



## Editor's Introduction: Special Issue on Lacanian Perspectives

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This special issue on Lacanian Perspectives, guest-edited by Jerry Aline Flieger, is focused on aspects of the work of Jacques Lacan, who famously elaborated on the nature of the Freudian Thing—*la chose freudienne*. Recently there has been a resurgent theoretical interest in "things"—reflecting a variety of approaches ranging from a focus on everyday things in what Bill Brown has called "Thing Theory," to what Quentin Meillassoux has sought to theorize as the primordial object in his conception of "speculative realism," to Jane Bennett's "vibrant matter," to the emphasis on object-object relations in Graham Harman's Object Oriented Ontology. The attention to things as such is not exactly new. In the Western canon, one could point to Heraclitus, Democritus, and Epicurus, not to mention Plato's conceptualization of the ideal *polis* as a Republic (*res publica* or the public "thing"), through Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, across the centuries through Baruch Spinoza's influential conception of the natural world, to Immanuel Kant's epistemological preoccupation with the problem of inability to apprehend the thing except through the a priori categories of space and time (which the thing itself may nevertheless evade). There is also G.W.F. Hegel's philosophy of Nature and *die Sache selbst*, somehow the union of the subject (or Reason and self-consciousness) and the object (or Nature). The genealogy of thinking the thing extends into Martin Heidegger's influential reflection on the thing, as well as to Hans Georg Gadamer, and in more contemporary times to Gilles Deleuze.

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One effect of this renewed focus on the thing itself is to make the thing newly strange, alien rather than ordinary, or familiar to the point of banality or “transparency.” It is from this banausic obscurity that many of the essays in this special collection seek to retrieve the thing, the “object,” and in the same gesture bring into focus the relation with the subject itself. Problematizing both subject as well as object in ontological as well as psychoanalytic terms, the essays collected here, emphasizing “Lacanian approaches,” offer fresh perspectives on the subject’s psychic investment in the object

Though this special issue is focused on Lacanian approaches to the study of literature and the arts, in fact the range of approaches is intentionally broad. *The PsyArt Journal* is committed to enabling a forum for an eclectic variety of writing from both academic and non-academic perspectives. We believe this ecumenical openness makes the journal both more inclusive and more democratic.

Variety is also evident in the career stages of our contributors; *PsyArt* welcomes essays from contributors at various phases in their academic lives. In this special issue, we are proud to be able to include essays by graduate students especially, as well as from well-established scholars with distinguished professional trajectories.

The contributors also come from different geographical locations—the institutions from which they write range widely as do their cultural backgrounds and interests. Some, such as Jerry Aline Flieger, Gautam Basu Thakur, Nick Popow, and Christopher Power, are located in the United States, others in the Netherlands (Alexander Venetis), the U.K. (Virginia Blum and Anna Secor), and France (Robert Silhol). The scholars’ range of interests includes a “Freudian field” as diverse as their geographical locations. While some contributors explore the topological question of psychic space (Venetis, as well as Blum and Secor), the issue’s closing essay by Flieger extends our interest beyond the human to the question of the extraterrestrial—here meaning “uncanny alien others,” and the psychological implications of alien visitors. This

focus on aliens is no longer mere eccentricity, but rather has entered the public sphere prominently. For instance, Kirsten Gillibrand, the U.S. Senator, has announced a new Unidentified Aerial Phenomena (UAP) amendment in the Fiscal Year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), H.R. 4350—117<sup>th</sup> Congress, and funding for two UAP research offices, one based in the Pentagon and the other extending to the wider scientific community, led by the distinguished Harvard astronomer Avi Loeb. To outline some of the contours of this range of interests, I offer below a brief account of the very diverse essays in the special issue.

