

IGBEAVER  
READING GROUP  
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PART 1 of 2

ŽIŽEK, SLAVOJ  
WELCOME TO THE DESERT OF THE REAL  
VERSO #5 ESSAYS ON SEPTEMBER 11 AND RELATED DATES

OUR POST-9-11 SERIES IS WELL OVER, BUT WE  
ARE STILL LIVING IN THE "WITHIN THE" PART OF IT,  
IN REGARD TO WORDS LIKE MANDATE, ETC. COVER,  
AND WE'LL NO NEED TO READ THIS, LET US READ THE  
TEXT.

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OFF TO  
LUNING  
DUST  
WISDOM OF  
CLEAN  
FACED  
BRINK OF  
QUICK  
PROLONGED  
PASTRAL

## INTRODUCTION: THE MISSING INK

In an old joke from the defunct German Democratic Republic, a German worker gets a job in Siberia; aware of how all mail will be read by the censors, he tells his friends: 'Let's establish a code: if a letter you get from me is written in ordinary blue ink, it's true; if it's written in red ink, it's false.' After a month, his friends get the first letter, written in blue ink: 'Everything is wonderful here: the shops are full, food is abundant, apartments are large and properly heated, cinemas show films from the West, there are many beautiful girls ready for an affair – the only thing you can't get is *red ink*.' The structure here is more refined than it might appear: although the worker is unable to signal that what he is saying is a lie in the prearranged way, he none the less succeeds in getting his message across – how? *By inscribing the very reference to the code into the encoded message, as one of its elements.* Of course, this is the standard problem of self-reference: since the letter is written in blue, is its entire content therefore not true? The answer is that the very fact that the lack of red ink is mentioned signals that it *should* have been written in red ink. The nice point is that this mention of the lack of red ink produces the effect of truth *independently of its own literal truth*:

even if red ink really *was* available, the lie that it is unavailable is the only way to get the true message across in this specific condition of censorship.

Is this not the matrix of an efficient critique of ideology – not only in ‘totalitarian’ conditions of censorship but, perhaps even more, in the more refined conditions of liberal censorship? One starts by agreeing that one has all the freedoms one wants – then one merely adds that the only thing missing is the ‘red ink’: we ‘feel free’ because we lack the very language to articulate our unfreedom. What this lack of red ink means is that, today, all the main terms we use to designate the present conflict – ‘war on terrorism’, ‘democracy and freedom’, ‘human rights’, and so on – are false terms, mystifying our perception of the situation instead of allowing us to think it. In this precise sense, our ‘freedoms’ themselves serve to mask and sustain our deeper unfreedom. A hundred years ago, in his emphasis on the acceptance of some fixed dogma as the condition of (demanding) actual freedom, Gilbert Keith Chesterton perspicuously detected the antidemocratic potential of the very principle of freedom of thought:

We may say broadly that free thought is the best of all safeguards against freedom. Managed in a modern style, the emancipation of the slave’s mind is the best way of preventing the emancipation of the slave. Teach him to worry about whether he wants to be free, and he will not free himself.<sup>1</sup>

Is this not emphatically true of our ‘postmodern’ time, with its freedom to deconstruct, doubt, distantiate oneself? We should not forget that Chesterton makes exactly the same claim as Kant

<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1995, p. 114.

in his ‘What is Enlightenment?’: ‘Think as much as you like, and as freely as you like, just obey!’ The only difference is that Chesterton is more specific, and spells out the implicit paradox beneath the Kantian reasoning: not only does freedom of thought not undermine actual social servitude, it positively sustains it. The old motto ‘Don’t think, obey!’ to which Kant reacts is counterproductive: it effectively breeds rebellion; the only way to secure social servitude is through freedom of thought. Chesterton is also logical enough to assert the obverse of Kant’s motto: the struggle for freedom needs a reference to some unquestionable dogma.

