity toward the fundamental fantasmatic

¹⁵ It is not difficult to notice the disposition of masochistic perversion involved here. Žižek seems to endorse the ethical value of pervert’s staging, externalization of his fundamental fantasy, as he claims in his “Is It Possible to Traverse the Fantasy in Cyberspace”: “If we follow [playing in cyberspace] to the end, if we immerse ourselves in it without restraint, if we externalize in it our imagination in its very inconsistency, the very fantasmatic frame that guarantees the consistency of our (self-)experience can, perhaps, be undermined” (ZR 122-23). It is at this point that this essay departs from Žižek’s interpretation of the film as an example of how to break out of the superegoic injunction to enjoy (“An Ethical Plea” 178-79). For Žižek, Jack’s beating “himself” (or Tyler beating Jack?) in front of his boss realizes excremental identification, the necessary step of masochistic self-degradation and emptying out of libidinal investment of power mechanism toward liberation (182-83). Of course, such interpretations sustain, as in the case of the possible analysis of *Fight Club*’s revolutionary potentials posited above, on condition that Jack’s psychosis is ignored or turned into a legitimate subversive position. Otherwise, we should be more cautious against any over-allegorizing reading of the film.

structure and status quo. It is in this sense that conspiracy theory and paranoid-cynical subjectivity support the technological, socio-cultural realities and ideologies they distrust and criticize. We thus encounter in such a situation an uncanny inversion of totalitarian regime under Hannah Arendt's formulation: there, total domination and terror are fully identified with lawfulness, or the Law becomes its own excess and transgression; in today's society of enjoyment, excess and transgression supercede symbolic prohibitions and are elevated to the status of the Law, and what we have is not more freedom but the return of a more primordial *Father-jouissance* and, hence, more anxiety toward, as well as harassment and persecution by, the other's enjoyment and more sense of guilt for not enjoying enough. As pointed out previously, those ethics (or those committees of small big others) that help us to blend enjoying in duties do not offer any solutions to anxiety; instead, they turn out to be the cause of more paranoiac anxiety, the unbearable burden of superegoic commands: paranoia as the dominant form of subjectivity in the society of enjoyment does not emerge over the loss of the object but the overproximity toward the object which becomes some persecuting agency. Ultimately, conspiracy theory and paranoid-cynical subjectivity do not accomplish any authentic ethical act from the ethical perspectives of psychoanalysis, which always emerges in a traumatic encounter with the Real that shatters the subject's ontological foundation (Žižek, *TS* 212) and, not necessarily offering more choices, changes the rules for choosing and "the very parameters of what is considered 'possible' in the existing constellation" (Žižek, *TS* 199).

"Authentic ethical act"? If we are asking conspiracy theorists too much of it, well, who wants to be serious about them?

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