The special issue opens with an essay by eminent Lacanian scholar Robert Silhol. The question that motivates Silhol's essay is Lacan's own: "What is, for psychoanalysis, in 1975, a subject?" One of the answers the author puts on the table in his contribution is: "Indeed, 'Me' is an object and that is all there is to it!" Silhol suggests that initially Lacan had proposed his crucial concept of the "knot of three," the famous Borromean knot—a powerful master-concept that virtually tied together his entire oeuvre by knotting together the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The Borromean knot seemed neatly to connect the three domains: undo any one and the whole structure falls apart. Clearly this had implications for a theory of Subjectivity. For the subject is always barred ( $\$$  or *S barré* in Lacanese) and that is precisely because while it has a symbolic representation it also has an imaginary aspect, as well as being perennially constituted by the desire of the Other, whose proper domain is the Real. The barred subject is condemned to be incomplete, and must forever ask the question from the Symbolic projected towards the Real Other: *Che Vuoi?* What do you want (from me)? This question also anchors our guest editor Jerry Aline Flieger's closing contribution to this special issue, though she defamiliarizes the *Che Vuoi* exchange by rerouting or enunciating it in another (alien) "Other's" direction.

What Silhol himself does is to show that over the course of his teaching and thinking Lacan grew dissatisfied with the neatness or triadic—perhaps too Christian—structure of the

Borromean knot. Silhol writes: “Indeed, what is already suggested by Lacan is that there may exist a fourth ring which he seems to think necessary to ensure the coherence and solidity of the whole structure . . . Although already linked to one another in the original model, they are nevertheless said here to be separated from one another, ‘*séparés les uns des autres*’ . . .but with the possibility however to be attached to one another . . . .” It is here that the “*sinthom*” emerges as a fourth “(some)thing.” What is curious in Silhol’s interpretation, and yet what makes it an especially provocative intervention for this special issue, is precisely this quasi-thingliness of the *sinthom*, its near-reification. It is almost an uncanny object that promises the missing link for the subject, finally interpenetrating, *copulating together* the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real as even the Borromean rings did not quite do for Lacan himself.

Virginia Blum and Anna Secor, in their contribution titled “Psychic Space as the Structure of Unconscious Fantasy,” maintain that topological space itself is the thing: the psychic-material surface that constitutes the lived experience of the subject. This of course includes (unconscious) fantasy objects that structure the set of relations configuring the self and its others. Thus the relation between thought and thing, subject and object, is rendered commutative and complex. Subject and object, material reality and psychic reality, are intricately intertwined in topological—rather than topographical--space. Blum and Secor note that while “it is often impossible to know the difference between physical and psychic reality, there nevertheless remains a strong tendency in psychoanalytic theory and practice to separate historical truth from psychic truth.” In contrast, the authors argue for “rethink[ing] the distinction between material and psychic reality in terms of the distinction between material and psychic space. The major historical shift in focus from outer trauma to inner psychic events and the fundamentally scenic structure of memory, especially traumatic memory, lead us to assert that space is a constitutive element of unconscious fantasy and vice versa.”

Blum and Secor’s main example is that of Michelangelo Antonioni’s *The Blow-Up*, a film

that in the authors' description "rejects the priority of the reality principle along with any naïve confidence in evidence uninfluenced by fantasy." One could say then that what is problematized is the *ontology* of "reality," as well as the priority of the reality principle *as principle*. Antonioni's film seems to invert any presumption of the priority of the material over the psychic, by evacuating the material of significance—the photographer in the film seems to be obsessed with locating material evidence of a crime or an affair in the image of the physical "scene" he has captured on film, but in fact there is nothing there. Yet there is his psychic investment in that meaning, which drives him compulsively to look for it as if chasing his own projection of a fantasy. Fantasy is in fact always a topological psychic space we inhabit, as Lacan emphasized. Only occasionally do we notice that it appears to conflict with material space. Topology, the authors clarify, "deals with surfaces and their properties, their boundedness, orientability, decomposition, and connectivity – that is, sets of properties that retain their relationships under processes of transformation." In this way their contribution proposes "to rethink the distinction between material and psychic reality in terms of the distinction between material and psychic space."

