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Science of the Signifier

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The Echo of the Signifier in the Body: How Drive Works (or Not) Today

Juliet Flower MacCannell

Is the signifier losing—if it has not already lost—the power to create and sustain the domain of the human? Is the labor of the signifier—to shape us and our societies—still beyond doubt today? And if it is indeed waning, what is taking its place? Here I explore the implications that the current fate of the signifier has for our bodies, our social orders, and our creativity.

The relation of the signifier to meaning

There is no meaning that is supported except by the relay to an other signification: touching at the extreme the remark that there is no extant language for whom the question of its insufficiency in covering the whole field of meaning is asked—being a fact of its existence as language that it responds to all needs (Lacan 1966: 498; 1977: 150).

Ferdinand de Saussure's revolutionary discovery of how language creates meanings from meaningless sounds by the mechanism he termed *the signifier* was for me the confirmation of the line of thought about language that I had studied closely in my second year of doctoral work at Cornell University (1965–6): theories of language in the eighteenth century, especially Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Language* (1990).¹ Rousseau demonstrated what Giambattista Vico had earlier argued: That just as humans have created our own history, we originated language independently of Adamic language (God's granting Adam the power to name the animals).

Rousseau likewise did not take words as God-given names for things. Words, he argued, were created to *respond* to whomever and whatever we encountered, to



cope with the distance (physical or social) between us and them—or it. Rousseau took an openly expressive stance on the originating impulse of language. Words were devised to reach across a divide between oneself and others. Though words could not actually bridge the abyss separating us, they could mediate (while also symbolically marking) the space between us. In rhetorical or literary terms, the original word is thus “poetic”: a metaphor, a “carrying across.”²

Metaphor relates disparate things by conveying a sense of a fundamental affinity between them. As Aristotle put it, “a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in the dissimilar” (*De Poetica*). It is a linkage, however, that implicitly depends on differentiating its object from other (unstated) things: To say, “My love is like a red, red rose” is tacitly to say it is not like a weed or an onion. The origin of language was not a simple act of generating names for things; it was the original symbolization of likeness and difference.

Saussure’s semiology—the “science of signs in the heart of society—carried on this Enlightenment project, whose basic premise was that language is the product of a human society whose precondition is the existence of language—a language that is ironically completely unknown outside of human society. Language generates signs that respond, in the strongest sense—including emotionally—to our experiences, especially of other human beings. Signs are formed by linking a sound to a concept, a signifier to a signified. A signifier is articulated to another signifier by traversing a void between them to make articulate speech. Articulation is based on the absence of sound, that is, on the consonantal stops that cut off the streaming of undifferentiated noise when tongue touches teeth or lip touches lip. Closing a physical gap produces a signifying gap.

In Saussure’s account, the succession of signifiers alone generates meaning (the combination of the signifier and the signified), since in language there are only differences, without any positive terms. Indeed, if there is to be any sign, it is only by virtue of being addressed to an other who responds, and it is only their concurrence about its meaning (or the signified) that makes a sound into a sign. In fact, it is this agreement (or social contract) alone that makes the sign into a symbol, symbolic of the social tie that establishes it. (Which is also why it is language that socializes the infant: when addressed, the infant is called on to respond.)

The ongoing addition of signifiers retroactively produces the impression of “meaning” and prospectively anticipates ones that may later modify the sense just fashioned. There is no transcendent meaning outside the process of a second signifier’s (S_2) endowing a prior one (S_1) with a significance it cannot nor would not have on its own. And because meaning is structured solely by adding yet one

more signifier to the total of language, the incompleteness of language is inherent (Saussure 1959: 75).

This is the essence of the semiology that responds to all contingencies of the work of the signifier. Lacan’s structuralism finds itself in, see

497 my translation and emphasis

The year after my study of Lacan’s *la Grammatologie* (1967), which was at that time doing the work of semiology. Derrida notes each

was at that time doing the work of the world. He did not mention Lacan who had brought Saussure’s signifier and of the scope of French psychoanalysis (Lacan 1966: 500; 1977: 152). Lacan

[W]e will fail to pursue the truth if we cling to the illusion that the signified, or better, the name of any signification

But Lacan also said something about the signified, the condition in the signifier that Derrida

more signifier to the total of already created signifiers, Saussure underscored the incompleteness of language and the need for creative additions to keep it alive (Saussure 1959: 75).

This is the essence of the citation above from Lacan: Language is what responds to all contingencies; any focus on meaning that excludes consideration of the work of the signifier, Lacan goes on, “leads to the absurd impasse logical positivism finds itself in, searching for the ‘meaning of meaning’” (Lacan 1966: 497 my translation and emphasis).³

The year after my study of Rousseau, Jacques Derrida published his book, *De la Grammatologie* (1967), which treated Rousseau’s *Essai* along with Saussure’s semiology. Derrida notes early in his book (1967: 35) that Parisian psychoanalysis was at that time doing the most original work on linguistics anywhere in the world. He did not mention Lacan by name (1967: 33–5).⁴ But of course it was Lacan who had brought Saussure’s “exact study of the liaisons proper to the signifier and of the scope of their function in the *genesis* of the signified” to French psychoanalysis (Lacan 1966: 497; 1977: 149).

Derrida adopted (as Lacan had earlier) the thesis that the signifier generates meaning strictly through deferrals and differential relays (Derrida 1967: 35; 1974: 20–1). But Derrida demanded a stringent theory of the signified, criticizing Saussure for thinking there is even the slightest material difference between the signifier and the signified: The “difference between the signifier and the signified is *nothing*,” he says (1967: 36; 1974: 22–3).⁵ And if there is no ontological distinction between the signifier and the signified—if all we have are signifiers—then we must question whether the concept that makes a signifier into a sign even exists.⁶ A decade before Derrida, Lacan took a different attitude toward the signifier while also recognizing its capital importance. In 1957, he said the signifier carries the whole weight of meaning, but its materiality should not be overlooked: “the signifier enters into the signified, namely, in a form which, not being immaterial, raises the question of its place in reality” (Lacan 1966: 500; 1977: 152). Lacan remarks:

[W]e will fail to pursue the question [of the nature of language] further as long as we cling to the illusion that the signifier answers to the function of representing the signified, or better, that the signifier has to answer for its existence in the name of any signification whatever. (1966: 498; 1977: 150)⁷

But Lacan also said something more important than Derrida did when it came to the signified, the concept. Lacan never lost sight of a power and an energy in the signifier that Derrida misses, a subjective, unconscious authority that

produces beyond conscious meanings other meanings incapable of articulation, meanings that insist, although they can never be spoken.

