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## The Matrix: Or, The Two Sides of Perversion

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When I saw *The Matrix* at a local theater in Slovenia, I had the unique opportunity of sitting close to the ideal spectator of the film—namely, to an idiot. A man in his late twenties at my right was so absorbed in the movie that he continually disturbed the other viewers with loud exclamations, like “My God, wow, so there is no reality!”

I definitely prefer such naive immersion to the pseudo-sophisticated intellectualist readings which project refined philosophical or psychoanalytic conceptual distinctions into the film.<sup>1</sup> It is nonetheless easy to understand this intellectual attraction of *The Matrix*: Isn't *The Matrix* one of those films which function as a kind of Rorschach test [<http://rorschach.test.at/>], setting in motion the universalized process of recognition, like the proverbial painting of God which seems always to stare directly at you,

<sup>1</sup> Comparing the original script (available on the Internet) with the movie itself, we can see that the Wachowski brothers were intelligent enough to throw out the clunky pseudo-intellectual references: “Look at ‘em. Automaton. Don't think about what they're doing or why. Computer tells 'em what to do and they do it.” “The banality of evil.” This pretentious reference to Arendt misses the point: People immersed in the VR of the Matrix are in an entirely different, almost opposite, position compared with the executioners of the Holocaust. Another wise move was to drop the all too obvious references to Eastern techniques of emptying your mind as the way to escape the control of the Matrix: “You have to learn to let go of that anger. You must let go of everything. You must empty yourself to free your mind.”

from wherever you look at it—practically every orientation seems to recognize itself in it?

My Lacanian friends tell me that the authors must have read Lacan; the Frankfurt School partisans see in *The Matrix* the extrapolated embodiment of *Kulturindustrie*, the alienated-reified social Substance (of Capital) directly taking over, colonizing our inner life itself, using us as the source of energy; New Agers see in it a source of speculations on how our world is just a mirage generated by a global Mind embodied in the World Wide Web.

This series goes back to Plato's *Republic*. Doesn't *The Matrix* exactly repeat Plato's device of the cave (ordinary humans as prisoners, tied firmly to their seats and compelled to watch the shadowy performance of (what they falsely consider to be) reality? The important difference, of course, is that when some individuals escape their cave predicament and step out onto the surface of the Earth, what they find there is no longer a bright surface illuminated by the rays of the Sun, the supreme Good, but the desolate “desert of the real.”

The key opposition here is the one between the Frankfurt School and Lacan: Should we historicize *The Matrix* into the metaphor of Capital that has colonized culture and subjectivity, or is it the reification of the symbolic order as such? However, what if this very alternative is false? What if the virtual character of the symbolic order “as such” is the very condition of historicity?

### Reaching the End of the World

The idea of the hero living in a totally manipulated and controlled artificial universe is hardly original: *The Matrix* just radicalizes it by bringing in virtual reality (VR). The point here is the radical ambiguity of VR with regard to the problematic of iconoclasm. On the one hand, VR marks the radical reduction of the wealth of our sensory experience to—not even letters, but—the minimal digital series of 0 and 1, of the transmission and non-transmission of an electrical signal. On the other hand, this very digital machine generates the “simulated” experience of reality which tends to become indistinguishable from the “real” reality, with the consequence of undermining the very notion of “real” reality. VR is thus at the same time the most radical assertion of the seductive power of images.

Is not the ultimate American paranoid fantasy that of an individual living in a small, idyllic Californian city, a consumerist paradise, who suddenly starts to suspect that the world he lives in is a fake, a spectacle staged to convince him that he lives in a real world, while all the people around him are effectively 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 24-hour ongoing TV show: his hometown is constructed on a gigantic studio set, with cameras following him continually.

Sloterdijk's "sphere" is here literally realized, as the gigantic metal sphere that envelops and isolates the entire city. The final shot of *The Truman Show* may seem to enact the liberating experience of breaking out from the ideological suture of the enclosed universe into its outside, invisible from the ideological inside. However, what if it is precisely this "happy" denouement of the film (let us not forget: applauded by millions around the world watching the last minutes of the show), with the hero breaking out and, as we are led to believe, soon to join his true love (so that we have again the formula of the production of the couple!), that is ideology at its purest? What if ideology resides in the very belief that, outside the closure of the finite universe, there is some "true reality" to be entered?<sup>2</sup>

Among the predecessors of this notion is Phillip K. Dick's novel *Time Out of Joint* (1959), in which a man living a modest daily life in an idyllic Californian small town of 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 hyper-reality, in a way unreal, substanceless, deprived of material inertia. So it's not only that Hollywood stages a semblance of real life deprived of the weight and inertia of materiality: In late-capitalist consumerist

<sup>2</sup> It's also crucial that what enables the hero of *The Truman Show* to see through and exit his manipulated world is the unforeseen intervention of his father. There are two paternal figures in the film, the actual symbolic-biological father and the paranoid "real" father, played by Ed Harris, the director of the TV show who totally manipulates his life and protects him in the closed environment.

society, "real social life" itself somehow acquires the features of a staged fake, with our neighbors behaving in "real" life as stage actors and extras. The ultimate truth of the capitalist utilitarian despiritualized universe is the dematerialization of "real life" itself, its reversal into a spectral show.

In the realm of science-fiction, one should mention also Brian Aldiss's *Starship*, in which members of a tribe live in the closed world of a tunnel in a giant starship, isolated from the rest of the ship by thick vegetation, unaware that there is a universe beyond. Finally some children penetrate the bushes and reach the world beyond, populated by other tribes.

Among the older, more "naive" forerunners, one should mention George Seaton's *36 Hours*, the early 1960s movie about an American officer (James Garner) who knows all the plans for the invasion of Normandy and is seized by the Germans just days before D-Day. Since he is taken prisoner unconscious following an explosion, the Germans quickly construct for him a replica of a small American military hospital, and try to convince him that he now lives in 1950, that America has already won the war and that he has no memory of the last six years—the intention being that he will reveal all he knows about the invasion plans. Cracks soon appear in this carefully constructed edifice . . . (Lenin, in the last two years of his life, lived in an almost similar controlled environment, in which, as we now know, Stalin had printed for him a specially-prepared one-copy edition of *Pravda*, censored of all news that would tell Lenin about the political struggles going on, with the justification that Comrade Lenin should take a rest and not be excited by unnecessary provocations.)