In a classic line from a Hollywood screwball comedy, the girl asks her boyfriend: ‘Do you want to marry me?’ ‘No!’ ‘Stop dodging the issue! Give me a straight answer!’ In a way, the underlying logic is correct: the only acceptable straight answer for the girl is ‘Yes!’, so anything else, including a straight ‘No!’, counts as evasion. This underlying logic, of course, is again that of the forced choice: you’re free to decide, on condition that you make the right choice. Would not a priest rely on the same paradox in a dispute with a sceptical layman? ‘Do you believe in God?’ ‘No.’ ‘Stop dodging the issue! Give me a straight answer!’ Again, in the opinion of the priest, the only straight answer is to assert one’s belief in God: far from standing for a clear symmetrical stance, the atheist’s denial of belief is an attempt to dodge the issue of the divine encounter. And is it not the same today with the choice ‘democracy or fundamentalism’? Is it not that, within the terms of this choice, it is simply not possible to choose ‘fundamentalism’? What is problematic in the way the ruling ideology imposes this choice on us is not ‘fundamentalism’ but, rather, *democracy itself*: as if the only alternative to ‘fundamentalism’ is the political system of liberal parliamentary democracy.

## 1

**PASSIONS OF THE REAL,  
PASSIONS OF SEMBLANCE**

When Brecht, on the way from his home to his theatre in July 1953, passed the column of Soviet tanks rolling towards the *Stalinallee* to crush the workers' rebellion, he waved at them and wrote in his diary later that day that, at that moment, he (never a party member) was tempted for the first time in his life to join the Communist Party. It was not that Brecht tolerated the cruelty of the struggle in the hope that it would bring a prosperous future: the harshness of the violence as such was perceived and endorsed as a sign of authenticity. . . . Is this not an exemplary case of what Alain Badiou has identified as the key feature of the twentieth century: the 'passion for the Real [*la passion du réel*]'?<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the nineteenth century of utopian or 'scientific' projects and ideals, plans for the future, the twentieth century aimed at delivering the thing itself – at directly realizing the longed-for New Order. The ultimate and defining moment of the twentieth century was the direct experience of the Real as opposed to everyday social reality – the Real in its extreme

2 See Alain Badiou, *Le siècle*, forthcoming from Éditions du Seuil, Paris.

violence as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality.

In the trenches of World War I, Ernst Jünger was already celebrating face-to-face combat as the authentic intersubjective encounter: authenticity resides in the act of violent transgression, from the Lacanian Real – the Thing Antigone confronts when she violates the order of the City – to the Bataille excess. In the domain of sexuality itself, the icon of this 'passion for the real' is Oshima's *Empire of the Senses*, a Japanese cult movie from the 1970s in which the couple's love relationship is radicalized into mutual torture until death. Is not the ultimate figure of the passion for the Real the option we get on hardcore websites to observe the inside of a vagina from the vantage point of a tiny camera at the top of the penetrating dildo? At this extreme point, a shift occurs: when we get too close to the desired object, erotic fascination turns into disgust at the Real of the bare flesh.<sup>3</sup>

Another version of the 'passion for the Real' as opposed to the 'servicing of goods' in social reality is clearly discernible in the Cuban revolution. Making virtue out of necessity, today's Cuba heroically continues to defy the capitalist logic of waste and planned obsolescence: many of the products used there are, in the West, treated as waste – not only the proverbial 1950s American cars which magically still function, but even dozens of Canadian yellow school buses (with old painted inscriptions in French or English, still completely legible), probably given as a

3 And, to add a personal note: when, in the early 1990s, I was more involved in Slovene politics, I experienced my own brush with the passion for the Real: when I was considered for a government post, the only one which interested me was that of the Minister of the Interior or head of the secret service – the notion of serving as Minister of culture, education, or science seemed to me utterly ridiculous, not even worth serious consideration.

present to Cuba and used there for public transport.<sup>4</sup> Thus we have the paradox that, in the frantic era of global capitalism, the main result of the revolution is to bring social dynamics to a standstill – the price to be paid for exclusion from the global capitalist network. Here we encounter a strange symmetry between Cuba and Western 'postindustrial' societies: in both cases, the frantic mobilization conceals a more fundamental immobility. In Cuba, revolutionary mobilization conceals social stasis; in the developed West, frantic social activity conceals the basic sameness of global capitalism, the absence of an Event. . . .

