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Chapter 10

The Death Drive

Alenka Zupančič

In the beginning of his famous essay 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' Freud introduces the problem of the compulsion to repeat, thus opening one of the most interesting as well as most controversial conceptual chapters in psychoanalysis, summed up by the hypothesis of the so-called death drive.¹ Freud proposes a range of different examples. We come across people, he writes, all of whose human relationships have the same outcome: such as the benefactor who is abandoned in anger after a time by each of his protégés, however much they may otherwise differ from one another; or the man whose friendships all end in betrayal by his friend; or the man who time and again in the course of his life raises someone else to the position of great private or public authority and then, after a certain interval, himself upsets the authority and replaces him with a new one; or the lover each of whose love affairs passes through the same phases and reaches the same outcome. There is also the case that became notorious under the name of *fort-da* [gone-there] – the words used by a small child playing with a wooden reel with a piece string tied round it, repeatedly casting it away and pulling it back to himself. Even more intriguing are the cases where the subject seems to have a *passive* experience, over which he has no influence, but in which he comes across the repetition of the same fatality. There was the case of the woman who married three successive husbands each of whom fell ill soon afterwards and had to be nursed by her on their deathbeds. Even at the level of dreams which are supposedly governed by the pleasure principle and guided by a 'wish fulfilment', psychoanalysis discovered a surprising compulsion to repeat some particularly traumatic incidents. The basic problem presented to psychoanalysis by the compulsion to repeat is thus the following: if one starts from – as Freud did at some point – the primary character of the pleasure principle which aims to

maximise pleasure (and whereby pleasure is defined as 'lowering of tension') or minimise displeasure, then the phenomena of the compulsion to repeat contradict this framework. Why would somebody be compelled to repeat a distinctly unpleasant experience?

Two divergent accounts of the mechanisms and the logics of the repetition can be discerned already in Freud. According to the first, what we find at the origin of repetition is a repression of a traumatic event – repetition appears at the place of remembering, one repeats something that one cannot remember. Repetition is thus fundamentally the repetition (in different 'disguises') of a concrete, originally traumatic event or experience. Although Freud preserved the basic outline of this explanation, he also saw that it nevertheless leaves several problems and questions unanswered, suggesting that the whole story may be more complicated. Practically all interesting and productive readings of Freud on this point emphasise the necessity of another turn which complicates the above scheme and puts the repetition in a new perspective. Despite some important differences these readings all agree on one point, which recently has been made again by Ray Brassier in the context of his take on negativity and nihilism: what the compulsion to repeat repeats is not some traumatic and hence repressed experience, but something which *could never register as experience to begin with*.¹ The trauma that is being repeated is outside of the horizon of experience (and is rather constitutive of it). This is how Brassier reads the intriguingly speculative part of 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', where Freud ventures into a speculation about the genesis of organic individuation. A primitive organic vesicle (that is, a small bladder, cell, bobble or hollow structure) becomes capable of filtering the continuous and potentially lethal torrent of external stimuli by sacrificing part of itself in order to erect a protective shield against excessive influxes of excitation. In doing so, it effects a definitive separation between organic interiority and inorganic exteriority. The separation between the organic inside and the inorganic outside is thus achieved at the price of death of a part of the primitive organism itself.² As Brassier put it:

Thus, individuated organic life is won at the cost of this aboriginal death whereby the organism first becomes capable of separating itself from inorganic outside. This death, which gives birth to organic individuation, thereby conditions the possibility of organic phylogenesis, as well as of sexual reproduction. Consequently, not only does this death precede the organism, it is the precondition for the organism's ability to reproduce and die. If the death-drive qua compulsion to repeat is the originary, primordial motive force driving organic life, this is because the motor of repetition – the repeating instance – is this trace of the aboriginal trauma of

organic individuation. [. . .] The death-drive is the trace of this scission: a scission that will never be successfully *bound* (invested) because it remains the *unbindable* excess that makes binding possible.³