What lurks in the background is the pre-modern notion of "arriving at the end of the universe." In those well-known engravings, the surprised wanderers approach the screen or curtain of heaven, a flat surface with painted stars on it, pierce it and reach beyond—this is exactly what happens at the end of *The Truman Show*. No wonder that the last scene of this movie, when Truman steps up the stairs attached to the wall on which the "blue sky" horizon is painted and opens the door, has a distinctly Magrittean touch: Isn't this same sensitivity today returning with a vengeance? Do works like Syberberg's *Parsifal*, in which the infinite horizon is also blocked by the obviously "artificial" rear-projections, not signal that the time of the Cartesian

infinite perspective is running out, and that we are returning to a kind of renewed medieval pre-perspective universe?

Fred Jameson perspicuously drew attention to the same phenomenon in some of Chandler's novels and Hitchcock's films. The shore of the Pacific Ocean in *Farewell, My Lovely* functions as a kind of "end or limit of the world," beyond which there is an unknown abyss; and it is similar with the vast open valley that stretches out in front of the Mount Rushmore heads when, on the run from their pursuers, Eva Marie Saint and Cary Grant reach the peak of the monument, and into which Eva Marie Saint almost falls, before being pulled up by Cary Grant.

One is tempted to add to this series the famous battle scene at a bridge on the Vietnamese-Cambodian frontier in *Apocalypse Now*, where the space beyond the bridge is experienced as the "beyond of our known universe." And the view that our Earth is not a planet floating in infinite space, but really a circular opening or hole, within the endless compact mass of eternal ice, with the sun in its center, was one of the favorite Nazi pseudo-scientific fantasies—according to some reports, they even considered putting some telescopes on the Sylt islands in order to observe America.

### The "Really Existing" Big Other

What, then, is the Matrix? Simply the Lacanian "big Other," the virtual symbolic order, the network that structures reality for us. This dimension of the "big Other" is that of the constitutive alienation of the subject in the symbolic order: the big Other pulls the strings, the subject doesn't speak, he "is spoken" by the symbolic structure. In short, this "big Other" is the name for the social Substance, for all that on account of which the subject never fully dominates the effects of his acts, on account of which the final outcome of his activity is always something other than what he aimed at or anticipated.

However, in the key chapters of *Seminar XI*, Lacan struggles to delineate the operation that follows alienation and is in a sense its counterpoint, that of separation: Alienation *in* the big Other is followed by separation *from* the big Other. Separation takes place when the subject takes note of how the big Other is in itself inconsistent, purely virtual, "barred," deprived of the Thing—and fantasy is an attempt to fill out this lack of the

Other, not of the subject, to (re)constitute the consistency of the big Other.

For that reason, fantasy and paranoia are inherently linked: Paranoia is at its most elementary a belief in an "Other of the Other", into another Other who, hidden behind the Other of the explicit social texture, programs (what appears to us as) the unforeseen effects of social life and thus guarantees its consistency: Beneath the chaos of the market, the degradation of morals, and so forth, there is the purposeful strategy of the Jewish plot . . . This paranoid stance has acquired a further boost with today's digitalization of our daily lives. When our entire social existence is progressively externalized-materialized in the big Other of the computer network, it's easy to imagine an evil programmer erasing our digital identity and thus depriving us of our social existence, turning us into non-persons.

Following the same paranoid twist, the thesis of *The Matrix* is that this big Other is externalized in the really existing Mega-Computer. There is—there *has* to be—a Matrix because "things are not right, opportunities are missed, something goes wrong all the time." In other words, the movie's suggestion that this is so because there is the Matrix obfuscates the true reality that is behind it all. Consequently, the problem with the film is that it is not "crazy" enough, because it supposes another "real" reality behind our everyday reality sustained by the Matrix.

However, to avoid a fatal misunderstanding, the inverse notion that "all there is is generated by the Matrix," that there is *no* ultimate reality, just the infinite series of virtual realities mirroring themselves in each other, is no less ideological. In the sequels to *The Matrix*, we shall probably learn that the very "desert of the real" is generated by another matrix. Much more subversive than this multiplication of virtual universes would have been the multiplication of realities themselves—something that would reproduce the paradoxical danger that some physicists see in recent high-accelerator experiments.

Scientists are now trying to construct an accelerator capable of smashing together the nuclei of very heavy atoms at nearly the speed of light. The idea is that such a collision will not only shatter the atom's nuclei into their constituent protons and neutrons, but will pulverize the protons and neutrons themselves, leaving a "plasma," a kind of energy soup consisting of loose quark and gluon particles, the building blocks of matter that

have never before been studied in such a state, since such a state only existed briefly after the Big Bang.

However, this prospect has given rise to a nightmarish scenario. What if the success of this experiment created a doomsday machine, a kind of world-devouring monster that would with inexorable necessity annihilate the ordinary matter around itself and thus abolish the world as we know it? The irony of it is that this end of the world, the disintegration of the universe, would be the ultimate irrefutable proof that the tested theory were true, since it would suck all matter into a black hole and then bring about a new universe, perfectly recreating the Big Bang scenario.

The paradox is thus that both versions—(1) a subject freely floating from one to another VR, a pure ghost aware that every reality is a fake; (2) the paranoid supposition of the real reality beneath the Matrix—are false. They both miss the Real. The film is not wrong in insisting that there *is* a Real beneath the Virtual Reality simulation—as Morpheus puts it to Neo when he shows him the ruined Chicago landscape: “Welcome to the desert of the real.”

However, the Real is not the “true reality” behind the virtual simulation, but the void which makes reality incomplete or inconsistent, and the function of every symbolic Matrix is to conceal this inconsistency. One of the ways to effectuate this concealment is precisely to claim that, behind the incomplete/inconsistent reality we know, there is another reality with no deadlock of impossibility structuring it.

### “The Big Other Doesn’t Exist”

“Big Other” also stands for the field of common sense at which one can arrive after free deliberation; philosophically, its last great version is Habermas’s communicative community with its regulative ideal of agreement. And it is this “big Other” that progressively disintegrates today.