Walter Benjamin defined the Messianic moment as that of *Dialektik im Stillstand*, dialectics at a standstill: in the expectation of a Messianic Event, life comes to a standstill. Do we not encounter in Cuba a strange realization of this, a kind of negative Messianic time: the social standstill in which 'the end of time is near' and everybody is waiting for the Miracle of what will happen when Castro dies, and socialism collapses? No wonder that, besides political news and reports, the main item on Cuban TV is English-language courses – an incredible number of them, five to six hours every day. Paradoxically, the very return to anti-Messianic capitalist normality is experienced as the object

4 This externality to capitalism is also discernible in the way Cuba continues to rely on the good old Socialist stance of symbolic accountancy: in order to count properly, every event has to be inscribed into the big Other. There was a note on a display panel in a Havana hotel in 2001: 'Dear guests, in order to fulfil the program of fumigation for this hotel, the hotel will be fumigated on February 9 from 3 p.m. till 9 p.m.' Why this redoubling? Why not simply inform the guests that the hotel will be fumigated? Why should fumigation be covered by a 'program of fumigation'? (And, incidentally, I am tempted to ask if this is also how one proposes a sexual encounter in these conditions: not the usual process of seduction, but 'My dear, in order to fulfil our sexual programme, why don't we . . .') .)

of Messianic expectation – something for which the country simply waits, in a state of frozen animation.

In Cuba, renunciations themselves are experienced/imposed as proof of the authenticity of the revolutionary Event – what, in psychoanalysis, is called the logic of castration. The entire Cuban politico-ideological identity rests on the fidelity to castration (no wonder the Leader is called Fidel Castro!): the counterpart of the Event is the growing inertia of social being/life: a country frozen in time, with old buildings in a state of decay. It is not that the revolutionary Event was 'betrayed' by the Thermidorian establishment of a new order; the very insistence on the Event led to the immobilization at the level of positive social being. The decaying houses *are* the proof of fidelity to the Event. No wonder revolutionary iconography in today's Cuba is full of Christian references – apostles of the Revolution, the elevation of Che into a Christlike figure, the Eternal One ('lo Eterno' – the title of a song Carlos Puebla sings about him): when Eternity intervenes in time, time comes to a standstill. No wonder that the basic impression of Havana in 2001 was that the original inhabitants had escaped, and *squatters* had taken it over – out of place in these magnificent old buildings, occupying them temporarily, subdividing large spaces with wooden panels, and so on. Here, the image of Cuba we get from someone like Pedro Juan Gutiérrez (his 'dirty Havana trilogy') is revealing: the Cuban 'being' as opposed to the revolutionary Event – the daily struggle for survival, the escape into violent promiscuous sex, seizing the day without future-oriented projects. This obscene inertia is the 'truth' of the revolutionary Sublime.<sup>5</sup>

5 The specificity of the Cuban revolution is best expressed by the duality of Fidel and Che Guevara: Fidel, the actual Leader, supreme authority of the State, versus Che, the eternal revolutionary rebel who could not resign himself to just running a state. Is this not

And is not so-called fundamentalist terror also an expression of the passion for the Real? Back in the early 1970s, after the collapse of the New Left student protest movement in Germany, one of its outgrowths was the Red Army Faction terrorism (the Baader–Meinhof 'gang', and so on); its underlying premise was that the failure of the student movement had demonstrated that the masses were so deeply immersed in their apolitical consumerist stance that it was not possible to awaken them through standard political education and consciousness-raising – a more violent intervention was needed to shake them out of their ideological numbness, their hypnotic consumerist state, and only direct violent interventions like bombing supermarkets would do the job. And does the same not hold, on a different level, for today's fundamentalist terror? Is not its goal also to awaken us, Western citizens, from our numbness, from immersion in our everyday ideological universe?