[O]nly someone without eyes could not see from what radiating center the signifier sends forth its light into the shadow of incomplete significations... For the signifier by its very nature, always anticipates meaning by unfolding its dimension before it... From which we can say that it is in the chain of the signifier that meaning "insists" but that none of its elements "consists" in the signification of which it is at the moment capable. (1966: 500–1; 1977: 152–3)

The "meaning" that "insists" in the chaining of signifiers is what Lacan comes to call "truth" (disparaged by Derrida among others in today's political sphere), the never more than half-spoken and never fully articulated truth of the speaking being that nonetheless exercises real impact on its life. Instead, Lacan said that there remains a *bar* not only between the signifier and signified and another *signified*, beyond the signifier's ostensible concept, another signified that the signifier represses, an unconscious response that it alone evokes.

Lacan calls attention to a dimension of language that Derrida later dismisses in emphasizing the nothingness of the signified. Lacan could never subscribe to Derrida's argument that the signifier is aconceptual, that is, that there is no distinction between the signified and its signifier except for the difference between them. That is because Lacan recognized, in the effect of the signifier, something more explosive and more generative, more reflective of human experience, than a mere concept: its continued relation to the *thing* the signifier has displaced, substituted for.

If we try to grasp in language the constitution of the object, we cannot fail to notice that this constitution is to be found only at the level of concept, a very different thing from a simple nominative, and that the *thing*, when reduced to the nothing, breaks up into the double, divergent beam of the "cause" (*causa*) in which it has taken shelter in the word *chose*, and the nothing (*rien*) to which it has abandoned its Latin dress (*rem*). (1966: 498; 1977: 150)

Unconscious drive as the by-product of the signifier

Lacan tied the "radiant energy" of the signifier to what it produces *beyond* its main task, that of generating symbolic, conscious meanings: It constitutes a dimensionless arena beyond time and space, where insistent (non-)meanings, "Things," haunt the very "no-thingness" of the chain of signifiers that dislodged them from their dwelling in the Real.

No multiplication or proliferation of symbols bury the signifier's true impact—its general unspoken ones with immense affective impact. The signifier, its "signified," is thus not only symbol.

The signifier is the repression that produces the body's response to speech. Every physical aperture that simulates the original physical orifices of the natural body are simulated, as fake openings to be "filled in" with fantasy, the unspeakable real thing the signifier had tried to symbolize. When the signifier banishes the ghostly Thing, a phantom animated by the repressed signifier. The cuts made by the signifier separate the "thing" lost to the signifier and which returns is why Lacan says clearly, "Drive is the echo of speech" (2016: 9).¹⁰

Internal bars or breaks/brakes placed on the organism never constitute a total repression of undischarged stimulations from within because the libido dammed up by repression. Libido, as hyper-energy accumulates, pooling in the unconscious which Freud defines as "a concept on the somatic... the psychological representative of the organism" (Freud repeats this exact definition).

Drive, the astonishing by-product of the signifier, has its own rebound, its own reverberations, and we must respond. Freud puts it thus: Drive pushes us toward the labor necessary to redirect drive's insistent, lethal ends. When drive reaches the mind, the demand made upon the mind for work in the body" (Freud 1953: 168). The work demands needs that are more than bodily, that are

As speaking beings, we must continually sublimate (and partially satisfy) drive's risk yielding to a fantasized *jouissance* which we must continually invent new ways of

No multiplication or proliferation of symbolic “meanings” can ever completely bury the signifier’s true impact—its generation, alongside overt meanings, of unspoken ones with immense affective impact.⁸ The meaning-effect of the signifier, its “signified,” is thus not only symbolic; it is *unconscious*.⁹

The signifier is the repression that produces the unconscious because of the body’s response to speech. Every positive speech act implies carving an aperture that simulates the original physical exit and entry points of pleasure: the orifices of the natural body are simulated by the after-effect of the signifier, as fake openings to be “filled in” with fantasies of enjoying the Real Thing (that unspeakable real thing the signifier had tried to reduce to “no-thing,” to a mere symbol). When the signifier banishes the thing, it unwittingly births another, ghostly Thing, a phantom animated by the excess of the energy expended by the signifier. The cuts made by the signifier supercharge the libidinal passion for the “thing” lost to the signifier and which returns to the body in fantasy form. This is why Lacan says clearly, “Drive is the echo in the body of the fact that there is speech” (2016: 9).¹⁰

Internal bars or breaks/brakes placed on the mental energy that overstimulates the organism never constitute a total repression: A “hyper-energy” (Freud 1956a) of undischarged stimulations from within becomes an insistent demand to discharge the libido dammed up by repression. Libidinal passion vibrates in us, unconsciously, as hyper-energy accumulates, pooling in our mental apparatus to become *drive*, which Freud defines as “a concept on the frontier between the mental and the somatic... the psychical representative of the stimuli originating from within the organism” (Freud repeats this exact definition twice, 1953: 168, 1957: 122).¹¹

Drive, the astonishing by-product of the signifier, thus turns out to be of capital importance for us as human, speaking beings. Why? Because drive, too, has its own rebound, its own reverberation, its own echo to which we must respond. Freud puts it thus: Drive pushes us to exert our minds, to do the mental labor necessary to redirect drive’s insistent urging toward livable rather than lethal ends. When drive reaches the mind, Freud says, it is “as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work in consequence of its connection to the body” (Freud 1953: 168). The work demanded is, of course, the satisfaction of needs that are more than bodily, that are fantasmatic.¹²

As speaking beings, we must constantly and ingeniously devise ways to sublimate (and partially satisfy) drive’s incessant demands.¹³ If we do not, we risk yielding to a fantasized *jouissance* while our real needs go unmet: to give way on our desire (lack of full enjoyment) is literally to give in to death drive. So we must continually invent new ways of duping death drive. But how? We have

by and large reconciled ourselves to the ongoing productive/destructive work of adding new signifiers to reenergize our drives and animate creative responses to them. New signifiers can then strike us the way a gong or a bell is struck, with a resonance more than acoustic. They must reverberate within us, for only if they unleash fresh unconscious drives can they also renew our mental resistance to those drives.