What we have today is a certain radical split. On the one hand, there is the objectivized language of experts and scientists which can no longer be translated into the common language accessible to everyone, but is present in common language in the mode of fetishized formulas that no one really understands, but which shape our artistic and popular imaginary universes

(Black Hole, Big Bang, Superstrings, Quantum Oscillation . . .). Not only in the natural sciences, but also in economics and other social sciences, the expert jargon is presented as an objective insight with which one cannot really argue, and which is simultaneously untranslatable into our common experience. In short, the gap between scientific insight and common sense is unbridgeable, and it is this very gap which elevates scientists into the popular cult figures of the “subjects supposed to know” (the Stephen Hawking phenomenon).

And on the other hand, the strict obverse of this objectivity is the way in which, in cultural matters, we are confronted with the multitude of lifestyles which we cannot translate into each other. All we can do is secure the conditions for their tolerant co-existence in a multicultural society. The icon of today’s subject is perhaps the Indian computer programmer who, during the day, excels in his expertise, while in the evening, upon returning home, he lights the candle to the local Hindu divinity and respects the sanctity of the cow.

This split is perfectly rendered in the phenomenon of cyberspace. Cyberspace was supposed to bring us all together in a Global Village. Yet what effectively happens is that we are bombarded with the multitude of messages belonging to inconsistent and incompatible universes. Instead of the Global Village, the big Other, we get the multitude of “small others,” of tribal particular identifications at our choice. To avoid a misunderstanding: Lacan is here far from relativizing science into just one of the arbitrary narratives, ultimately on an equal footing with Politically Correct myths, and so forth: Science *does* “touch the Real,” its knowledge *is* “knowledge in the real.” The deadlock resides simply in the fact that scientific knowledge cannot serve as the *symbolic* “big Other.” The gap between modern science and Aristotelian common-sense philosophical ontology is here insurmountable. This gap emerges with Galileo, and is brought to an extreme in quantum physics, where we’re dealing with laws which do work, though they cannot ever be retranslated into our experience of representable reality.

The theory of the risk society and its global reflexivization is right in its emphasis on how, today, we are at the opposite end of the classical Enlightenment universalist ideology which presupposed that, in the long run, the fundamental questions can be resolved by way of reference to the “objective knowledge”

of the experts. When we're confronted with conflicting opinions about the environmental consequences of a certain new product (say, of genetically modified vegetables), we search in vain for the ultimate expert opinion. And the point is not simply that the real issues are blurred because science is corrupted through financial dependence on large corporations and state agencies. Even in themselves, the sciences cannot provide the answer.

Fifteen years ago ecologists predicted the death of the Earth's forests, but we now learn that the problem is too large an increase of forest growth. Where this theory of the risk society falls short is in emphasizing the irrational predicament into which this puts us, common subjects. We are again and again compelled to decide, although we are well aware that we are in no position to decide, that our decision will be arbitrary. Ulrich Beck and his followers refer to the democratic discussion of all options and consensus-building. However this does not resolve the immobilizing dilemma: Why should the democratic discussion in which the majority participates lead to better results, when, cognitively, the ignorance of the majority remains?

The political frustration of the majority is thus understandable. They are called upon to decide, while, at the same time, receiving the message that they are in no position effectively to decide, to objectively weigh the pros and cons. The recourse to "conspiracy theories" is a desperate way out of this deadlock, an attempt to regain a minimum of what Fred Jameson calls "cognitive mapping."

Jodi Dean<sup>3</sup> drew attention to a curious phenomenon clearly observable in the "dialogue of the mutes" between the official ("serious," academically institutionalized) science and the vast domain of so-called pseudo-sciences, from ufology to those who want to decipher the secrets of the pyramids. One cannot but be struck by how it is the official scientists who proceed in a dogmatic, dismissive way, while the pseudo-scientists refer to facts and argumentation, disregarding common prejudices. The answer, of course, will be that established scientists speak with the authority of the big Other, of science as an institution, but

the problem is that, precisely, this scientific big Other is again and again revealed as a consensual symbolic fiction. So when we are confronted with conspiracy theories, we should proceed in a strict homology to the proper reading of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. We should neither accept the existence of ghosts as part of the narrative reality nor reduce them, in a pseudo-Freudian way, to the "projection" of the heroine's hysterical sexual frustrations.

Conspiracy theories are of course not to be accepted as "fact." However one should also not reduce them to the phenomenon of modern mass hysteria. Such a notion still relies on the "big Other," on the model of "normal" perception of shared social reality, and thus does not take into account how it is precisely this notion of reality that is undermined today. The problem is not that ufologists and conspiracy theorists regress to a paranoid attitude unable to accept (social) reality; the problem is that this reality itself is becoming paranoid.

Contemporary experience again and again confronts us with situations in which we are compelled to take note of how our sense of reality and normal attitude towards it is grounded in a symbolic fiction—how the "big Other" that determines what counts as normal and accepted truth, what is the horizon of meaning in a given society, is in no way directly grounded in "facts" as rendered by the scientific "knowledge in the real."

Let us take a traditional society in which modern science is not yet elevated into the "master discourse." If, in its symbolic space, an individual advocates propositions of modern science, he will be dismissed as a "madman." And the key point is that it is not enough to say that he is not "really mad," that it is merely the narrow, ignorant society which puts him in this position. In a certain way, being treated as a madman, being excluded from the social big Other, effectively *equals* being mad. "Madness" is not the designation which can be grounded in a direct reference to "facts" (in the sense that a madman is unable to perceive things the way they really are, since he is caught in his hallucinatory projections), but only with regard to the way an individual relates to the "big Other."

Lacan usually emphasizes the opposite aspect of this paradox: "The madman is not only a beggar who thinks he is a king, but also a king who thinks he is a king." In other words, madness designates the collapse of the distance between the

<sup>3</sup> On whom I rely extensively here. See Dean's *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

Symbolic and the Real, an immediate identification with the symbolic mandate; or, to take his other exemplary statement, when a husband is pathologically jealous, obsessed by the idea that his wife sleeps with other men, his obsession remains a pathological feature even if it is proved that he is right and that his wife in fact sleeps with other men.