These last two examples indicate the fundamental paradox of the 'passion for the Real': it culminates in its apparent opposite, in a *theatrical spectacle* – from the Stalinist show trials to spectacular terrorist acts.<sup>6</sup> If, then, the passion for the Real ends up

something like a Soviet Union in which Trotsky would not have been rejected as the arch-traitor? Imagine that, in the mid 1920s, Trotsky had emigrated and renounced Soviet citizenship in order to incite permanent revolution around the world, and then died soon afterwards – after his death, Stalin would have elevated him into a cult. . . . Of course, such a fidelity to the Cause ('Socialismo o muerte!'), in so far as this Cause is embodied in the Leader, can easily degenerate into the Leader's readiness to sacrifice (not himself for the country, but) the country itself for himself, for his Cause. (Similarly, the proof of true fidelity to a Leader is not that one is ready to take a bullet *for* him; over and above this, one must be ready to take a bullet *from* him – accept being dropped or even sacrificed by him if this serves his higher purposes.)

6 On a more general level, we should note how Stalinism – with its brutal 'passion for the Real', its readiness to sacrifice millions of lives for its goal, to treat people as dispensable – was at the same

in the pure semblance of the spectacular *effect of the Real*, then in an exact inversion, the 'postmodern' passion for the semblance ends up in a violent return to the passion for the Real. Take the phenomenon of 'cutters' (people, mostly women, who experience an irresistible urge to cut themselves with razors or otherwise hurt themselves); this is strictly parallel to the virtualization of our environment: it represents a desperate strategy to return to the Real of the body. As such, cutting must be contrasted with normal tattooed inscriptions on the body, which guarantee the subject's inclusion in the (virtual) symbolic order – the problem with cutters, is the opposite one, namely the assertion of reality itself. Far from being suicidal, far from indicating a desire for self-annihilation, cutting is a radical attempt to (re)gain a hold on reality, or (another aspect of the same phenomenon) to ground the ego firmly in bodily reality against the unbearable anxiety of perceiving oneself as nonexistent. Cutters usually say that once they see the warm red blood flowing out of the self-inflicted wound, they feel alive again, firmly rooted in reality.<sup>7</sup> So although, of course, cutting is a pathological phenomenon, it is none the less a pathological attempt at regaining some kind of normality, at avoiding a total psychotic breakdown.

On today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant properties: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol. . . . And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell time the regime most sensitive about *maintaining proper appearance* it reacted with total panic whenever there was a threat that these appearances would be disturbed (say, that some accident which clearly revealed the failure of the regime would be reported in the media: in the Soviet media there were no black chronicles, no reports on crime and prostitution, let alone workers' or public protests).

7 See Marilee Strong, *The Bright Red Scream*, London: Virago 2000.

doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare, the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration, that is, as politics without politics, up to today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness (the idealized Other who dances fascinating dances and has an ecologically sound holistic approach to reality, while practices like wife beating remain out of sight . . .)? Virtual Reality simply generalizes this procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance: it provides reality itself deprived of its substance, of the hard resistant kernel of the Real – just as decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being real coffee, Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being so. What happens at the end of this process of virtualization, however, is that we begin to experience 'real reality' itself as a virtual entity. For the great majority of the public, the WTC explosions were events on the TV screen, and when we watched the oft-repeated shot of frightened people running towards the camera ahead of the giant cloud of dust from the collapsing tower, was not the framing of the shot itself reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others, since – as Jeremy Bentham knew – reality is the best appearance of itself?

And was not the attack on the World Trade Center with regard to Hollywood catastrophe movies like snuff pornography versus ordinary sado-masochistic porno movies? This is the element of truth in Karl-Heinz Stockhausen's provocative statement that the planes hitting the WTC towers was the ultimate work of art: we can perceive the collapse of the WTC towers as the climactic conclusion of twentieth-century art's 'passion for the Real' – the 'terrorists' themselves did not do it primarily to provoke real material damage, but *for the spectacular effect of it*. When, days after September 11 2001, our gaze was transfixed by the images of the plane hitting one of the

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WTC towers, we were all forced to experience what the 'compulsion to repeat' and *jouissance* beyond the pleasure principle are: we wanted to see it again and again; the same shots were repeated *ad nauseam*, and the uncanny satisfaction we got from it was *jouissance* at its purest. It was when we watched the two WTC towers collapsing on the TV screen, that it became possible to experience the falsity of 'reality TV shows': even if these shows are 'for real', people still act in them -- they simply play themselves. The standard disclaimer in a novel ('Characters in this text are fictional, any resemblance to real-life characters is purely accidental') also holds for participants in reality soaps: what we see there are fictional characters, even if they play themselves for real.