This is a crucial point, and we shall return to it. Yet this important emphasis notwithstanding, Brassier's reading still remains within the classical Freudian scheme, according to which the compulsion to repeat is in the service of mastering the unbound 'erring surplus' (the excess of excitation), related to the aboriginal trauma, even though the latter could not have been *experienced* as such. The compulsive repetition is thus explained as the mechanism through which 'the psyche is striving to muster the anxiety required in order to achieve a successful binding (*Besetzung*) of the excess of excitation released by the traumatic breaching of its defenses. It is this binding that lies "beyond the pleasure principle".⁴ In other words: when the usual mechanisms of defence (including repression) – which can still master the excessive excitement within the register of the pleasure principle – no longer work, anxiety is brought in as the last resort in order to perform this work of binding, which in this case takes place beyond the pleasure principle. And the role of the compulsive repetition (of the unpleasant) is to give rise to this anxiety. In spite of its unpleasant character, anxiety is still a defence (against an even bigger displeasure); and the repetition providing this drastic defence is ultimately still in the service of the pleasure principle qua lowering of tension, it is a paradoxical extension of the pleasure principle itself. And so is the death drive. Or else one would need to distinguish between the death drive as such, and the *compulsion* to repeat this or that (empirical) traumatic experience. What suggests a move in this last direction is that Brassier is brought to separate the repetition itself from the excess of excitation and to put them, so to speak, on two opposite sides: the excess is the trace of the aboriginal trauma (prior to any experience), and the compulsion to repeat an *empirically* traumatic experience is a means of awakening anxiety in order to master and 'bind' the excess. But this would then imply that the (death) drive itself is not intrinsically related to repetition.

These considerations and difficulties could be a good starting place from which to look at the perhaps surprising proximity between Lacan and Deleuze in their readings of Freud on this point, which will then bring us to examine the relationship between their respective ontologies.

In relation to Freud both Lacan and Deleuze first vigorously reject the principle of 'lowering of tension' as a fundamental principle and, second, they insist that there is a direct connection between the 'erring/unbound excess' and repetition. As to the first point, they reject the hypothesis of two competing principles (pleasure as 'Eros' and death drive as 'Thanatos'), as well as the possibility of relating the death drive to a homeostatic tendency

('return to the inanimate')⁵ and hence its subjection – in the last instance – to the pleasure principle as the primary principle. This last emphasis and the ontological primacy of the death drive it implies, which is not so surprising in the case of Lacan, is certainly much more so in the case of the allegedly 'vitalist' Deleuze. In the introductory part of *Difference and Repetition*, where he develops one of the most lucid readings of Freud's death drive ever proposed, he explicitly suggests that the death drive 'is the transcendental principle, whereas the pleasure principle is only psychological'.⁶ Or: 'Eros and Thanatos are distinguished in that Eros must be repeated, can be lived only through repetition, whereas Thanatos (as transcendental principle) is that which gives repetition to Eros.'⁷ In other words, Eros is but part of the logic (of the appearing) of Thanatos or of the death drive, and does not have the status of another, complementary (or primary) principle. Death drive is the fundamental (and only) principle, and it has nothing to do with any kind of lowering of tension.

In the same way Lacan argues against the duality of the drives, claiming that 'every drive is virtually a death drive',⁸ as well as against what he perceives as a remainder of the Aristotelian metaphysics in Freud. He thus argues strongly against:

backing the primary process up with the principle which, if pleasure were its only claim, would demonstrate nothing, save that we cling to the soul like a tick to a dog's hide. Because what else is the famous lowering of tension with which Freud links pleasure, other than the ethics of Aristotle?⁹

One should add to this, however, that to think of the death drive as fundamental does not amount to positing the primacy of some obscure *will* or tendency to aggression, destruction, death. As Deleuze perspicuously pointed out, Freud did not discover the death drive in the context of destructive and aggressive tendencies, but in the context of considering the phenomena of repetition. According to Deleuze, repetition itself is precisely the place of original affirmation. Which is why for him the true question is: 'How is it that the theme of death, which appears to draw together the most negative elements of psychological life, can be in itself the most positive element, transcendently positive, to the point of affirming repetition?'¹⁰

For both Lacan and Deleuze repetition is essentially related to the death drive as the fundamental matrix of the drive. What the logic of the latter demonstrates could well be, to borrow the sharpened formulation of this by Slavoj Žižek:

that the most radical tendency of a living organism is to maintain a state of tension, to avoid final 'relaxation' in obtaining a state of full homeostasis.

'Death drive' as 'beyond the pleasure principle' is the very insistence of an organism on endlessly repeating the state of tension.¹¹

One should also emphasise that Lacan's and Deleuze's criticism of Freud is probably closer to the spirit of Freud, to his crucial findings and insights, than the simple acceptance of the claim about an original tendency to lower the tension.

The other crucial point concerns the relation between the 'erring excess' and repetition. Both Lacan and Deleuze insist that the excess (of excitation) does not exist somewhere independently of repetition, but only and precisely in repetition itself and through it. In other words, the thing in defence against which repetition mobilises anxiety exists only through the repetition itself. Repetition is to be found on both sides of this movement: repetition is what brings in the excess 'bound' by anxiety through repetition. The death drive already involves repetition, so that the repetition itself could be seen as split, or two-sided.