The lesson of such paradoxes is clear. Pathological jealousy is not a matter of getting the facts wrong, but of the way these facts are integrated into the subject's libidinal economy. However, what we should assert here is that the same paradox should also be performed as it were in the opposite direction: The society (its socio-symbolic field, the big Other) is "sane" and "normal" even when it is proven factually wrong. Maybe it was in this sense that the late Lacan designated himself as "psychotic." He effectively was psychotic insofar as it was not possible to integrate his discourse into the field of the big Other.

One is tempted to claim, in the Kantian mode, that the mistake of the conspiracy theory is somehow homologous to the "paralogism of pure reason," to the confusion between the two levels: the suspicion (of the received scientific, social, etc. common sense) as the formal methodological stance, and the positing of this suspicion in another all-explaining global para-theory.

### Screening the Real

From another standpoint, the Matrix also functions as the "screen" that separates us from the Real, that makes the "desert of the real" bearable. However, it is here that we should not forget the radical ambiguity of the Lacanian Real: it is not the ultimate referent to be covered-gentrified-domesticated by the screen of fantasy. The Real is also and primarily the screen itself as the obstacle that always distorts our perception of the referent, of the reality out there.

In philosophical terms, therein resides the difference between Kant and Hegel: For Kant, the Real is the noumenal domain that we perceive "schematized" through the screen of transcendental categories; for Hegel, on the contrary, as he asserts exemplarily in the *Introduction* to his *Phenomenology*, this Kantian gap is false. Hegel introduces here *three* terms: when a screen intervenes between ourselves and the Real, it

always generates a notion of what is In-itself, beyond the screen (of the appearance), so that the gap between appearance and the In-itself is always-already "for us." Consequently, if we subtract from the Thing the distortion of the Screen, we lose the Thing itself (in religious terms, the death of Christ is the death of the God in himself, not only of his human embodiment)—which is why, for Lacan, who here follows Hegel, the Thing in itself is ultimately the gaze, not the perceived object. So, back to the Matrix: the Matrix itself is the Real that distorts our perception of reality.

A reference to Lévi-Strauss's exemplary analysis, from his *Structural Anthropology*, of the spatial disposition of buildings in the Winnebago, one of the Great Lake tribes, might be of some help here. The tribe is divided into two sub-groups ("moieties"), "those who are from above" and "those who are from below"; when we ask an individual to draw on a piece of paper, or on sand, the ground-plan of his or her village (the spatial disposition of cottages), we obtain two quite different answers, depending on his or her belonging to one or the other sub-group. Both perceive the village as a circle; but for one sub-group, there is within this circle another circle of central houses, so that we have two concentric circles, while for the other sub-group, the circle is split into two by a clear dividing line. In other words, a member of the first sub-group (let us call it "conservative-corporatist") perceives the ground-plan of the village as a ring of houses more or less symmetrically disposed around the central temple, whereas a member of the second ("revolutionary-antagonistic") sub-group perceives his or her village as two distinct heaps of houses separated by an invisible frontier . . .<sup>4</sup>

Lévi-Strauss's main point is that this example should in no way entice us into cultural relativism, according to which the perception of social space depends on the observer's group-membership. The very splitting into the two "relative" perceptions implies a hidden reference to a constant—not the objective, "actual" disposition of buildings but a traumatic

<sup>4</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Do Dual Organizations Exist?", in *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), pp. 131–163. The drawings are on pp. 133–34.

kernel, a fundamental antagonism the inhabitants of the village were unable to symbolize, to account for, to "internalize," to come to terms with, an imbalance in social relations that prevented the community from stabilizing itself into a harmonious whole.

The two perceptions of the ground-plan are simply two mutually exclusive endeavors to cope with this traumatic antagonism, to heal its wound via the imposition of a balanced symbolic structure. Is it necessary to add that things stand exactly the same with respect to sexual difference, that "masculine" and "feminine" are like the two configurations of houses in the Lévi-Straussian village? And in order to dispel the illusion that our "developed" universe is not dominated by the same logic, suffice it to recall the splitting of our political space into left and right: a leftist and a rightist behave exactly like members of the opposite sub-groups of the Lévi-Straussian village. They not only occupy different places within the political space; each of them perceives differently the very disposition of the political space—a leftist as the field that is inherently split by some fundamental antagonism, a rightist as the organic unity of a community disturbed only by foreign intruders.

However, Lévi-Strauss makes a further crucial point: since the two sub-groups nonetheless form one and the same tribe, living in the same village, this identity somehow has to be symbolically inscribed. But how is this possible, if the entire symbolic articulation, all social institutions, of the tribe are not neutral, but are overdetermined by the fundamental and constitutive antagonistic split? By what Lévi-Strauss ingeniously calls the "zero-institution," a kind of institutional counterpart to the famous *mana*, the empty signifier with no determinate meaning, since it signifies only the presence of meaning as such, in opposition to its absence: a specific institution which has no positive, determinate function—its only function is the purely negative one of signalling the presence and actuality of social institution as such, in opposition to its absence, to pre-social chaos.

It's the reference to such a zero-institution that enables all members of the tribe to experience themselves as such, as members of the same tribe. Is, then, this zero-institution not ideology at its purest—the direct embodiment of the ideological function of providing a neutral all-encompassing space in which social antagonism is obliterated, in which all members of society can

recognize themselves? And is the struggle for hegemony not precisely the struggle for how this zero-institution will be overdetermined, colored by some particular signification?

To provide a concrete example: is not the modern notion of nation such a zero-institution that emerged with the dissolution of social links grounded in direct family or traditional symbolic matrixes, when, with the onslaught of modernization, social institutions were less and less grounded in naturalized tradition and more and more experienced as a matter of "contract."<sup>5</sup> Of special importance here is the fact that national identity is experienced as at least minimally "natural," as a belonging grounded in "blood and soil," and as such opposed to the "artificial" belonging to social institutions proper (state, profession . . .). Pre-modern institutions functioned as "naturalized" symbolic entities (as institutions grounded in unquestionable traditions), and the moment institutions were conceived as social artifacts, the need arose for a "naturalized" zero-institution that would serve as their neutral common ground.