The authentic twentieth-century passion for penetrating the Real Thing (ultimately, the destructive Void) through the cobweb of semblances which constitutes our reality thus culminates in the thrill of the Real as the ultimate 'effect', sought after from digitalized special effects, through reality TV and amateur pornography, up to snuff movies. Snuff movies which deliver the 'real thing' are perhaps the ultimate truth of Virtual Reality. There is an intimate connection between the virtualization of reality and the emergence of an infinite and infinitized bodily pain, much stronger than the usual one: do not biogenetics and Virtual Reality combined open up new 'enhanced' possibilities of torture, new and unheard-of horizons of extending our ability to endure pain (through widening our sensory capacity to sustain pain, through inventing new forms of inflicting it)? Perhaps the ultimate Sadeian image of an 'undead' victim of torture who can bear endless pain without having the escape into death at his or her disposal is also waiting to become reality.

The ultimate American paranoid fantasy is that of an individual living in a small idyllic Californian city, a consumerist paradise, who suddenly starts to suspect that the world he is

living in is a fake, a spectacle staged to convince him that he is living in a real world, while all the people around him are in fact actors and extras in a gigantic show. The most recent example of this is Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998), with Jim Carrey playing the small-town clerk who gradually discovers the truth that he is the hero of a permanent twenty-four-hour TV show: his home town is in fact a gigantic studio set, with cameras following him everywhere. Among its predecessors, it is worth mentioning Phillip K. Dick's *Time out of Joint* (1959), in which the hero, living a modest daily life in a small idyllic Californian city in the late 1950s, gradually discovers that the whole town is a fake staged to keep him satisfied. . . . The underlying experience of *Time out of Joint* and of *The Truman Show* is that the late-capitalist consumerist Californian paradise is, in its very hyperreality, in a way *unreal*, substanceless, deprived of material inertia. And the same 'derealization' of the horror went on after the WTC collapse: while the number of victims -- 3,000 -- is repeated all the time, it is surprising how little of the actual carnage we see -- no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people . . . in clear contrast to reporting on Third World catastrophes, where the whole point is to produce a scoop of some gruesome detail: Somalis dying of hunger, raped Bosnian women, men with their throats cut. These shots are always accompanied by an advance warning that 'some of the images you will see are extremely graphic and may upset children' -- a warning which we never heard in the reports on the WTC collapse. Is this not yet further proof of how, even in this tragic moment, the distance which separates Us from Them, from their reality, is maintained: the real horror happens *there*, not *here*?<sup>8</sup>

So it is not only that Hollywood stages a semblance of real life

8 Another case of ideological censorship: when firefighters' widows

deprived of the weight and inertia of materiality – in late-capitalist consumerist society, 'real social life' itself somehow acquires the features of a staged fake, with our neighbours behaving in 'real' life like stage actors and extras. . . . Again, the ultimate truth of the capitalist utilitarian despiritualized universe is the dematerialization of 'real life' itself, its reversal into a spectral show. Among others, Christopher Isherwood gave expression to this unreality of American daily life, exemplified in the motel room: 'American motels are unreal! . . . They are deliberately designed to be unreal. . . . The Europeans hate us because we've retired to live inside our advertisements, like hermits going into caves to contemplate.' Peter Sloterdijk's notion of the 'sphere' is literally realized here, as the gigantic metal sphere that envelops and isolates the whole city. Years ago, a series of science-fiction films like *Zardoz* or *Logan's Run* forecasted today's postmodern predicament by extending this fantasy to the community itself: the isolated group living an aseptic life in a secluded area longs for the experience of the real world of material decay. Is not the endlessly repeated shot of the plane approaching and hitting the second WTC tower the real-life version of the famous scene from Hitchcock's *Birds*, superbly analysed by Raymond Bellour, in which Melanie approaches the Bodega Bay pier after crossing the bay in a little boat? When, as she approaches the wharf, she waves to her (future) lover, the single bird (first perceived as an indistinguishable dark blot

were interviewed on CNN, most of them gave the expected performance: tears, prayers . . . all except one who, without a tear, said that she does not pray for her dead husband, because she knows that prayer will not bring him back. Asked if she dreams of revenge, she calmly said that that would be a true betrayal of her husband: had he survived, he would have insisted that the worst thing to do is to succumb to the urge to retaliate . . . there is no need to add that this clip was shown only once, then disappeared from the repetitions of the same interviews.