In Deleuze, this is the split between repetition as 'transcendental principle' and repetition as 'empirical'. With every empirical repetition something else is at stake (and repeated) as well, namely the difference as such: it is only through and in relation to this repetition as pure difference that the things exist which we can describe as different, similar or the same.¹² This is why one should not understand repetition here solely in the narrow sense of repeating an identical configuration, but as something no less at work in the colourful variety of differences. The point is that 'something' can be repeated in very different forms, while it does not exist somewhere outside of these forms. This 'something' has no independent existence, yet at the same time it is not simply reducible to the elements which it repeats. Or, in a longer but crucial passage from Deleuze:

Death has nothing to do with a material model. On the contrary, the death instinct may be understood in relation to masks and costumes. Repetition is truly that which disguises itself in constituting itself, that which constitutes itself only by disguising itself. It is not underneath the masks, but is formed from one mask to another, as though from one distinctive point to another, from one privileged instant to another, with and within the variations. The masks do not hide anything except other masks. There is no first term which is repeated [. . .]. There is therefore nothing repeated which may be isolated or abstracted from the repetition in which it was formed, but in which it is also hidden. There is no bare repetition which may be abstracted or inferred from the disguise itself. The same thing is both disguising and disguised.¹³

We must be attentive to Deleuze's wording, which is very precise here. The point is not simply that all that exists are masks/appearances/disguises and *nothing else*. The point is (1) that there is no substance that would

repeat itself in different disguises and could be deciphered as such, pointed out and separated from them; and (2) that *there is* something besides the masks, yet the ontological status of this something is paradoxical: we are dealing with something that only exists in repetition of different masks, and which calls for redoubling in its formulation ('The same thing is both disguising and disguised'). Moreover, not only does that what is repeated only exist through the 'masks' with which it is repeated, these masks themselves exist only (and literally) through what they repeat: 'The masks or costumes, do not come "over and above": they are, on the contrary, the internal genetic elements of repetition itself, its integral and constituent parts.'¹⁴ These, then, are the two sides of repetition.

In Lacan a similar inherent split could be established between two levels of the drive: drives as involved in all kinds of partial satisfactions, following the well-known list (oral, anal, scopic), and the drive as purely disruptive pulsating negativity that propels them. In Seminar XI, for example, he emphasises the difference between object *a* as marking a negativity (loss or gap) as such, around which the drive circulates, and all forms of objects *a*, which 'are merely its representatives, its figures',¹⁵ and which constitute different partial drives. As in Deleuze, these two levels cannot be separated. Death drive does not exist somewhere independently of these multiple figures, but only with them and through them. This also means, however, that the supposedly original chaotic, fragmented (empirical) multiplicity of the drives is already a *result* of some 'unifying' negativity – as opposed to the rather romantic and much too simple idea about an original chaotic freedom of the drives.¹⁶ However, this fundamental negativity is 'unifying' in a very specific sense which, again, bears some surprising resemblance to the Deleuzian notion of 'univocity'.

In Deleuze the notion of the univocity of being is directly linked to the singular and central relation between two levels of difference involved in repetition:

We must show not only how individuating difference differs in kind from specific difference, but primarily and above all how individuation properly precedes matter and form, species and parts, and every other element of the constituted individual. Univocity of being, in so far as it is immediately related to difference, demands that we show how individuating difference precedes generic, specific and even individual differences within being; how a prior field of individuation within being conditions at once the determination of species of forms, the determination of parts and their individual variations. If individuation does not take place either by form or by matter, neither qualitatively nor extensionally, this is not only because it differs in kind but because it is already presupposed by the forms, matters and extensive parts.¹⁷

This is a very dense passage. It invokes, among other things, the very beginning of metaphysics and the whole discussion by Aristotle (in Book VII of *Metaphysics*) of what is *being qua being*, where Aristotle attempts to decide whether this title should go to matter or to form.¹⁸ What makes him eventually decide that the title does not go to his first candidate, which is the formless matter of which everything is ultimately composed, but to form, is precisely the question of individuation. He very briskly concludes that substance must be 'separate' (*chôriston*) and 'some this' (*tode ti*, sometimes translated 'this something'), and – implying that matter fails to meet this requirement – the title goes to form. Precisely what the requirement amounts to is still a matter of considerable scholarly debate. Yet one can plausibly say that it concerns the question of (a certain type of) individuation. And this is precisely the point (or the 'symptom') to which both Lacan and Deleuze respond with the argument that could be most concisely put in the following terms: Aristotle fails to distinguish between 'difference' and 'differentiating difference', and hence between two levels of individuation: one that can be seen as separate individual entities, and the one that only makes it possible for the latter to appear (or to count) as such. In his discussion of the ontological status and presuppositions of *one* (as unit) in the seminar . . . *ou pire* Lacan points out that Aristotle's logic is founded on 'the intuition of the individual posited as real'.¹⁹ This means that, in a nominalist way, Aristotle takes empirical individuation (difference) as the foundation of the notion of One. In relation to this Lacan does not simply embrace a realist ('Platonic') stance according to which One would exist as such (the idea of One that would precede any empirical oneness). Instead, by drawing strongly on the contemporary mathematical logic and set theory,²⁰ he proposes his own way of thinking the difference and the relationship between the two levels of individuation, and comes up with formulations strongly consonant with Deleuze's. The One of individuation can only be founded on pure difference, it 'comes from' a negativity that is repeated in (and with) any countable one. 'One cannot be founded upon sameness. On the contrary, in set theory it is designated as something that has to be founded upon pure and simple difference.'²¹