Lacan warns that any aspiration to halt the process is ultimately a variant of death drive—the end of meaning-making. Fulfilling the dream of totalizing knowledge and finalizing language by quantifying “meaning” is ultimately a nightmare of stagnation.

This other signifier is not alone. The stomach of the Other, the big Other, is full of them. This stomach is like some monstrous Trojan horse that provides the foundations for the fantasy of a totality-knowledge [*savoir-totalité*]. It is, however, clear that its function entails that something comes and strikes it from without, otherwise nothing will ever emerge from it. (Lacan 1975: 33)

A next signifier must “strike it from without” with a resonance that echoes—not only through our physical body but throughout the linguistic body.

There must be something in the signifier which resonates. It is surprising that this has been in no way apparent to English philosophers. I call them philosophers because they have a rock-solid belief that language has no effect. They imagine that there are drives and so on... for they don't know what a drive is: the echo in the body of the fact that there is speech. For speech to resonate,... the body must be sensitive to it. (Lacan 1975: 4)

Language or code? The fate of the signifier today

In what follows, I argue that signifiers seem to have to work harder and harder these days to provoke any response of the kind Lacan describes. Does the signifier, indeed, continue to constitute the most singular, evocative force in the formation of our bodies, our psyches, and our social ties? Can it continue to maintain the symbolic order as a living entity, open to change? Has that crucial *next* signifier now lost this tone? Or have we simply become tone deaf to it?

It is true that, under the rubric of postmodernism, the value of the *new* has recently come strongly into question. Lacan nonetheless remains faithful to the thesis that only the advent of a *new* signifier (that permits the *next* to emerge from the “Order”) grants knowledge (S_2) and the linguistic formations that

support its truth. In a world that is becoming more and more sclerotic, it is no longer enough to have a signifier that resonates with its link to meaning.

Human language is a complex system of signs. Yet today the language of the signifier has become a Babel of gibberish. The signifier is no longer a speaking being, and the unconscious is no longer a speaking being.

After all, today's world is a world of signs. As they are piled upon each other, they form a new economy. In this economy, the signifier is no longer a speaking being, and the unconscious is no longer a speaking being. The signifier is no longer a speaking being, and the unconscious is no longer a speaking being. The signifier is no longer a speaking being, and the unconscious is no longer a speaking being.

When language is no longer a speaking being, the signifier is no longer a speaking being. The signifier is no longer a speaking being, and the unconscious is no longer a speaking being. The signifier is no longer a speaking being, and the unconscious is no longer a speaking being.

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support its true Symbolic standing. If this Order becomes (as it so often does) sclerotic, it is no longer enough simply to add on a signifier that has lost touch with its link to meaning; that would offer neither promise nor hope.

Human language has never been a simple stockpile of ready-made meanings. Yet today this fundamental assumption has come into question. Has the Babel of globalized late capitalism radically altered the form(ul)ation of us as speaking beings, split by the signifier and subject to the pressures of unsatisfiable unconscious drives that force us to create alternative ways of enjoying?

After all, today we have accumulated a great many ready-made meanings that as they are piled up become fodder for meaninglessness. We witness capitalist economies devising the quasi-automatic generation of as many intentionally meaningless names for things as one could imagine: for example, those names of automobile models with a vague aura of a signification they do not possess (e.g., “Sentra” and “Elantra” are Japanese-made car models sold in America; a pseudo-Italian word, “Miata” names a sports car by Mazda in the USA while in its country of origin, Japan, it is named “Roadstar,” etc.). Not to mention the seemingly endless proliferation of terms for new gender identities (cissexual, transsexual, bisexual, and more)—all now *consciously chosen*. (A recent *Bizarro* cartoon by Dan Piraro shows parents telling their children that right now they have the choice of being LGBT, “but surely there will be many more by the time you grow up.” Indeed, there is already an expansion: LGBTIQ.)

When language loses to imaginary satiety, the pen is no longer mightier than the sword and its erstwhile productions (poems, metaphors, songs, lovers’ discourses—and even psychoanalysis) can no longer resonate with us or move us. Indeed, late capitalist culture already seems to require that we *not* be driven from within, and that drive should emanate exclusively from the external economic order. Capitalism promotes the belief that it handles our drives for us, thereby releasing us from the requirement to do the work necessary to fend off the lethality of fantasmatic *jouissance*.

The takeover of the crucial functioning of drive in our lives has now become a literal triumph of death drive: consider the recent demise of 40-year-old John Brown, a former Navy SEAL, who put his Tesla Model S on autopilot so he could watch a Harry Potter film on his car’s video screen. The vehicle’s radar sensor showed no problems ahead—but the autopilot was misreading the white side of a large truck turning in front of the car, categorizing it as “sky,” while the camera, aimed at the pavement beneath the truck, showed the road ahead as “clear.” The automobile drove into the van, or rather under it, shearing off its top along with the driver’s head, as it continued driving autonomously for some miles before

it came to a halt.¹⁴ Witness as well the two men in Northern San Diego County in California who fell off a bluff recently while playing the cell phone game Pokémon Go (*The San Francisco Chronicle* 2019, 7/15/16: D8).

What better figure for giving over your mental labor to the semantic/categorical machine imperatives—yielding to imperatives that can never birth even a single new metaphor, let alone a new signifier? (Zukovic (2006: 25) says a computer chokes on metaphor). If unconscious drive insists we devise ever-new ways to satisfy it, there is not much evidence of an anxious desire for novel ways of “pursuing happiness.” Indeed, capitalist discourse seems to rely on recycling old, used-up meanings to advertise its provision of E-Z *jouissance*.