unexpectedly enters the frame from above right, and hits her on the head.<sup>9</sup> Was not the plane which hit the WTC tower literally the ultimate Hitchcockian blot, the anamorphic stain which denaturalized the idyllic well-known New York landscape?

The Wachowski brothers' hit *Matrix* (1999) brought this logic to its climax: the material reality we all experience and see around us is a virtual one, generated and co-ordinated by a gigantic mega-computer to which we are all attached; when the hero (played by Keanu Reeves) awakens into 'real reality', he sees a desolate landscape littered with burnt-out ruins – what remains of Chicago after a global war. The resistance leader, Morpheus, utters the ironic greeting: 'Welcome to the desert of the real.' Was it not something of a similar order that took place in New York on September 11? Its citizens were introduced to the 'desert of the real' – for us, corrupted by Hollywood, the landscape and the shots of the collapsing towers could not but be reminiscent of the most breathtaking scenes in big catastrophe productions.

When we hear how the attacks were a totally unexpected shock, how the unimaginable Impossible happened, we should recall the other defining catastrophe from the beginning of the twentieth century, the sinking of the *Titanic*: this, also, was a shock, but the space for it had already been prepared in ideological fantasizing, since the *Titanic* was the symbol of the might of nineteenth-century industrial civilization. Does not the same hold also for these attacks? Not only were the media bombarding us all the time with talk about the terrorist threat; this threat was also obviously libidinally invested – just remember the series of movies from *Escape from New York* to *Independence Day*. That is the rationale of the often-mentioned association of the attacks with

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 3 of Raymond Bellour, *The Analysis of Film*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2000.



Hollywood disaster movies: the unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise. The ultimate twist in this link between Hollywood and the 'war against terrorism' occurred when the Pentagon decided to solicit the help of Hollywood: at the beginning of October 2001, the press reported that a group of Hollywood scenarists and directors, specialists in catastrophe movies, had been established at the instigation of the Pentagon, with the aim of imagining possible scenarios for terrorist attacks and how to fight them. And this interaction seemed to be ongoing: at the beginning of November 2001, there was a series of meetings between White House advisers and senior Hollywood executives with the aim of co-ordinating the war effort and establishing how Hollywood could help in the 'war against terrorism' by getting the right ideological message across not only to Americans, but also to the Hollywood public around the globe – the ultimate empirical proof that Hollywood does in fact function as an 'ideological state apparatus'.

We should therefore invert the standard reading according to which the WTC explosions were the intrusion of the Real which shattered our illusory Sphere: quite the reverse – it was before the WTC collapse that we lived in our reality, perceiving Third World horrors as something which was not actually part of our social reality, as something which existed (for us) as a spectral apparition on the (TV) screen – and what happened on September 11 was that this fantasmatic screen apparition entered our reality. It is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality (i.e. the symbolic coordinates which determine what we experience as reality). The fact that, after September 11, the openings of many 'blockbuster' movies with scenes which bear a resemblance to the WTC collapse (tall buildings on fire or under attack, terrorist acts . . .) were postponed (or the films were even shelved) should thus be read as the 'repression' of the fantasmatic background responsible for the impact of the WTC collapse. Of course, the point is not to play a pseudo-postmodern game of reducing the WTC collapse to just another media spectacle, reading it as a catastrophe version of the snuff porno movies; the question we should have asked ourselves as we stared at the TV screens on September 11 is simply: *Where have we already seen the same thing over and over again?*