The way Lacan reads the notion of the 'empty set' in modern mathematics echoes, almost word for word, the Deleuzian construction of the individuating difference as prior to all countable differences, while at the same time involved (as repeated) in each one of them. It is not that we have, say, first an empty set, then a set with one element, a set with two elements, and so on. The empty set appears only through its repetition, for – mathematically – it is already a set with one 'element' (this element being the empty set). The constitutive emptiness does not exist without the One

with which it appears the first time (although it is not reducible to it) and, on the other hand, this One 'comes from' the empty set which it repeats.

'Emptiness', 'hole' and 'radical difference' are posited by Lacan at the core of repetition as constituting/generating what *there is*, and what is countable. This is the 'unifying negativity' which is always the 'same' only insofar as it is absolutely singular, *alone (un seul)*.²² This also applies to Deleuze. Albeit borrowing the notion of univocity (of being) from Duns Scotus and Spinoza, Deleuze nevertheless modifies it at a crucial point: we are not dealing with a configuration in which being or substance is One, and everything that exists is a modification of this One-Substance. Deleuze's claim is not that 'being is One', but that being is difference, which is one (alone), *singular*. The accent is on there being only one, *single* Difference, and not on the difference forming a One. This single, pure Difference is repeating itself with different entities, different 'ones' (and their differences), constituting them in this way, and constituting itself in this repetition.

Deleuze has two magisterial concepts with which he thinks this fundamental negativity: Difference (the radical, individuating difference as conceptualised in *Difference and Repetition*) and the 'crack', *fêlure*, which plays a most significant role in *The Logic of Sense*. Unsurprisingly, both are discussed by Deleuze as directly related to the 'death instinct'. He famously introduces the concept of the crack in relation to F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Crack-Up* (translated in French as *La fêlure*), making a proper concept out of it, and developing it more extensively in his discussion of Zola that concludes – which is quite significant positioning – *The Logic of Sense*. Deleuze takes as his starting point the following extraordinary passage from *La bête humaine*:

The family was really not quite normal, and many of them had some flaw [*fêlure*]. At certain times, he could clearly feel this hereditary taint [*fêlure*], not that his health was bad, for it was only nervousness and shame about his attacks that made him lose weight in his early days. But there were attacks of instability in his being, losses of equilibrium like cracks [*causses*] or holes from which his personality seemed to leak away, amid a sort of thick vapor that deformed everything.²³

Deleuze first carefully stresses that the crack does not designate the route along which morbid ancestral elements will pass, marking the body. 'Hereditry is not that which passes through the crack, it is the crack itself – *the imperceptible rift or the hole*.'²⁴ He further distinguishes this 'grand', 'epic' heredity from what he calls 'small' heredity and which is what we usually mean by this term: the transmission of something determined, transmission as 'reproduction' of the same. Although they are in no way

reducible to one another, they are very closely related. A way of conceiving this relation would be (again following Zola) in terms of the relation between the crack and its surroundings. Distributed around the crack there are what Zola calls the temperaments, the instincts, the big appetites. Deleuze takes the notion of 'instincts' (and their objects) to refer to the corporeal ('empirical') appearance of the crack²⁵ – a corporeal appearance without which the crack would remain but a 'diffuse potentiality'. He then proposes the following formulation of the relation between the two levels, which directly echoes the way he describes the relation between repetition (as pure difference/being) and its masks (that which appears) in *Difference and Repetition*:

If it is true that the instincts are formed and find their object only at the edge of the crack, the crack conversely pursues its course, spreads out its web, changes direction and is actualized in each body in relation to the instincts which open a way for it, sometimes mending it a little, sometimes widening it [. . .] The two orders are tightly joined together, like a ring within a larger ring, but they are never confused.²⁶