And, back to sexual differences, I am tempted to risk the hypothesis that, perhaps, the same logic of zero-institution should be applied not only to the unity of a society, but also to its antagonistic split: what if sexual difference is ultimately a kind of zero-institution of the social split of humankind, the naturalized minimal zero-difference, a split that, prior to signalling any determinate social difference, signals this difference as such? The struggle for hegemony is then, again, the struggle for how this zero-difference will be overdetermined by other particular social differences. It is against this background that one should read an important, although usually overlooked, feature of Lacan's schema of the signifier: Lacan replaces the standard Saussurean scheme (above the bar the word "arbre," and beneath it the drawing of a tree) with, above the bar, two words one alongside the other, "homme" and "femme," and, beneath the bar, two identical drawings of a door.

In order to emphasize the differential character of the signifier, Lacan first replaces Saussure's single scheme with a signifier's couple, with the opposition man-woman, with the sexual

<sup>5</sup> See Rastko Mocnik, "Das 'Subjekt, dem unterstellt wird zu glauben' und die Nation als eine Null-Institution," in H. Boke, ed., *Denk-Prozesse nach Althusser* (Hamburg: Argument Verlag, 1994).

difference; but the true surprise resides in the fact that, at the level of the imaginary referent, *there is no difference* (we do not get some graphic index of the sexual difference, the simplified drawing of a man and a woman, as is usually the case in most of today's restrooms, but *the same* door reproduced twice). Is it possible to state in clearer terms that sexual difference does not designate any biological opposition grounded in "real" properties, but a purely symbolic opposition to which nothing corresponds in the designated objects—nothing but the Real of some undefined X which cannot ever be captured by the image of the signified?

Back to Lévi-Strauss's example of the two drawings of the village. Here one can see in what precise sense the Real intervenes through anamorphosis. We have first the "actual," "objective," arrangement of the houses, and then their two different symbolizations which both distort in an anamorphic way the actual arrangement. However, the "real" here is not the actual arrangement, but the traumatic core of the social antagonism which distorts the tribe members' view of the actual antagonism. The Real is thus the disavowed X on account of which our vision of reality is anamorphically distorted. (And, incidentally, this three-levels device is strictly homologous to Freud's three-level device of the interpretation of dreams: The real kernel of the dream is not the dream's latent thought, which is displaced or translated into the explicit texture of the dream, but the unconscious desire which inscribes itself through the very distortion of the latent thought into the explicit texture.)

The same goes for today's art scene, in which the Real does *not* return primarily in the guise of the shocking brutal intrusion of excremental objects, mutilated corpses, shit, and so forth. These objects are, to be sure, out of place—but in order for them to be out of place, the (empty) place must already be here, and this place is rendered by "minimalist" art, starting from Malevitch. Therein resides the complicity between the two opposed icons of high modernism, Kazimir Malevitch's "Black Square on White Surface" and Marcel Duchamp's display of ready-made objects as works of art.

The underlying notion of Malevitch's elevation of an everyday object into a work of art is that being a work of art is not an inherent property of the object: It is the artist himself who, by pre-empting the (or, rather, *any*) object and locating it at a

certain place, makes it the work of art. Being a work of art is not a question of "why" but "where." And what Malevitch's minimalist disposition does is simply to render—to isolate—this place as such, the empty place (or frame) with the proto-magic property of transforming any object that finds itself within its scope into the work of art.

In short, there is no Duchamp without Malevitch. Only after the art practice isolates the frame/place as such, emptied of all its content, can one indulge in the ready-made procedure. Before Malevitch, a urinal would have remained just a urinal, even if it were to be displayed in the most distinguished gallery.

The emergence of excremental objects which are out of place is thus strictly correlative to the emergence of the place without any object in it, of the empty frame as such. Consequently, the Real in contemporary art has three dimensions, which somehow repeat within the Real the triad of Imaginary-Symbolic-Real. The Real is first here as the anamorphic stain, the anamorphic distortion of the direct image of reality—as a distorted image, as a pure semblance that "subjectivizes" objective reality. Then, the Real is here as the empty place, as a structure, a construction which is never here, experiences as such, but can only be retroactively constructed and has to be presupposed as such—the Real as symbolic construction.

Finally, the Real is the obscene excremental Object out of place, the Real "itself." This last Real, if isolated, is a mere fetish whose fascinating or captivating presence masks the structural Real, in the same way that, in Nazi anti-Semitism, the Jew as the excremental Object is the Real that masks the unbearable "structural" Real of the social antagonism.

These three dimensions of the Real result from the three modes of setting distance from "ordinary" reality: One submits this reality to anamorphic distortion; one introduces an object that has no place in it; or one subtracts or erases all content (objects) of reality, so that all that remains is the very empty place these objects were filling in.

### The Freudian Touch

The falsity of *The Matrix* is perhaps most directly discernable in its designation of Neo as "the One." Who is the One? There

effectively is such a place in the social link. There is, first, the One of the Master-Signifier, the symbolic authority. Even in social life in its most horrifying form, the memories of concentration camp survivors invariably mention the One, an individual who did not break down, who, in the midst of the unbearable conditions which reduced all others to the egoistic struggle for bare survival, miraculously maintained and radiated an "irrational" generosity and dignity. In Lacanian terms, we are dealing here with the function of *Y'a de l'Un*: even here, there was the One who served as the support of the minimum of solidarity that defines the social link proper as opposed to collaboration within the frame of the pure strategy of survival.

Two features are crucial here. First, this individual was always perceived as one (there was never a multitude of them, as if, following some obscure necessity, this excess of the inexplicable miracle of solidarity has to be embodied in a One); secondly, it was not so much what this One effectively did for the others which mattered, but rather his very presence among them (what enabled the others to survive was the awareness that, even if they are for most of the time reduced to survival-machines, there is the One who maintained human dignity). In a way homologous to canned laughter, we have here something like canned dignity, where the Other (the One) retains my dignity for me, in my place, or, more precisely, where I retain my dignity *through* the Other. I may be reduced to the cruel struggle for survival, but the very awareness that there is One who retains his dignity enables *me* to maintain a minimal link to humanity.

Often, when this One broke down or was unmasked as a fake, the other prisoners lost their will to survive and turned into indifferent living dead—paradoxically, their very readiness to struggle for bare survival was sustained by its exception, by the fact that there was the One *not* reduced to this level, so that, when this exception disappeared, the struggle for survival itself lost its force.