Lacan already noted (*Seminar XVII*) that in late capitalism we bathe in an aura of satisfaction, as if our drives need no longer be frustrated by the limits placed on us by language and the symbolic social contract. This is, of course, a false aura based on flooding our world with what Lacan called the “fake satisfactions” or *jouissances en toc* embodied in proliferating gadgets (he said this before the plethora of i-gadgets like iPhones, iPods, iPads, etc. were invented) (Lacan 2007: 162; MacCannell 2006: 205).

To sum up: the implicit claim made by the endless proliferation of part-words, sound-bites, made-up names, and the like, names detached from signification, is that we have achieved a final victory over the disruptive, disturbing impact of unconscious drive. Even many educational institutions are busily consigning language, narrative, literature, and the work of the signifier to blissful oblivion: after their second year of high school in the United States, “English” courses no longer teach works of fiction; instead, students learn how to read business reports and other data-filled material. This clearly limits the signifier by cutting off its “poetic” or metaphoric side.

The question remains as to why this implicit claim of “satisfying all drives” became a hallmark of our era? Let me take perhaps a more subtle example, one completely word-based, of an assault on the signifier that shows up in a recent advertising campaign for a new perfume.¹⁵ The scent industry might be seen as in the business of re-establishing the olfactory as indispensable to sexual attractions: Once human beings attained erect posture, the close association of smell with sexuality was broken. Smell was displaced in favor of sight as the means of attracting a mate. Bodily odors (and not only those from our sexual parts) came to seem base and unpleasant, while visible beauty became the dominant factor in sexual appeal.

The vast amount of retail space devoted to perfume counters might lead one to assume the return of the repressed olfactory. But if we study closely

the commodification of scent, we find the business of making smell indispensable in a capitalist system of commodification that dismisses sexual difference as something

Consider Chanel’s recent marketing my first caution that the nose is not displaced by the eye (as Freud thought name, is obviously intended to imply men (and, since Polge—Chanel’s “nose imagine that he had women in mind).

Yet it can only suggest this if we hear *Allure*—for the Anglophone—hints at that may be deceptive, and it is most a speaker’s ear, however, *allure* is gender natural or customary way of doing so related to the seductive deceptiveness

Second, the perfume is described as of aromas that would bring about the particularity of this invented scent.

Like all Chanel perfumes [*Allure*] has and citrusy at the beginning, it opens vanilla nuances and leaves lingering a the various accords it possesses.

One has to wonder at this fantasized and at the conceptual level (opposed yet “lingering”). Its marketing has impossible reconciliation of irreconcilable flower, trunk and root. *Allure*’s “accords oppositions, and differences.

Out of this plethora, the verbal describes perhaps more than the physical ingredients of an aroma; we are not told whether concocted ones) in order to introduce commodity, conjured chiefly by words names for things: they evoke sense resonance beyond. As such they are the ultimate source: globalized trade and

the commodification of scent, we find the perfume industry is not really in the business of making smell indispensable to sexual attraction. We also find the capitalist system of commodification in which this industry participates actually dismisses sexual difference as something to be overcome.

Consider Chanel's recent marketing for a new perfume, *Allure*. It illustrates my first caution that the nose is not what is really being promoted, not even displaced by the eye (as Freud thought), but by the ear. *Allure*, the perfume's name, is obviously intended to imply that the woman who uses it will attract men (and, since Polge—Chanel's "nose"—later created *Allure pour homme*, we imagine that he had women in mind).

Yet it can only suggest this if we hear the name with an English-speaker's ear. *Allure*—for the Anglophone—hints at temptation and lure, at an attractiveness that may be deceptive, and it is most usually applied to a woman. To the French-speaker's ear, however, *allure* is gender neutral, and simply means someone's natural or customary way of doing something: neither marked as feminine nor related to the seductive deceptiveness the word denotes in English.

Second, the perfume is described as being an almost overwhelming profusion of aromas that would bring about outright olfactory confusion and void the particularity of this invented scent.

Like all Chanel perfumes [*Allure*] has a rich and complex composition. Fresh and citrusy at the beginning, it opens in lavishing floral heart to wooden and vanilla nuances and leaves lingering and fickle scent. It is best to describe it by the various accords it possesses.

One has to wonder at this fantasized blending of differences, at the odorous and at the conceptual level (opposites harmoniously coexist, e.g., "fickle" yet "lingering"). Its marketing has the scent accomplishing a miraculous, impossible reconciliation of irreconcilable differences: flower and tree, fruit and flower, trunk and root. *Allure's* "accords" are a sustained erasure of contrasts, oppositions, and differences.

Out of this plethora, the verbal description of the fragrance, as much as or perhaps more than the physical ingredients, blends a single aroma (or fantasy of an aroma; we are not told whether these are natural fragrances or chemically concocted ones) in order to introduce it into the global market as the purest commodity, conjured chiefly by words. These words, please note, are exclusively names for things: they evoke sense images (visual and olfactory) without resonance beyond. As such they are cleverly designed to mask, yet hint at, their ultimate source: globalized trade and its twin, colonialism.

Each aroma contributing to *Allure* is an exotic scent that originates in plant life outside of Europe, brought there by international trade and colonial adventures. The specific fragrances making up the advertised “accords” are “lemon and bergamot; mandarin and peach” (all originating in Asia); “rose of May/jasmine” (Asia for rose of May; only one species of jasmine is native to Europe, while the water lily is the national flower of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka); “peony/magnolia” (these come from Asia, Southern Europe, western North America; and the West Indies); “sandalwood/vetiver” (South India and Asia); “orange/vanilla” (orange is native to China and was brought to Europe by Arabophone peoples, while vanilla comes from Mexico and Central America).

With its global credentials established, this perfume is ready for a worldwide economy, whose miraculously universal appeal transcends all minor differences of nation or even of sex. The perfume’s concoction and its marketing scheme operate at a level well beyond the division of the sexes, so *Allure* thus decidedly does *not* signal a return of the nose to sexual attraction. For women the perfume bears no real linkage to the sexual difference Lacan described—to the logical divide under which masculine and feminine line up, regardless of their biological bodies.