The fact that the September 11 attacks were the stuff of popular fantasies long before they actually took place provides yet another case of the twisted logic of dreams: it is easy to account for the fact that poor people around the world dream about becoming Americans – so what do the well-to-do Americans, immobilized in their well-being, dream about? About a global catastrophe that would shatter their lives – why? This is what psychoanalysis is about: to explain why, in the midst of well-being, we are haunted by nightmarish visions of catastrophes. This paradox also indicates how we should grasp Lacan's notion of 'traversing the fantasy' as the concluding moment of the psychoanalytic treatment. This notion may seem to fit perfectly the common-sense idea of what psychoanalysis should do: of course it should liberate us from the hold of idiosyncratic fantasies, and enable us to confront reality as it really is! However, this, precisely, is what Lacan does *not* have in mind – what he aims at is almost the exact opposite. In our daily existence, we are immersed in 'reality' (structured and supported by the fantasy), and this immersion is disturbed by symptoms which bear witness to the fact that another, repressed, level of our psyche resists this immersion. To 'traverse the fantasy' therefore, paradoxically, means *fully identifying oneself with the fantasy* – namely, with the fantasy which structures the excess that resists our immersion in daily reality; or, to quote a succinct formulation by Richard Boothby:

'Traversing the phantasy' thus does not mean that the subject somehow abandons its involvement with fanciful caprices and accommodates itself to a pragmatic 'reality,' but precisely the opposite: the subject is submitted to that effect of the symbolic lack that reveals the limit of everyday reality. To traverse the phantasy in the Lacanian sense is to be more profoundly claimed by the phantasy than ever, in the sense of being brought into an ever more intimate relation with that real core of the phantasy that transcends imaging.<sup>10</sup>

Boothby is right to emphasize the Janus-like structure of a fantasy: a fantasy is simultaneously pacifying, disarming (providing an imaginary scenario which enables us to endure the abyss of the Other's desire) and shattering, disturbing, inassimilable into our reality. The ideologico-political dimension of this notion of 'traversing the fantasy' was clearly revealed by the unique role the rock group *Top lista nadrealista* (*The Top List of the Surrealists*) played during the Bosnian war in the besieged town of Sarajevo: their ironic performances – which, in the midst of war and hunger, satirized the predicament of Sarajevo's population – acquired a cult status not only in the counterculture, but also among citizens of Sarajevo in general (the group's weekly TV show went on throughout the war, and was extremely popular). Instead of bemoaning the Bosnians' tragic fate, they daringly mobilized all the clichés about the 'stupid Bosnians' which were commonplace in Yugoslavia, fully identifying with them – the point thus made was that the path of true solidarity leads through direct confrontation with the obscene racist fantasies which circulated in the symbolic space of Bosnia, through playful identification with them, not

10 Richard Boothby, *Freud as Philosopher*, New York: Routledge 2001, pp. 275–6.

through the denial of these obscenities because they do not represent people as they 'really are'.

This means that the dialectic of semblance and Real cannot be reduced to the rather elementary fact that the virtualization of our daily lives, the experience that we are living more and more in an artificially constructed universe, gives rise to an irresistible urge to 'return to the Real', to regain firm ground in some 'real reality'. The Real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance: *precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition*. This is what the compelling image of the collapse of the WTC was: an image, a semblance, an 'effect', which, at the same time, delivered 'the thing itself'. This 'effect of the Real' is not the same as what Roland Barthes, way back in the 1960s, called *l'effet du réel*: it is, rather, its exact opposite: *l'effet de l'irréel*. That is to say: in contrast to the Barthesian *effet du réel*, in which the text makes us accept its fictional product as 'real', here, the Real itself, in order to be sustained, has to be perceived as a nightmarish unreal spectre. Usually we say that we should not mistake fiction for reality – remember the postmodern doxa according to which 'reality' is a discursive product, a symbolic fiction which we misperceive as a substantial autonomous entity. The lesson of psychoanalysis here is the opposite one: *we should not mistake reality for fiction* – we should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the Real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it. In short, we should discern which part of reality is 'transfunctionalized' through fantasy, so that, although it is part of reality, it is perceived in a fictional mode. Much more difficult than to denounce/unmask (what appears as) reality as fiction is to recognize the part of fiction in 'real' reality. (This, of course, brings us back to the old