What this means is that this One was not defined exclusively by his "real" qualities (at this level, there may well have been more individuals like him, or it may even have been that he was not really unbroken, but a fake, just playing that role). His exceptional role was rather that of transference: He occupied a place constructed (presupposed) by the others.

In *The Matrix*, on the contrary, the One is he who is able to see that our everyday reality is not real, but just a codified virtual universe, and who therefore is able to unplug from it, to manipulate and suspend its rules (fly in the air, stop bullets, and so forth). Crucial for the function of this One is his virtualization of reality. Reality is an artificial construct whose rules can be suspended or at least rewritten—therein resides the properly paranoid notion that the One can suspend the resistance of the Real ("I can walk through a thick wall, if I really decide to . . ."—the impossibility for most of us to do this is reduced to the failure of the subject's will).

Here again, the film does not go far enough. In the memorable scene in the waiting room of the Oracle who will decide if Neo is the One, a child who is seen bending a spoon with his mere thoughts tells the surprised Neo that the way to do it is not to convince myself that I can bend the spoon, but to convince myself that *there is no spoon* . . . However, what about *myself*? Shouldn't the movie have taken the further step of accepting the Buddhist proposition that I, *myself*, the subject, do not exist?

In order to further specify what is false in *The Matrix*, one should distinguish simple technological impossibility from phantasmic falsity: Time-travel is (probably) impossible, but phantasmic scenarios about it are nonetheless "true" in the way they render libidinal deadlocks. Consequently, the problem with *The Matrix* is not the scientific naivety of its tricks. The idea of passing from reality to VR through the phone makes sense, since all we need is a gap or hole through which we can escape.

Perhaps, an even better solution would have been the toilet. Is not the domain where excrements vanish after we flush the toilet effectively one of the metaphors for the horrifyingly sublime Beyond of the primordial, pre-ontological Chaos into which things disappear? Although we rationally know what goes on with the excrements, the imaginary mystery nonetheless persists—shit remains an excess which does not fit our daily reality, and Lacan was right in claiming that we pass from animals to humans the moment an animal has problems with what to do with its excrements, the moment they turn into an excess that annoys it. The Real is thus not primarily the horrifyingly-disgusting stuff re-emerging from the toilet sink, but rather the hole itself, the gap which serves as the passage to a different ontological order—the topological hole or torsion which "curves" the

space of our reality so that we perceive/imagine excrements as disappearing into an alternative dimension which is not part of our everyday reality.

The problem is a more radical phantasmic inconsistency, which erupts most explicitly when Morpheus (the African-American leader of the resistance group who believe that Neo is the One) tries to explain to the still perplexed Neo what the Matrix is. He quite consequently links it to a failure in the structure of the universe:

MORPHEUS: It's that feeling you have had all your life. That feeling that something was wrong with the world. You don't know what it is but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad. . . . The Matrix is everywhere, it's all around us, here even in this room. . . . It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.

NEO: What truth?

MORPHEUS: That you are a slave, Neo. That you, like everyone else, was born into bondage . . . kept inside a prison that you cannot smell, taste, or touch. A prison of your mind.

Here the film encounters its ultimate inconsistency: the experience of the lack/inconsistency/obstacle is supposed to bear witness of the fact that what we experience as reality is a fake—however, towards the end of the film, Smith, the Agent of the Matrix, gives a different, much more Freudian explanation:

Did you know that the first Matrix was designed to be a perfect human world? Where none suffered, where everyone would be happy? It was a disaster. *No one would accept the program.* Entire crops [of the humans serving as batteries] were lost. Some believed we lacked the programming language to describe your perfect world. But I believe that, as a species, human beings define their reality through suffering and misery. The perfect world was a dream that your primitive cerebrum kept trying to wake up from. Which is why the Matrix was re-designed to this: the peak of your civilization.

The imperfection of our world is thus at the same time the sign of its virtuality *and* the sign of its reality. One could effectively claim that Agent Smith (let us not forget: not a human being as

others, but the direct virtual embodiment of the Matrix—the big Other—itsself) is the stand-in for the figure of the analyst within the universe of the film: His lesson is that the experience of an insurmountable obstacle is the positive condition for us, humans, to perceive something as reality—reality is ultimately that which resists.

### Malebranche in Hollywood

Another inconsistency concerns death: *Why* does one “really” die when one dies in the VR regulated by the Matrix? The film provides the obscurantist answer: “Neo: If you are killed in the Matrix, you die here [not only in the VR, but also in real life]” Morpheus: The body cannot live without the mind.” The logic of this solution is that your “real” body can only function in conjunction with the mind, the mental universe into which you are immersed. So if you are in a VR and killed there, this death affects also your real body . . . The obvious opposite solution (you only really die when you are killed in reality) is also too short.

The catch is: Is the subject *wholly* immersed in the Matrix-dominated VR or does he know or at least *suspect* the actual state of things? If the answer to the former question is *yes*, then a simple withdrawal into a prelapsarian Adamic state of distance would render us immortal *in the VR* and, consequently, Neo who is already liberated from the full immersion in the VR should *survive* the struggle with Agent Smith which takes place *within* the VR controlled by the Matrix (in the same way he is able to stop bullets, he should also have been able to derealize blows that wound his body). This brings us back to Malebranche's occasionalism. Much more than Berkeley's God who sustains the world in his mind, the *ultimate* Matrix is Malebranche's occasionalist God.

Malebranche was undoubtedly the philosopher who provided the best conceptual apparatus to account for Virtual Reality. Malebranche, a disciple of Descartes, drops Descartes's ridiculous reference to the pineal gland in order to explain the co-ordination between the material and the spiritual substance, body and soul. How, then, are we to explain their co-ordination, if there is no contact between the two, no point at which a soul can act causally on a body or vice versa? Since the two causal

networks (that of ideas in my mind and that of bodily interconnections) are totally independent, the only solution is that a third, true Substance (God) continuously co-ordinates and mediates between the two, sustaining the semblance of continuity. When I think about raising my hand and my hand effectively raises, my thought causes the raising of my hand not directly but only "occasionally." Upon noticing my thought directed at raising my hand, God sets in motion the other, material, causal chain which leads to my hand effectively being raised. If we replace "God" with the big Other, the symbolic order, we can see the closeness of occasionalism to Lacan's position: As Lacan put it in his polemics against Aristotle in "Television,"<sup>6</sup> the relationship between soul and body is never direct, since the big Other always interposes itself between the two.