The muting of all natural/symbolic differences merged into a single smell in *Allure* is analogous to the merging of cultural and sexual differences into the artificially bound “global order,” ruled by only one side of sexual logic, a masculine universal that recognizes *no difference*—and where, we might add, “society doesn’t exist.”

Slavoj Žižek claims ours is the era of the obscene or sadistic superego, where an “anything goes” mentality combines with intensifying self-imposed regulations against (guilty) pleasures (like “giving up” sugar or more recently gluten). Žižek repeatedly argues that symbolic law simply hides its true origin in the obscene superego, and he exhibits very little interest in symbolic social ties and their formations because he sees them as ultimately rooted in obscenity. Any limits placed on enjoyment today are individual (not moral) choices (we can just deny ourselves certain pleasures and thus restrain the dominant imperative to just “Enjoy!”). No need, that is, for socio-symbolic laws to modulate our behavior. Ironically, of course, if these self-denials (which somehow are always a collective trend or fad) are our “own” doing, then we can logically dispense with the need for expending mental effort on finding sublimated or creative alternatives to the problem of satisfying unconscious drives.

Žižek is insightful at the level of individual psychology, especially since today’s capitalist order has established the ego and its superego in domains well beyond their origination in the unconscious. He does not address corresponding

alterations in the constitution of society called “discourse” or varying forms of it, represented by the signifier to other signifiers. Those ties as simply between egos, however, is an oversight is not inadvertent, however, in the direction I have been detailing in the discourse is no unconscious, no drive that it doesn’t exist.”

In contrast, in his seminars from 1975, Lacan began to hold “discourse”—the “form” of discourse to the simple oppositions of language and voice, twisting these oppositions on a new substrate: discourse both supports and undermines the embodiment of the finite whole of the subject (in the infiniteness of code/numbers). But in truth it cannot articulate. The discourse in his seminar, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, imperceptibly shades into and becomes the discourse of capitalism.

Capitalism, Lacan said, begins by expanding on the singular feature of the subject: “I must have the same and be the same.” It is a serious Freud’s insight that in such a system, the subject to the point where the “sexual couple” is dissolved.

What this means, and it is time to ask, is that discourse promises you is what is in need of a partner, no social link, no one responsible to and for (such as children). It is *de l’idiot*¹⁸—idiosyncratic, purely and meaningfully meaningless.

In “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” Lacan argues that primal drives should be distinguished from sexual drives. He hypothesizes that the “instincts of the ego” is at the root of the subject (124). What distinguishes Freud’s “sexual drives” must link to someone or something in the world of vicissitudes (Freud details the others in his text on exhibitionism, and even in taking one

alterations in the constitution of *society* itself—material changes in what Lacan called “discourse” or varying forms of the social tie—the tie between subjects, represented by the signifier to other signifiers, symbolic ties, because he sees those ties as simply between egos based on images, not subjects.¹⁶ Žižek’s oversight is not inadvertent, however, as it is entirely consonant with the direction I have been detailing in the discourse of capitalism: its claim that there is no unconscious, no drive that *it* cannot satisfy—and above all that “society doesn’t exist.”

In contrast, in his seminars from the 1950s to the 1970s, Jacques Lacan began to hold “discourse”—the “form of the social tie”—to be an alternative axis to the simple oppositions of language to speech and writing to authentic voice, twisting these oppositions until they reveal their unconscious substrate: discourse both supports and alienates its subjects in its pretended embodiment of the finite whole of language (in contrast, perhaps, to the infiniteness of code/numbers). But every discourse has an impediment, a truth it cannot articulate. The discourse Lacan targeted in his seventeenth seminar, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, was “university” discourse, which imperceptibly shades into and becomes indistinguishable in his view from the discourse of capitalism.

Capitalism, Lacan said, begins by doing away with sex (1974: 51).¹⁷ As he expanded on the singular feature of the modern “artificial” group, that “everyone must have the same and be the same” (Freud 1956b: 120–1), Lacan took very seriously Freud’s insight that in such groups even sexual differences are banned: to the point where the “sexual couple” is actually a protest *against* group life.

What this means, and it is time to say it clearly: the *enjoyment* that capitalist discourse promises you is what is indeed only satisfiable as an *individual* who needs no partner, no social link, no other who responds to you or that you are responsible to and for (such as children). No sex, in short, just the *jouissance de l’idiot*¹⁸—idiosyncratic, purely individual, sans society, and completely meaningless.

In “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” Freud proposed that “two groups of... primal drives should be distinguished: the *ego* or *self-preservative* drives and the *sexual* drives.” He hypothesizes that the “conflict between the claims of sexuality and those of the ego” is at the root of psychoneurotic disorders (Freud 1957: 124). What distinguishes Freud’s “sex drives” from “ego drives” is that the former must link to someone or something *other* to seek out its satisfaction—in all its vicissitudes (Freud details the others involved in sado-masochism, scopophilia, exhibitionism, and even in taking oneself as another: “turning round upon the

subject's own self"). The sex drive is not only what makes one a link in a longer reproductive chain, tying you to your forebears and progeny. It also means that in terms of attaining organ pleasure beyond self-pleasuring, you need another, a partner, to whom you are linked as well.

So, it seems, to be consonant with the demand that society not exist, we simply set aside the sex drive in favor of the ego drives.

This is the actual basis for the now faddish claims that we are indeed in a post-human society.¹⁹ Consider the many apocalyptic alarms raised these days by the discourse of techno-capitalism, its takeover of creativity (and I claim, the drives), and the resignation most thinkers feel before it. Let me here turn once again to Derrida's *La Carte Postale* (1980) to illustrate: Derrida says in this text that everything we have considered the very heart of what the signifier has created in our human history (literature, philosophy, love letters, and psychoanalysis) is about to vanish under the weight of technology's displacement of the work of the signifier. With their loss, the "human" in our history vanishes as well.

Can we not ask Derrida, however, if his early refusal to divide the signifier from the signified has influenced his later pronouncements in *La Carte Postale* about the end of the human and of literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and love letters? How are we to deal with such an apocalypse? Must we resign ourselves to the fate of being defined exclusively by how we are encoded in a cybernetic field and unable to use the signifier to represent us as subjects for another signifier?