In his essay, entitled "The Subject as Contradiction: Atomicity, the Void & the Aesthetic Experience," Alexander Venetis's argument resonates with those of Silhol and Flieger, elaborating as it does the Lacanian account of the subject as organized around a void. For Venetis the subject is explicitly not a thing, not even a thinking thing. In this sense, and especially in the register of the Lacanian Imaginary, (virtual) spatiality is crucial, as it is for Blum and Secor in their contribution to this special issue, though Venetis' argument takes him in a different, if still "topological," direction. For psychoanalysis, the category of the subject is absolutely crucial. Yet that subject is "empty," not a positive thing in the world on its own, whether physically or biologically. Lacan rejects Descartes' "cogito ergo sum," as positing "thinking substance"— the "thinking *thing*," *res cogitans*. Reducible neither to the cerebral

product of neuronal activity nor hypostasized as “flesh,” how can the subject then be even the object of (psycho-)analysis? In Venetis’ account, the Lacanian subject appears through the slits or gaps that open up in the Symbolic; thus the subject here is not ontologically actual, reified, but is rather “inscribed in” the Lacanian Real. Venetis suggests that the register in which Lacan conceptualizes the subject is affect, so that aesthetic representations are privileged. Ironically, as the author also goes on to emphasize, “[t]he appearance of affects through art, which range from ecstasy to beauty to ugliness and even to revulsion and disgust in some cases, is premised on the effect of what Lacan calls ‘the Void’ (*le vide*).” Once again, we are faced with an ontological problematic, but one articulable at the level of aesthetics—or at least a kind of negative aesthetics.

The essays in this special issue are not concerned just with the thing as “Thing” (*das Ding*), associated with the Lacanian *chose freudienne*. Their preoccupation with thingness extends to other forms of “otherness”—and to “the other” in other registers, particularly social and political registers. Thus Gautam Basu Thakur, in his essay bearing the title “‘You Should Pray I Choose the Latter’: Rioting, Violence, & Jouissance,” explicitly foregrounds the extension of the Lacanian category of the other to frame a discussion of rioting and violence in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement’s rise into prominence, but more generally by revisiting the racialized anxiety of the non-white “other” rising up violently to upset the comfortable hegemony of the white man as Symbolic “Other”—the makers of the law, the oppressors who seek to make their oppression transparent or invisible in its very performance. Here the “thing” approaches the status of “*das Ding*”—it is the resurgent abjected other returning to haunt the living. Or, as Basu Thakur himself puts it, “having surfaced as the Thing of unbearable jouissance, the oppressed admits no one as its master and lays waste to everything around.”

Basu Thakur’s main brief is to contest the imputation of a negative spontaneity to rioters (including the BLM movement). This negative spontaneity is the obverse of the ascription of an

“unthinking Eurocentrism” by postcolonialist thinkers, against forms of “Empire” that proceeded on an assumption that Euro-American arrogation of the right to exploit and colonize non-white “races” did not need to be reflected upon, since it was allegedly self-evident. Basu Thakur’s defense of the rioters as rational actors borrows a page from the Subaltern Studies historians’ defense of tribal resisters in South Asia from the charge of a similar perverse lack of rational consideration, indeed an alleged deficit of self-consciousness. This reduction of rioters or subalterns to unthinking bad subjects partakes of a larger racialized calculation, to deny human agency to the marginalized who are perceived as threatening the hegemony of white patriarchy in particular, by portraying them as excluded from membership in the club of *homo sapiens*—and ultimately as no higher than apes or non-human objects because they are unthinking. Basu Thakur cites one source to illustrate this way of seeing: “The rioters are not only looters or anti-socials; they are also ‘like’ animals (‘swarm’), lacking or devoid of humanity, rational understanding, and compassion.” In this logic, they are on the species grid, more *things* than *persons*—and as Basu Thakur writes, “[t]he black body in itself does not matter except as potential for labor which is integral to the functioning of the Market.” The black body is in a word *reified*, made a thing, a resource for the capitalist market to exploit. A crucial dimension of Basu Thakur’s argument is a critique of how such logic participates in the neoliberal defense of Market-State capitalism: “[I]n fact, far from being mindless acts of misguided anomie, rioting can be historically evidenced as the minority’s actions against the Market-State entente.”