Occasionalism is thus essentially a name for the "arbitrary of the signifier," for the gap that separates the network of ideas from the network of bodily (real) causality, for the fact that it is the big Other which accounts for the co-ordination of the two networks, so that, when my body bites an apple, my soul experiences a pleasurable sensation. This same gap is targeted by the ancient Aztec priest who organizes human sacrifices to ensure that the sun will rise again: The human sacrifice is here an appeal to God to sustain the co-ordination between the two series, the bodily necessity and the concatenation of symbolic events. "Irrational" as the Aztec priest's sacrificing may appear, its underlying premise is far more insightful than our commonplace intuition according to which the co-ordination between body and soul is direct—it's "natural" for me to have a pleasurable sensation when I bite an apple since this sensation is caused directly by the apple: what gets lost is the intermediary role of the big Other in guaranteeing the co-ordination between reality and our mental experience of it.

And is it not the same with our immersion in Virtual Reality? When I raise my hand in order to push an object in virtual space, this object effectively moves—my illusion, of course, is that it was the movement of my hand which directly caused the dislocation of the object; in my immersion, I overlooked the intricate mechanism of computerized co-ordination, homolo-

gous to the role of God guaranteeing the co-ordination between the two series in occasionalism.<sup>7</sup>

It is a well-known fact that the "Close the door" button in most elevators is a totally redundant placebo, placed there just to give the individuals the impression that they are somehow participating, contributing to the speed of the elevator journey—when we push this button, the door closes in exactly the same time as when we just pressed the floor button without "speeding up" the process by pressing also the "Close the door" button. This extreme and clear case of fake participation is an appropriate metaphor of the participation of individuals in our "postmodern" political process. And this is occasionalism at its purest: according to Malebranche, we are all the time pressing such buttons, and it is God's incessant activity that co-ordinates between them and the event that follows (the door closing), while we think the event results from our pushing the button . . .

For that reason, it is crucial to keep open the radical ambiguity of how cyberspace will affect our lives: this does not depend on technology as such but on the mode of its social inscription. Immersion into cyberspace can intensify our bodily experience (new sensuality, new body with more organs, new sexes . . .), but it also opens up the possibility for the one who manipulates the machinery which runs the cyberspace literally to steal our own (virtual) body, depriving us of control over it, so that one no longer relates to one's body as to "one's own." What one encounters here is the constitutive ambiguity of the notion of mediatization.<sup>8</sup> Originally this notion designated the gesture by means of which a subject was stripped of its direct, immediate right to make decisions; the great master of political mediatization was Napoleon who left to the conquered monarchs the appearance of power, while they were effectively no longer in a position to exercise it. At a more general level, one could say that such a "mediatization" of the monarch defines the constitutional monarchy: In it, the monarch is reduced to the point of a purely formal symbolic gesture of "dotting the i's," of signing and thus conferring the performative force on the edicts

<sup>6</sup> See Jacques Lacan, "Television," *October* 40 (1987).

<sup>7</sup> The main work of Nicolas Malebranche is *Recherches de la Vérité* (1674–75; the most available edition is Paris: Vrin, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> As to this ambiguity, see Paul Virilio, *The Art of the Motor*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

whose content is determined by the elected governing body. And does not, *mutatis mutandis*, the same hold for today's progressive computerization of our everyday lives, in the course of which the subject is also more and more "mediatized", imperceptibly stripped of his power, under the false guise of its increase? When our body is mediatized (caught in the network of electronic media), it is simultaneously exposed to the threat of a radical "proletarianization": the subject is potentially reduced to the pure dollar sign, since even my own personal experience can be stolen, manipulated, regulated by the mechanical Other. One can see, again, how the prospect of radical virtualization bestows on the computer the position which is strictly homologous to that of God in Malebrancheian occasionalism. Since the computer co-ordinates the relationship between my mind and (what I experience as) the movement of my limbs (in the virtual reality), one can easily imagine a computer which runs amok and starts to act like an Evil God, disturbing the co-ordination between my mind and my bodily self-experience—when the signal of my mind to raise my hand is suspended or even counteracted in (the virtual) reality, the most fundamental experience of the body as "mine" is undermined. It seems thus that cyberspace effectively realizes the paranoid fantasy elaborated by Schreber, the German judge whose memoirs were analyzed by Freud.<sup>9</sup> The "wired universe" is psychotic insofar as it seems to materialize Schreber's hallucination of the divine rays through which God directly controls the human mind.

In other words, does the externalization of the big Other in the computer not account for the inherent paranoid dimension of the wired universe? Or, to put it in yet another way, the commonplace is that, in cyberspace, the ability to download consciousness into a computer finally frees people from their bodies—but it also frees the machines from "their" people . . .

### Staging the Fundamental Fantasy

The final inconsistency concerns the ambiguous status of the liberation of humanity announced by Neo in the last scene. As the result of Neo's intervention, there is a "SYSTEM FAILURE" in the

<sup>9</sup> The connection between cyberspace and Schreber's psychotic universe was suggested to me by Wendy Chun, Princeton.

Matrix; at the same time, Neo addresses people still caught in the Matrix as the Savior who will teach them how to liberate themselves from the constraints of the Matrix—they will be able to break the physical laws, bend metals, fly in the air . . . However, the problem is that all these "miracles" are possible only if we remain *within* the VR sustained by the Matrix and merely bend or change its rules: our "real" status is still that of the slaves of the Matrix, we as it were are merely gaining additional power to change our mental prison rules—so what about exiting from the Matrix altogether and entering the "real reality" in which we are miserable creatures living on the destroyed earth surface?