Whereas Deleuze arrives to this topology by way of literature, Lacan sketches it with reference to modern mathematics. They can both be said to 'force' their references to some extent (is Zola really saying this? Is mathematics really saying this?) in order to come up with a wording of their own which, again, is often astonishingly similar. Describing the relation between the empty set and the elements that can be counted (as one) and said to exist, Lacan works his way to his principal thesis according to which One (that could be said to be) emerges out of an ontological deficit, a 'hole', posited as primary. Here are some highly suggestive formulations: (countable) One 'only begins from its lack';²⁷ 'One emerges as effect of the lack';²⁸ 'the fundament of One turns out to be constituted out of the place of a lack'.²⁹ One emerges out of 'the entry door designated from the lack, from the place where there is a hole'.³⁰ As one can see very clearly, the 'hole' is not an effect or a result of a failed repetition or impossibility; rather, it is itself the impossible. The impossible is precisely what *is* repeated, it is the repetition itself, and it is itself 'productive'. The proximity between this 'hole' or original lack (the negativity on which the death drive is premised) and the Deleuzian *fêlure* becomes even more striking in the following passage from Deleuze:

The crack designates, and this emptiness is, Death – the death instinct. The instincts may speak loud, make noise, or swarm, but they are unable to cover up this more profound silence, or hide that from which they come forth and to which they return: the death instinct, *not merely one instinct among others*, but the crack itself around which all the instincts congregate.³¹

This is most interesting in relation to Lacan's discussion of the relationship between sexuality and the (always) partial drives: sexuality, considered from a phenomenological point of view, appears to be composed of several different partial drives, to which it provides a more or less accomplished unification. (And this was basically Freud's view of the matter.) What Lacan adds to this – and we are clearly on a speculative level here – is that we could also see sexualisation as prior to the partial drives: not as a kind of primary substance, but as a pure negativity, hole/crack (and in this sense as the real) around which the drives 'congregate' (to use Deleuze's wording). There is no sexual drive: sexuality (as 'activity') appears at the point of its own fundamental lack. Taken at this level, sexuality 'unifies' the drives not by uniting them in a more or less coherent whole (of sexual activity), but precisely as the crack (of being) around which they circulate and to which they keep returning. 'Sexual' refers to the 'hole' or the 'crack' shared (and repeated) by different drives. Taken at this level, sexuality is indeed synonymous with the death drive, and not opposed to it, as Eros opposed to Thanatos. It is Thanatos insofar as the latter is, in Deleuzian terms, 'that which gives repetition to Eros'.

And, perhaps not so surprisingly any more, when discussing the 'crack' Deleuze also links it to sexualisation: As opposed to 'some' (the somatic cells, the biological cells forming the body of an organism), he writes, 'the "germen" is the crack – nothing but the crack'.³² The 'germen' – that is to say the germ cells, the elements involved in sexual reproduction – is the very instance of *fêlure*.

It is of course well known how, in *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze states emphatically that the motor, the mobile of repetition is not an impossibility (to repeat), a failure, a lack, a deficiency; there is nothing (outside it) that motivates repetition, repetition itself is the primary 'motivator' and motor. Yet we must not read this Deleuzian stance against 'negativity' and 'lack' too quickly. As we have seen in his consideration (and appropriation) of the death drive, things are more complicated and more interesting. The point is rather that 'negativity' (the crack, the hole) is the primary site of affirmation. Repetition is the hole/crack that repeats itself, and by this it repeats what is around it and related to it. Or, in other words, repetition is negativity taken in its absolute sense: not negativity in relation to something, but original negativity, negativity that is itself productive of what is there and what can be differentiated, compared, said to fail, and so on. We could also say that he takes negativity as such to be the original positive force – as opposed to a secondary notion of negativity (and difference). And the whole question now becomes how to eventually separate this 'bad' negativity from a 'good' one. It is with this question that some more significant differences between Lacan and Deleuze start to appear.

As we have seen, both Lacan and Deleuze emphasise the necessity to think the difference of difference, that is the necessity to distinguish between difference in a radical sense and the usual way in which the term is used and which already presupposes a prior Difference. And in both Lacan and Deleuze repetition is conceived as the form of the relationship between these two differences, or between these two levels of difference. If Deleuze can see in the Nietzschean eternal return an actualisation of the univocity of being, this is precisely because eternal return (as repetition) realises this relationship in its simultaneous, instant doubleness: 'The wheel in the eternal return is at once both production of repetition on the basis of difference and selection of difference on the basis of repetition.'³³ What does this mean? What is repeated comes from the pure negativity of difference which, in repetition, is always already something (that is to say something which comes under the categories of analogy, similarity, identity); at the same time this repetition itself is a 'centrifugal force' that expels all that which, of the difference, gets 'reified' into something in this same repetition.³⁴

The centrifugal force of repetition in its most radical form thus not only introduces the difference at the very core of repetition, but also 'realises' this difference – it realises it by extracting the repetition itself from repetition, by extracting what is new from the mechanism of repetition that produced it. This is what could be described, in Deleuze, as concept-project, the latter being no less than the project of realised ontology: 'However, the only realized Ontology – in other words, the univocity of being – is repetition.'³⁵ Difference is the only and the original being, yet at the same time it (still) needs to be realised, that is to say *repeated* and thus separated from all the metaphysical and dialectical attendance that constitutes the history of Being and of its thought. This task can be accomplished by the 'centrifugal force' of the repetition itself. Yet what this amounts to is not only a 'realised ontology', but also an 'ontologisation of the Real' – the Real in the Lacanian sense.