My colleague J. Hillis Miller had an exemplary response to Derrida's observations about the looming technological eclipse of literature and love. He cites Proust's image of seeing his grandmother eerily split in two by the invention of the telephone:

The introduction of a new technology, while it still overlaps with the old, provides inadvertently, by allowing Marcel to juxtapose the two grandmothers [one telephonically near, the other real and far away], a striking confirmation of Marcel's assertion that we superimpose upon or project into the dark and forever impenetrable shadow that is another person this or that set of assumptions about what is "really there"

...

It also provides a way to understand what Derrida means when he says that the new regime of telecommunications will put an end to literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and love letters. (Miller 2001: 147 and 193)

Miller's response to Derrida's "new regime of telecommunications"?

The comment Derrida makes through his end of literature, et al.]... is truly frightening to me... the comment arouses in me (by the passions of anxiety, fear, disgust, disbelief) what it would be like to live beyond the end of the world and psychoanalysis. It would be like living beyond the end of the world. (Miller 2001: 155-6)

The "response" evoked in Hillis by Derrida's anxiety. Anxiety is avowedly part of a surprising jubilation, an unexpected *anagnorisis*. It is also supplemented with a *revelation* according to the current logical arrangement ("perhaps a little secret desire to see what lies beyond the end of the world").

Hillis Miller anticipates, that is, a *revelation* of ruins of literature, love, and philosophy. It is no shallow, casual, or even rational *revelation*. The desire is no less than the desire to witness the point where the literary writer always *misses* literature."

If my attention to tonality as a "poetic" treasury of ready-made meanings comes to mind (as in an essay by American critic Kenneth Surin, *Against Poetic Meaning*) as an "address" (name and address of every event in a text) can anything more aptly describe the deep assumptions of "coding"?)

Poetic meaning ignores the boxes of *revelation* instead to what lies beyond pigeonholes. Burke says poetic is the "kind of meaning ... [and] cannot be encompassed by an *ideal*":

When you have isolated your individual process, you have not at all adequately represented what he means one thing to his family, another to his creditors, etc. All such points people act towards him on the basis of

The comment Derrida makes through his protagonist in *The Post Card* [on the end of literature, et al.]... is truly frightening, at least to a lover of literature like me... the comment arouses in me (by an efficacious performative effect) the passions of anxiety, fear, disgust, disbelief, and perhaps a little secret desire to see what it would be like to live beyond the end of literature, love letters, philosophy and psychoanalysis. It would be like living beyond the end of the world. (Miller 2001: 155–6)

The “response” evoked in Hillis by Derrida’s thesis is not mere conventional anxiety. Anxiety is avowedly part of it, but this fear is supplemented with a surprising jubilation, an unexpected anticipation of incalculably *new things to come*. It is also supplemented with a remarkable desire to know what cannot, according to the current logical arrangement of things, actually be known (“perhaps a little secret desire to see what it would be like to live beyond the end of literature, love letters, philosophy and psychoanalysis. It would be like living beyond the end of the world”).

Hillis Miller anticipates, that is, a *next* signifier that might emerge from the ruins of literature, love, and philosophy. The anticipation he articulates here is no shallow, casual, or even rational reaction. What Derrida prompts Hillis to desire is no less than the desire to witness strange new events, and to do so from the point where the literary writer always stands: at a point “beyond the end of literature.”

If my attention to tonality as a “poetic” alternative to seeing language as a treasury of ready-made meanings consternates you,²⁰ I can refer you to the 1938 essay by American critic Kenneth Burke, who described semantic meaning (as opposed to poetic meaning) as an “aim to evolve a vocabulary that gives the name and address of every event in the universe” (Burke 1994: 122). (Could anything more aptly describe the deep intention behind the Internet, the basic assumptions of “coding”?)

Poetic meaning ignores the boxes around semantic meanings by attending instead to what lies beyond pigeonholed individual meanings: poetic meanings. Burke says poetic is the “kind of meaning [which] *impinges* upon semantic meaning ... [and] cannot be encompassed with perfect fidelity to the *semantic ideal*”:

When you have isolated your individual by the proper utilizing of the postal process, you have not at all adequately encompassed his “meaning”... because he means one thing to his family, another to his boss, another to his underlings, another to his creditors, etc. All such meanings are *real* enough, since at every point people act towards him on the basis of these meanings. (Burke 1994: 124–5)

Dare we say that such relational, situated “meanings” that Burke terms “poetic” are the “next” signifiers awaited by Lacan and by us—and by Hillis Miller?—the signifiers that emerge when established ones are displaced from their semantic categories, and put together in ways that stir new responses?

What I find exemplary in Hillis Miller—and a challenge to us all as students of language, literature, psychoanalysis, and the signifier—is the way he positions his response as an ideal “demand from the other,” a demand to answer back. Miller productively saves literature from the dustbin of history—to which postmodern theorists and cybernetic prophecies often readily consign it. The poised prose of Hillis Miller’s response removes “all the sting of unanswerability that automatically resides in powerful theoretical assertions about how code displaces language as we have known it” (MacCannell 2005).

Hillis’ own critical performance suggests that after each and every apocalypse, the signifier will still be standing—if only in the form of a responsible questioning—and it may continue to evoke that drive to deny its power, the drive that may still be the strongest resource for evoking the next signifier.²¹

Notes

- 1 I studied Rousseau’s multifaceted *Essay On the Origin of Language*. It is filled with striking ideas—that language could only have been invented on an island, that the first words uttered in mild southern climes were « *Aimez-moi*, » (“Love me!”), while in harsher northern regions they were « *Aidez-moi* » (“Help me!”). The charming picture Rousseau painted was that language was really invented to express love for or a reaching out for another: In one scenario he describes a metaphorical crossing of the distance between two would-be lovers from opposing groups who meet at a well that both groups must use for water, and they fall in love. (Why did they not settle for gestures or facial expressions to convey their passion? Why trouble themselves to invent words as a means of bringing them closer while still marking the distance between them? These are Rousseau’s real questions.)
- 2 Metonymy is the variant that emphasizes a connection between things rather than their difference from each other. Rousseau says that figurative language precedes conceptual or literal language; the first “meaning” evoked as a response—fear or love or pity—precedes the literal meaning, which comes later, after reflection on the experience, as in his example of a man running through a forest who spies an unfamiliar figure, and out of fear, pronounces him a “giant.” Later he realizes their equality of stature and invents a word/concept to cover both of them: “man.”