In an Adornian way, one should claim that these inconsistencies<sup>10</sup> are the film's moment of truth: they signal the antagonisms of our late-capitalist social experience, antagonisms concerning basic ontological couples like reality and pain (reality as that which disturbs the reign of the pleasure-principle), freedom and system (freedom is only possible within the system that hinders its full deployment). However, the ultimate strength of the film is nonetheless to be located at a different level. Years ago, a series of science-fiction films like *Zardoz* or *Logan's Run* forecast today's postmodern predicament: The isolated group living an aseptic life in a secluded area longs for the experience of the real world of material decay. Till postmodernism, utopia was an endeavor to break out of the real of historical time into a timeless Otherness. With postmodern overlapping of the "end of history" with full availability of the past in digitalized memory, in this time where we *live* the atemporal utopia as everyday ideological experience, utopia becomes the longing for the Reality of History itself, for memory, for the traces of the real past, the attempt to break out of the closed dome into smell and decay of the raw reality. *The Matrix* gives the final twist to this reversal, combining utopia with dystopia: the very reality we live in, the atemporal utopia staged by the Matrix, is in place so that we can be effectively reduced to a passive state of living batteries providing the Matrix with the energy.

<sup>10</sup> A further pertinent inconsistency also concerns the status of intersubjectivity in the universe run by the Matrix: do all individuals share *the same* virtual reality? Why? Why not to each its preferred own?

The unique impact of the film thus resides not so much in its central thesis (what we experience as reality is an artificial virtual reality generated by the "Matrix," the mega-computer directly attached to all our minds), but in its central image of millions of human beings leading a claustrophobic life in water-filled cradles, kept alive in order to generate energy for the Matrix. So when (some of) the people "awaken" from their immersion into the Matrix-controlled virtual reality, this awakening is not the opening into the wide space of the external reality, but first the horrible realization of this enclosure, where each of us is effectively just a fetus-like organism, immersed in the pre-natal fluid . . . This utter passivity is the foreclosed fantasy that sustains our conscious experience as active, self-positing subjects—it is the ultimate perverse fantasy, the notion that we are ultimately instruments of the Other's (Matrix's) *jouissance*, sucked out of our life-substance like batteries.

Therein resides the true libidinal enigma of this device. *Why* does the Matrix need human energy? The purely energetic solution is, of course, meaningless. The Matrix could have easily found another, more reliable, source of energy which would have not demanded the extremely complex arrangement of virtual reality co-ordinated for millions of human units. Another question is discernible here. Why does the Matrix not immerse each individual into his or her own solipsistic artificial universe? Why complicate matters by co-ordinating the programs so that all humanity inhabits one and the same virtual universe? The only consistent answer is that the Matrix feeds on the humans' *jouissance*—so we are back at the fundamental Lacanian thesis that the big Other itself, far from being an anonymous machine, needs the constant influx of *jouissance*. This is how we should turn around the state of things presented by the film. What this movie depicts as the scene of our awakening into our true situation, is effectively its exact opposition, the very fundamental fantasy that sustains our being.

The intimate connection between perversion and cyberspace is today a commonplace. According to the standard view, the perverse scenario stages the "disavowal of castration." Perversion can be seen as a defense against the motif of "death and sexuality," against the threat of mortality as well as the contingent imposition of sexual difference. What the pervert enacts is a universe in which, as in cartoons, a human being can sur-

vive any catastrophe; in which adult sexuality is reduced to a childish game; in which one is not forced to die or to choose one of the two sexes. As such, the pervert's universe is the universe of pure symbolic order, of the signifier's game running its course, unencumbered by the Real of human finitude.

As a first approach, it may seem that our experience of cyberspace fits perfectly this universe: Isn't cyberspace also a universe unencumbered by the inertia of the Real, constrained only by its self-imposed rules? And is not the same true of Virtual Reality in *The Matrix*? The "reality" in which we live loses its inexorable character; it becomes a domain of arbitrary rules (imposed by the Matrix) that one can violate if one's Will is strong enough . . . However, according to Lacan, what this standard notion leaves out of consideration is the unique relationship between the Other and the *jouissance* in perversion. What, exactly, does this mean?

In "Le prix du progrès," one of the fragments that conclude *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer quote the argument of the nineteenth-century French physiologist Pierre Flourens against medical anesthesia with chloroform. Flourens claims that it can be proven that the anesthetic works only on our memory's neuronal network. In short, while we are butchered alive on the operating table, we fully feel the terrible pain, but later, after awakening, we do not remember it . . . For Adorno and Horkheimer, this, of course, is the perfect metaphor of the fate of Reason based on the repression of nature in itself: his body, the part of nature in the subject, fully feels the pain, it is only that, due to repression, the subject does not remember it. Therein resides the perfect revenge of nature for our domination over it: Unknowingly, we are our own greatest victims, butchering ourselves alive . . . Isn't it also possible to read this as the perfect fantasy scenario of inter-passivity, of the Other Scene in which we pay the price for our active intervention into the world? There is no active free agent without this phantasmic support, without this Other Scene in which he is totally manipulated by the Other.<sup>11</sup> A sado-masochist willingly assumes this suffering as the access to Being.

<sup>11</sup> What Hegel does is to "traverse" this fantasy by demonstrating its function of filling in the pre-ontological abyss of freedom—reconstituting the positive

Perhaps, it is along these lines that one can also explain the obsession of Hitler's biographers with his relationship to his niece Geli Raubel, who was found dead in Hitler's Munich apartment in 1931, as if the alleged Hitler's sexual perversion will provide the "hidden variable," the intimate missing link, the phantasmic support that would account for his public personality. Here is this scenario as reported by Otto Strasser:

Hitler made her undress [while] he would lie down on the floor. Then she would have to squat down over his face where he could examine her at close range, and this made him very excited. When the excitement reached its peak, he demanded that she urinate on him, and that gave him his pleasure. (Ron Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler* [New York: Harper, 1999], p. 134)

Crucial here is the utter passivity of Hitler's role in this scenario as the phantasmic support that pushed him into his frenetically destructive public political activity—no wonder Geli was desperate and disgusted at these rituals.

Therein resides the correct insight of *The Matrix*: in its juxtaposition of the two aspects of perversion: on the one hand, reduction of reality to a virtual domain regulated by arbitrary rules that can be suspended; on the other hand, the concealed truth of this freedom, the reduction of the subject to an utter instrumentalized passivity.<sup>12</sup>

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Scene in which the subject is inserted into a positive noumenal order. In other words, for Hegel, Kant's vision is meaningless and inconsistent, since it secretly reintroduces the ontologically fully constituted divine totality, a world conceived *only* as Substance, *not* also as Subject.

<sup>12</sup> An earlier version of this chapter was delivered to the international symposium "Inside *The Matrix*," Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany.

## The Potentials

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