In order to see what is at stake here, we could look at the Deleuzian argument from the perspective of the classical difference between Being and appearing. The Deleuzian revolution in philosophy consists in proposing that Being qua being is the very relationship (difference) between Being and appearing. In other words, Deleuzian ontology does not simply differentiate from others by what he poses (conceives) as Being. When he claims that Being is pure difference, his claim is precisely that it is the pure difference as that which repeats itself as the relation between (what has so far been called) 'being' and 'appearing'. In other words, and if we may use this topological metaphor: it is the placing of Being that changes, and not simply its referent. The *relation* between Being and its appearing (the Difference, or the 'crack' between them) is now what is called

Being. At the same time, the ontological primacy of the Difference means that (1) the Difference, the rift between (what has traditionally been conceptualised as) being and appearing precedes both; and that (2) 'realised ontology' does away with the difference between being and appearing, because all that remains is the Difference itself (pure difference, and not a difference between this and that). This Difference is pure being qua being in its univocity. And it equals (pure) *movement*. In the same way that the *fêlure*, the 'crack', is finally not so much a rift as it is a pure movement or force. This shift from *topological* to *dynamical* tropes is indeed crucial for Deleuze: the topological non-coincidence of being and appearing is 'liquefied' into Being as pure *movement* of Difference.

Lacan's conceptual manoeuvre is different. As we have seen, he shares with Deleuze the insight that what is problematic in the classical metaphysical difference between Being and appearing is the fact that it misrecognises how this difference actually always involves *three* terms and not just two. There is Being, there is appearing, and *there is* the non-coincidence of the two. The relationship between Being and appearing is never just about these two terms: the fact that they are two (or that Being 'needs' to appear) bears witness to the fact that something third is at stake.

In order to illustrate more 'plastically' this tripartite structure that both Deleuze and Lacan recognise as the hidden truth of the classical metaphysical couples and distinctions, we can refer once more to the Freudian presupposition of the 'aboriginal death' discussed by Brassier: presupposed by the distinction between life and death is a death that precedes both life and death and makes their distinction possible. Presupposed by the distinction between inside and outside is something that paradoxically falls 'out' before the distinction between 'in' and 'out' can actually appear.³⁶ What this singular logic illustrates is a division (difference) that does not come from something (some whole) being cut into two, but comes as a result of a *subtraction*, of something being taken away (the concept of the one-less, *l'un-en-moins*, that appears in late Lacan corresponds to this, precisely). This tripartite topology is crucial for both Lacan and Deleuze at their starting point. And the whole question now becomes what one makes out of this third term.

It is at the point of this third term that Lacan introduces his concept of the Real, not to be confused with being. Deleuze, on the other hand – and in a genuinely Nietzschean sense – *revalues* it, and with it the entire landscape: he makes (of) it the true Being qua being. For Lacan, what is at stake can only be rendered by insisting on the tripartite topology, which is that of the Borromean knot. For Deleuze, this third term is finally nothing but the *double* movement of Being in its univocity. This is why he will say: 'The two orders are tightly joined together, like a ring within a larger ring, but they are never confused.'³⁷ For Lacan, on the other hand, for the

two orders to be tightly joined together, yet never confused, one needs to think **this topology in terms of *three* rings**, and not just two – hence the Borromean knot.

With the concept of the Real, Lacan gives a conceptual support to the rift, the crack, implied by, yet invisible in the deployment of differences, and repeated with them. He extracts it from its invisibility, claiming that psychoanalysis is in the position to actually assign to it some minimal consistency.

Whereas Deleuze moves to ontologise this Real, and makes it the real Being qua being, it is essential for Lacan to keep them apart. This Lacanian holding of Being and the Real apart does not suggest that Being is not real – **the Real is precisely not a predicate**. Lacan's reluctance towards something like a psychoanalytic ontology is well known. He is not after developing his own ontology. Yet the reason does not lie perhaps in his conviction that ontology is meaningless (after the transcendental turn) and necessarily 'metaphysical'; on the contrary. If there is someone who has always refused to consider psychoanalysis as exempt from ontological interrogations, it is Lacan. **His point is rather that the very notion of ontology (as science of Being qua being) has to be expanded by an additional concept (the Real) that holds and marks the place of its inherent contradiction as the very place from which Being can be thought.**