- 3 The published English version reads, “The ‘meaning of meaning,’ as its objective” (1977: 150). Lacan refers to I. A. Richards.
- 4 The English translation renders the passage as “psychoanalytic research that this breaching of the likelihood of being expanded” (Derrida).
- 5 In the original French: « *la différence entre* »
- 6 I was particularly struck by a passage in which Derrida writes: “Let he who cannot reach at its horizon rather renounce it [analysis]. For how can that engages him in a symbolic movement being the axis of those lives? Let him be his era draws him in the ongoing enterprise as interpreter in the discordance of language Field of Speech and Language” (Lacan). Derrida’s *The Ear of the Other*—and this is just what has been so glaringly missing in psychoanalysis, theoretically and practically linked to discursive regimes that alter the How is it linked to his social and symbolic literally, written?
- 7 After Derrida ironized Lacan’s seminar as “*la vérité*”, few ever looked at them together again. The critique cemented Lacan’s position on writing and having missed the point to convey truth: there is no *aletheia* in the relationship between “meaning” and “truth,” and this is the cornerstone of his discourses: truth is not to say; every discourse is formed around the point the discourse can neither express nor the horizon of the speaking being’s intention Derrida’s graphematic universal.
- 8 Thus distilling Freud’s insights on the unconscious *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (MacCannell).
- 9 Lacan, *Seminar XVII* (2007, 81: 1980–1981).
- 10 Author’s modification of translation: “du fait qu’il y a un dire”). Lacan will see the infant’s erotic body as well: “L’homme langage—le mot le comporte—de façon rien à faire avec l’anatomie” (1974: 26).

3 The published English version reads, “That leads logical positivism in search of
 the ‘meaning of meaning,’ as its objective is called in the language of its devotees”
 (1977: 150). Lacan refers to I. A. Richards’s *Mencius on the Mind*.

4 The English translation renders the passage this way: “Outside of linguistics, it is in
 psychoanalytic research that this breakthrough seems at present to have the greatest
 likelihood of being expanded” (Derrida 1974: 21).

5 In the original French: « *la différence entre le signifiant et le signifié n’est rien* ».

6 I was particularly struck by a passage on Babel from Lacan’s “Rome Discourse”:

“Let he who cannot reach at its horizon the subjectivity of his epoch therefore
 rather renounce it [analysis]. For how could he who knows nothing of the dialectic
 that engages him in a symbolic movement with so many lives possibly make his
 being the axis of those lives? Let him be well acquainted with the whorl into which
 his era draws him in the ongoing enterprise of Babel, and let him learn his function
 as interpreter in the discordance of languages.” (Jacques Lacan, “Function and
 Field of Speech and Language” (Lacan 1977: 106–7)). Babel shows up again later in
 Derrida’s *The Ear of the Other*—and this then led me to formulate (for this essay)
 just what has been so glaringly missing in psychoanalytic method. That is the way
 for psychoanalysis, theoretically and practically, to account for how the subject is
 linked to discursive regimes that alter, rapidly or slowly, in the course of history.
 How is it linked to his social and symbolic others: that is, how the subject is, quite
 literally, *written*?

7 After Derrida ironized Lacan’s seminar on *Poe’s Purloined Letter* in “*Le Facteur de
 la vérité*,” few ever looked at them together on the matter of “the letter” or writing,
 again. The critique cemented Lacan’s critical reception as having missed the boat
 on writing and having missed the point that *écriture* (the graphic) does not directly
 convey truth: there is no *aletheia* in or of writing. Lacan, of course, distinguished
 between “meaning” and “truth,” and made the inability to convey a truth the
 cornerstone of his discourses: truth is precisely what a discourse is designed *not*
 to say; every discourse is formed around an unspeakable impossibility, a sticking
 point the discourse can neither express nor avoid. His examination of the *parlêtre*,
 the horizon of the speaking being’s immersion in discourse, is hardly very far from
 Derrida’s graphematic universal.

8 Thus distilling Freud’s insights on the construction, of the child’s erotic body in the
Project for a Scientific Psychology (MacCannell 2013: 73–89).

9 Lacan, *Seminar XVII* (2007, 81: 1991: 93). See MacCannell 2006: 205.

0 Author’s modification of translation. Price translates: “of a fact of saying” (French:
 “*du fait qu’il y a un dire*”). Lacan will ascribe to language the very shaping of
 the infant’s erotic body as well: “L’homme... pense de qu’une structure, celle du
 langage—le mot le comporte—de qu’une structure découpe son corps, et qui n’a
 rien à faire avec l’anatomie” (1974: 16). “Language—the word implies it (*language/*

tongue/blade)—carves up [the] body”—but what precisely has it carved away? The animal body “lost” to language returns to it in fantasies of unlimited enjoyment—fantasies that shape our sexuality by zoning our bodies erogenous. *Blade* is the root sense of *la langue*. This is, by the way, entirely consistent with Freud’s view of the origin of mental life and of the drives: i.e., the infant responds to what is closest to it—the Mother, the *Nebenmensch*, *Das Ding*, maternal speech. Freud (1956a: 317 ff.) writes about it in the section “on satisfaction,” where the “helpful person” and the “hostile object” are two ways of characterizing the “*Nebenmensch*.”