But what does this have to do with the special issue’s focus on Lacan? Basu Thakur attempts to clarify by foregrounding the liberal desire for order, which makes liberals strange bedfellows of the reactionaries and conservatives who make no bones about disparaging black rioters’ alleged lack of humanity, their lack of rational subjective agency. What unites them is an investment in the elusive object cause of desire—the *objet a*. That “desire, which is the desire of the Other, as Lacan reminds us repeatedly, is a desire for an impossible fantastic object which,

insofar as the subject can never attain nor finding which can the subject be fully satisfied, implies the subject is forever suspended in desire. By remaining unattainable, and thus holding within it the promise of a fantastic wholesome satisfaction, the object sustains desire and the subject in continuous pursuit of this object of desire. In this context, fantasy ( $\$ \diamond a$ ) rejigs this zero-sum game by offering a solution: fantasy introduces the objet a as the object cause of desire and/or as responsible for creating a barrier between the subject and its desired object.” Again, the *objet a* operates as a “thing,” anchoring but never guaranteeing the possibility of satisfaction of desire, in this political framing, while racist fantasy simultaneously fetishizes the racialized other as the “thing” perpetually threatening to steal the normative subject’s *jouissance*.

Essays in this special issue challenge the presumed sovereignty and even the taken-for-granted substantiality (the supposed “thingliness”) of the human subject, foregrounding the Lacanian emphasis on its barred—incomplete—status. Nick Popow’s essay, “Wounds and Repetition: The Death Drive in the Subject’s Sensorium,” argues that for Lacan “the Subject must be understood in a pre-phenomenological, purely formal sense, as a gap in the signifying chain.” As Popow writes, “the subject in this sense is a prerequisite for the meaning effects that signifying chains generate, but it is not a signifier or ‘content’ concept like any other.” In many strands of thinking it is the “ontological status” of the subject that has been put under erasure. Indeed Lacan himself had insisted that at the center of the Subject is a void, a no-thing. (This is something that Venetis, in his contribution, takes as a premise). How then do we talk about the subject as though it were some *thing* that occupies a space or at least has a place in a world, even if has no actual physical consistency, no “*Gegen-stand*.” We must ask, What is the substance of the subject, What is the “*ontos*” supporting the subject, if indeed we can ask such a Heideggerian question of *being*? Popow suggests that “Lacanian metapsychology attempts to maintain a precarious dialectic between the Subject’s cultural determinations and the intrinsic

ontological features that allow a Subject to be so determinable.” A related question follows: What comes after the subject?, a question that has been a preoccupation of recent theoretical speculation and something to which Popow also gestures in proposing to resist rather than “succumb[ ] to the theoretical illusion that we are in a post-Subject and therefore post-ideological age . . . “ Yet rather than supporting a liberal humanist defense of a stable and sovereign subject, Popow argues “the condition of possibility for the entanglement of subject and ideology goes beyond mere interpellation and is grounded in the death drive.” This requires, as Popow acknowledges, a *paraconsistent* mode of conceptualizing the subject.

Not surprisingly, Popow hails Louis Althusser’s famous critique of ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses to address this question: how to understand the positioning or instantiation of the subject within the matrix of society, thoroughly determined, indeed overdetermined, by ideology. Popow seeks to contextualize Althusser’s critique in the light of contemporary ideological debates, particularly noting that normative white subjectivity is not interpellated in quite the same way as non-white subjectivity, a case in point being the ongoing crisis of Black subjectivity in the U.S. and elsewhere, a crisis that occasioned the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. He also invokes the anticolonial struggle in Algeria. This emphasis on the difference that “racial” difference makes aligns Popow’s approach with Basu Thakur’s.

Christopher Power, in his concise but pointed essay, “Madness in Lacan and Foucault,” also speaks of a certain objectification—loosely speaking a reduction to the status of a thing—that connects conceptualizations of madness *chez* Lacan and Michel Foucault. Power notes that for Lacan, “the conditions of modern life . . . alienate subjects from their speech. The foundation of his science is the living word, and it is always threatened by exhaustion and ossification.” This ossification or objectification is reductive—at once a reification interposed into the living “field” of intersubjective discourse, and an objectification of the subject itself, a

forgetting of the subject within the various “sciences” that Lacan wants psychoanalysis to equal in terms of rigorous method, without losing sight of the subject, without reducing it to an object.