Why is Lacan so reluctant to ontologise this Real? Because the Real for him is not simply something that is out there (not even as a 'diffused potentiality' yet to be realised), it is not to be confused with reality: the Real is what is necessary in order for what is (out) there to be *thought*, and for this thought to have any consequences for what is out there. Thought, in the emphatic sense of the term, is the prerogative of the Real (and in this precise sense the Lacanian theory is very far from any kind of nominalism). **The Real is not an Idea – it is the conceptual name for what must go wrong in reality for an idea to appear at all. And this is also what relates thought to the political dimension proper, instead of confining it to the act of 'understanding', 'reflecting', 'analysing' reality. It is also a genuinely 'political' point in Lacan.**

The Real is not so much something that we have to strive for (or hope for, or trust in its capacity to eliminate everything else), as it is a possible weapon in the struggle with what is. It is also bound to the idea of an intervention as conceived in psychoanalysis: an intervention with a 'weapon' produced by the very configuration that one aims at changing. This is the central idea of analysis:

Psychoanalytic intervention should in no way be theoretical, suggestive [. . .]
Analytical interpretation is not made in order for it to be understood; it is made

in order to make waves [...] I learn everything from my analysands; [...] I borrow my interventions from them, and not from my teaching [...] And if you choose your words well – the words that will haunt the analysand – you will find the elected signifier, the one which will work.³⁸

It is not out of (false or sincere) modesty that Lacan says ‘I learn everything from my analysands’, ‘I borrow my interventions from them’. The psychoanalyst is not an expert treating patients with his or her expertise, which he or she would be applying to the symptoms of a given concrete case; symptoms in the psychoanalytic sense are something very different from organic symptoms or symptoms in the medical sense. If one wants to shift something in the thing (in the unconscious structure), one has to give the word to it, for it alone can come up with, produce the word that eventually ‘works’ and moves things.

Thought is not simply on the side of the subject, it is out there. Yet for it to become effective (to become a material force), something else/new has to occur – a new signifier with which one thinks (differently), and which triggers a new subjectivation. This is where Lacan and Deleuze seem to be the furthest apart: whereas for Deleuze materialism of thought implies radical de-subjectivation, for Lacan (the effect of) subjectivation is the very instance of the materialism of thought.

But what exactly is this new signifier, ideally produced at the end of analysis, the one signifier that makes/is the Difference?³⁹ It is the formula, the algorithm of the enjoyment that defines, paves the route of the repetition in a concrete configuration. It is the signifier that kills the (compulsive) repetition because it successfully repeats its enjoyment.⁴⁰ It is the algorithm that disorients the drive by cutting off the well-established routes of its satisfaction. It is the letter to be inserted at the very core of the double face of the drive and of its ‘satisfaction’. In itself, the drive is quite indiscriminate, indifferent towards what it satisfies along the way of pursuing its one and only goal, which is simply to ‘return into circuit’,⁴¹ that is to repeat itself, as Deleuze reads this. This is the ‘affirmative’ force of repetition (repetition for the sake of repetition) related to the drive: not something that failed, but the repetition itself is the sole drive of the drive. The drive is always satisfied. However, in its very indifference it is also always supportive of whatever complicated paths and extraordinary objects our enjoyment may choose under the sign of repression. It does not care one way or the other. By itself, the drive does not work against repression. In this precise sense the death drive is as much an accomplice of repression as it is utterly indifferent to it. Which also means that one cannot simply count on it to make the ‘right’ selection (which is what is implied in the Nietzschean/Deleuzian perspective). There is absolutely no guarantee that, left to itself, the death drive will expel the right (that

is the wrong) things. One needs something else, or more: it is only a new signifier (and the subjectivation triggered by it) that can effect and sustain the separation at the very heart of the drive. Not a force (be it centrifugal or other), only a letter can disentangle what only exists in entangled form, and hence eventually change this form itself. This is why for Lacan the only vital politics of the drive is that of a dead letter. (And of the thought that it carries and transmits.)

This is an important conceptual feature that separates Lacan from Deleuze: the surplus ('the erring/unbound excess') is not in itself the real scene of emancipation, but the means of production of that which eventually realises this 'emancipation'; the eventual tectonic shift does not take place at the level of this surplus, but thanks to the newly produced *signifier*. This signifier is not about any signification, nor is it a kind of Deleuzian sign that acts directly upon matter: it marks the dead end of signification, its '*ab-sense*'.

The Deleuzian perspective, on the other hand, could be said to merge politics and ontology. The Deleuzian ontology is a political ontology. Or, put differently: realised ontology looks very much like a political project. And one could ask: does emancipation (as political project) have a brighter future in the hands of a dead letter (a new signifier) than in the hands of ontology (to be realised)? This question is of some relevance today.