- 11 Drive is “a measure of the demand made on the mind for work,” Freud, “Three Essays on Sexuality” (1953: 168). Also from Freud’s “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes”: “drive appears to us as a concept on the frontier between the mental and the somatic, as the psychical representative of the stimuli originating from within the organism, and reaches the mind, as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work in consequence of its connection to the body” (1957: 121–2).
- 12 Lacan’s approach to the infant seems a far cry from Freud’s. Yet if we look back to the early *Project*, we find Freud too tracing the growth of the infant’s mind as its body is altered by conceptual (metaphoric) thought (Freud 1956a: 283–399). Technically, this is the same as Freud’s thesis in the *Project* that the organism makes a primitive judgment on what to keep and what to expel of incoming energy from its surroundings. Selection requires that raw physical energy’s *quantity* be transformed (conceptualized or metaphorized) into mental *quality*. Physical energy is converted into both qualitative nervous mental energy (conceptual thought) and hyper-energized unconscious thought (drive) via one set of neurons, that permit energy to flow in, be stored up or discharged, and another set that blocks portions of the conceptualized energy from exiting the organism at all. The *Aufbau* or elaboration of mind occurs chiefly by way of a quantity of physical energy that, in primordial sentience, gets absorbed, deflected, and/or transformed by incipiently “neuronic” structures. What permits sentience at all is quite simply the act or fact of shielding the organism from a portion of the energy that passes through it.
- 13 Drive (translated “Instinct” by Strachey) is “a measure of the demand made on the mind for work,” Freud says in “Three Essays on Sexuality”; it is “the psychical representative of an endosomatic, continuously flowing source of stimulation, as contrasted with a ‘stimulus,’ which is set up by single excitations coming from without” (Freud 1953: 168).
- 14 <http://ktla.com/2016/07/03/tesla-autopilot-death-driver-may-have-been-watching-harry-potter-at-time-of-crash-witness-tells-ap/> (accessed May 18, 2018).
- 15 I was offered this example by artist Sharon Kivland (2015), who asked me to comment on it for her exhibit inspired by Karl Marx’s description of women as “folles de leur corps.” Her installation consisted (among other things) of tiny

- perfume bottles converted into miniature *Mannequins*. Freud’s notion of how the olfactory sense affects the unconscious of whose females habitually exude odors, signals the unconscious of a male, and how this is lost once humans walk.
- 16 The theory of discourse as a form of the *discours* is developed in Lacan’s *Seminar XVII* (1969–70) and in *Discourse of the Subject*, which presents its final form. For Lacan, language is a *discours* of *discourses*. The *discourse* is a set of concrete *discourses* of each of its subjects. Now, each *discourse* has its own axes, and over time, rotates its axes—a “revolution” unremarked as a rupture or break, but that reorganizes its components into a new situation. The unconscious (the *discours* little letters goes against the grain of the *discours* and linguistic powers), but what must be *discours* and unconscious—together create a *discours* in two directions—a *writing* Derrida would call *écriture*.
 - 17 “Autant donc pour le sexe, puisqu’en effet le sexe n’est que le mettre au rancart” (1974: 51).
 - 18 Lacan says this is the ultimate outcome of the *discours* of sexuation: masturbation as the *discours* of the subject. Todd McGowan tries very hard to define the *discours* of sexuation mechanism (promising you satisfaction) and the question seems to me to be much more complex. *Desire* depicts it. After all, desire is defined as that which it always misses its objective, according to Lacan. That capitalism purveys a tremendous *discours* of “free us” from desire. Recall Lacan’s *discours* of the subject is Alexander’s proclamation when he arrived in Paris? The preamble isn’t *discours* from this or that.’ The essential point is *discours*. Which of course means: ‘let it be clear that the *discours* the moment to express the least surprise of the *discours* service of goods is as follows: ‘as far as the *discours* make them wait’” (Lacan 1992: 315).
 - 19 I have proposed that we have transitioned to a *discours* version of society, an Imaginary that has *discours* distinctions that language can. See *Discours*.
 - 20 Tzvetan Todorov once wrote that only *discours* the “body” of language requires the *discours*

perfume bottles converted into miniature Molotov cocktails. I thought back to Freud's notion of how the olfactory sense affects sexual attraction among animals, whose females habitually exude odors, signaling readiness for sexual congress with a male, and how this is lost once humans walk upright.

- 16 The theory of discourse as a form of the social tie is developed systematically in Lacan's *Seminar XVII* (1969–70) and in subsequent seminars. *Seminar XX* presents its final form. For Lacan, language and the symbolic are embodied in *discourses*. The *discourse* is a set of concrete commands that organize or frame each of its subjects. Now, each *discourse* has a certain slippage that eventually, and over time, rotates its axes—a “revolution” that (non-violently) goes mostly unremarked as a rupture or break, but that nonetheless inexorably moves its components into a new situation. The unconscious evoked and carried by these little letters goes against the grain of the discursive dominant (current symbolic and linguistic powers), but what must be understood is that the two—discourse and unconscious—together create a text: a *tissu* of lines interwoven in opposing directions—a *writing* Derrida would call it.
- 17 “Autant donc pour le sexe, puisqu'en effet le capitalisme, c'est de là qu'il est parti, de le mettre au rancart” (1974: 51).
- 18 Lacan says this is the ultimate outcome of the masculine universal in the logic of sexuation: masturbation as the truest and only complete satisfaction. While Todd McGowan tries very hard to define capitalism as deploying a simple mechanism (promising you satisfaction and then sadistically withholding it), the question seems to me to be much more complex than what *Capitalism and Desire* depicts it. After all, desire is defined as and structured as unsatisfiable; it always misses its objective, according to Lacan. McGowan does not grasp that capitalism purveys a tremendous number of satisfactions in an effort to “free us” from desire. Recall Lacan's remarks on Alexander and Hitler: “What is Alexander's proclamation when he arrived in Persepolis or Hitler's when he arrived in Paris? The preamble isn't important: ‘I have come to liberate you from this or that.’ The essential point is ‘Carry on working, work must go on.’ Which of course means: ‘let it be clear to everyone that this is on no account the moment to express the least surge of desire.’ The morality of power of the service of goods is as follows: ‘as far as desires are concerned, come back later, make them wait’” (Lacan 1992: 315).
- 19 I have proposed that we have transitioned to an Imaginary from a Symbolic version of society, an Imaginary that has yet to develop the necessary *metaphoric* distinctions that language can. See MacCannell (2015).
- 20 Tzvetan Todorov once wrote that only literature has the power to resist language. If the “body” of language requires the addition of a new signifier to remain a living,

open, and generative system, the same is also true for our bodies and the creative work we must do to remain human.

I have addressed this moment in an earlier essay, "J is for *Jouissance*" (MacCannell 2005).

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