Power argues that “[t]he degeneration of psychoanalytic technique against which Lacan protests is its objectification as an immutable, codified doctrine of established categories. By unsettling psychoanalytic concepts, he returns the practice to the domain of the signified, which is not determined by meanings but rather by effects.” From Lacan’s perspective, Power argues, rather than “treating the analysand’s alienation [conventional psychoanalysis] gives the analysand another vocabulary for forgetting himself and neglecting the specificity of his situation. Lacan’s metaphor registers a paradox: once science is taken for granted it resembles religion.” While Foucault critiques the Cartesian cogito as reliant on a construal of madness as exclusive of being as such, Lacan destabilizes the presumed homeostasis of the commutation between being and thought. For Lacan the subject is not reified as standing, like a physical object, where (and *because*) the subject thinks (“cogito ergo sum”) but being where (or being displaced to somewhere) thinking does not make the subject itself the thing that is thought, and rendered manipulable by thought. *The subject is not merely the thought thing.* Madness is nothing, no thing, and certainly not a mental illness. In this (non-)accounting, madness takes on the form not of an aesthetic *object* but a literary or other aesthetic *disposition* to speech.

Jerry Aline Flieger’s essay, “Uncanny Foreign Objects (*Unheimliche Fremde Objekte*): Lacan’s Close Encounters of the Third Kind,” bookends this special issue. Provocatively, she brings into asymptotic proximity the Lacanian “radical Other” with another other, the alien that is increasingly insinuating itself into the public consciousness (our “species-mind”), though of course other “others” could be invoked: not just the extraterrestrial but also the extranational (the immigrant or subaltern alien for instance). For Flieger the relevant issue is not merely a question of fact—whether UFOs are “real”—but psychoanalytic, a matter relating to the Lacanian “Real,” Uncanny rather than just the Unknown, as she signals in her title by

reappropriating the acronym “UFO”: in Flieger’s reframing, the UFOs now become not simply Unidentified Flying Objects but *Unheimliche Fremde Objekte*.

As Flieger points out, since 2017 the US Government has found it impossible to deny that fighter pilots have encountered such objects in the air, moving at speeds and in ways that are inexplicable by known *physical* laws. Yet what Flieger highlights rather are the *psychical* implications of this radically alien “other”—the uncanny alien object. Her essay is an “apologue” or “apology”—following Lacan—for the alienness of the alien as bearer of an enigmatic message from beyond the Symbolic register itself, and thus uncanny. The enigma is also an apologue for the nature of the Symbolic itself, for all discourse is elusive, “opaque,” prompting the subject to ask, What does the Other want from me—*Che vuoi?* The answer will always be readable only anamorphically, Lacan insists. Yet this is precisely why the *Unheimlich* alien object is crucial to contemplate even though never “domesticate,” make “*Heimlich*.” The *Che Vuoi?* elicited, even provoked, from the subject is to be recognized as what structures the subject as barred ( $\$$ , or *S barré*), counterposed to the object as “barred” from apprehension by the subject, irretrievably opaque—yet simultaneously “*extimate*,” that is to say simultaneously *alien*, beyond reality in some unsymbolizable “Real” with a capital R, and *intimate*, on the earth, or below the face of the ocean. The thing’s alienness is rendered both strange and uncannily familiar. Such a meditation has, as Flieger suggests, implications for the “object” of science as well as poetics. It has entailments for the claim of reason as well as for what once was the ambit, and the gambit, of religion: the “thing”—Lacan’s *chose freudienne / das Ding?*-- at the core of science, reason, poetics and religion, is in the same gesture evacuated and reconstructed. Thus the essays in this special Lacan issue circulate around the thing and compel us to renewed exploration of the object as well as the subject. Their psychoanalytically oriented perspectives open up an intricate topology of routes for such exploration.