Several decades ago the decline of politics proper (and of conceiving politics as effective thought) was accompanied by the rise of 'ethics'. The (philosophical and social) success of the latter was linked to its promise to carry out the task of politics better than politics. This is how the rising ethical discourse presented itself. The new ethics to replace the old politics. Concepts like 'antagonism', 'class struggle', 'emancipation' and 'politics' itself were generally replaced by notions of 'tolerance' and 'recognition of the Other', and by the self-imposed rules of political correctness.⁴² Ever since the beginning of the last economic and political crisis, starting in the early 2000s, the limits of this 'ethics as politics' were becoming more salient, and the notion of politics as politics started to re-enter the stage. At the same time we were (and still are) witnessing an astounding rise of the so-called new ontologies and new materialisms (to a large extent, albeit not exclusively, inspired by Deleuze), which paradoxically advance by making a very similar kind of promise as ethics did a while ago: to be able to carry out the task of politics better than politics. The massive use (and popularity) of the word 'ontology' is symptomatic in this respect. The point I am trying to make is not, of course, that ontology should be a-political. That would indeed be a stupid point to make. The point, and the (Lacanian) question, is simply this: what if this reinscription of the Real into Being is a way of foreclosing its gap? For Lacan this is precisely the gap where truth

holds on to the Real, and where truth preserves and maintains a political dimension, the question of how we situate ourselves in it. Hence:

We cannot confine ourselves to giving a new truth its rightful place, for the point is to take up our place in it. The truth requires us to go out of our way. We cannot do so by simply getting used to it. We get used to reality. The truth we repress.⁴³

Notes

1. Freud, Sigmund, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in *The Penguin Freud Library Vol. 11: On Metapsychology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).
2. See *ibid.* p. 299.
3. Brassier, Ray, *Nihil Unbound* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 237–8.
4. *Ibid.* p. 234.
5. According to this (Freudian) hypothesis, the occurrence of life corresponds to a disturbing arousal of tension, and the death drive can serve as the basis of the explanation of destructive tendencies because it is itself nothing other than the tendency to return to the inanimate, to re-attain the supposedly zero-level tension ('nirvana') of lifeless, inorganic, inanimate matter.
6. Deleuze, Gilles, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 16. Deleuze uses the term 'death instinct', following the then current French translation of the Freudian *Todestrieb*.
7. *Ibid.* p. 18.
8. Lacan, Jacques, *Écrits* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2006), p. 719.
9. Lacan, Jacques, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1990), p. 19.
10. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 16.
11. Žižek, Slavoj, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 24.
12. Hence Deleuze writes, for example, that even when dealing with something that appears as a repetition of the same (such as, for instance, the rituals in obsessional neurosis), we have to recognise in the element that is being repeated, that is in the repetition of the same, the mask of a deeper repetition (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 17).
13. *Ibid.* p. 17.
14. *Ibid.* p. 17.
15. Lacan, Jacques, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 198.
16. For a more detailed elaboration of this point, see Zupančič, Alenka, 'Die Sexualität innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft', in Härtel, Insa (ed.), *Erogene Gefahrenzonen* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2013), pp. 41–56.
17. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 38.
18. See Aristotle, *The Metaphysics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999).
19. Lacan, Jacques, *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan, livre XIX: . . . ou pire* (Paris: Seuil, 2011), p. 139.
20. Which are decidedly not Deleuzian references.
21. Lacan, . . . *ou pire*, p. 144.
22. *Ibid.* p. 165.
23. Quoted in Deleuze, Gilles, *The Logic of Sense* (London: The Athlone Press, 1990), p. 331.
24. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 321; my emphasis

25. Ibid. p. 322.
26. Ibid. p. 325.
27. Lacan, . . . *ou pire*, p. 146.
28. Ibid. p. 158.
29. Ibid. p. 158.
30. Ibid. p. 147.
31. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 326; original emphasis.
32. Ibid. p. 322.
33. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 42.
34. See *ibid.* p. 297.
35. Ibid. p. 303.
36. And this is also the status of the Freudian unconscious: the unconscious is not the opposite of the conscious, it is not that of which we are not conscious, it is also what disappears from the conscious before the difference between what we are conscious of and what not, can appear.
37. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 325.
38. Lacan, Jacques, 'Conférences et entretiens dans des universités nord-américaines', *Scilicet*, 6–7 (1976), pp. 5–63, pp. 32, 34.
39. 'The One at stake in the S_1 which the subject produces, so to say, at the ideal point of analysis, is, differently from the One at stake in repetition, the One as only One [*Un seul*]. It is the One so far as, whatever the difference that exists, of all the differences that exist and that all have the same value, there is only one, and this is the difference' (Lacan, . . . *ou pire*, p. 165).
40. Ibid. pp. 151–2.
41. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 179.
42. This point was made by Slavoj Žižek.
43. Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 433.