

# Of symbolic mortification and ‘undead life’: Slavoj Žižek on the death drive

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## Abstract

The work of Slavoj Žižek contains arguably the most conceptually ambitious re-articulation of the Lacanian notion of the death drive. This paper offers an expository thread joining many of the fragmentary depictions of the death drive in Žižek’s work. I begin by tracing the most counter-intuitive aspects of Žižek’s re-articulations of the concept. Opposing the notions of death drive as biological instinct, cosmic principle, Nirvana-like release, and self-annihilating impulse, Žižek highlights instead the Lacanian notions of repetition automatism, excess negativity, ‘undead’ eternal life, and symbolic mortification. Žižek provides useful applications of a series of related Lacanian ideas – the lamella, the zone between two deaths, and the ethical dimension of the death drive - and extends these via a set of philosophical conceptualizations (self-relating negativity, negative inherence, death drive as non-historicizable). The last section of the paper explores how the notion of self-relating negativity allows Žižek to consolidate the foregoing Lacanian concepts and to understand the death drive as simultaneously reflexive, a-subjective and ‘meta-causative’.

## *Variations on a Lacanian theme*

The work of Slavoj Žižek contains arguably the most philosophically ambitious –and certainly the most colourful – re-articulation of the Lacanian notion of the death drive. There are nevertheless several drawbacks to this work, instrumental as it has been in advancing the philosophical and ethical horizons of the concept. Firstly, though insightful and provocative, Žižek’s many contributions in the area tend to be fragmentary, less than rigorously systematic. Such discussions are scattered across his work, in a series of isolated extracts that allow for no integrated overview and which – not inappropriately perhaps – repeat and revisit key formulas in

an ostensibly unfinished manner. In this respect one frequently has less an impression of progressive conceptual refinement than of Žižek drawing again and again (1989, 1999a, 2000, 2005b, 2006a, 2010, 2014b) on a basic conceptual matrix that was already well developed by the time of his earliest publications in English. At this scholarly level Žižek frustrates our attempts at periodization. In doing so he provides an intimation of a broader theme, namely, that of resistance to historicization, or, more forcefully put, the ostensibly *a-historical* nature of the death drive.

There is a second issue to bear in mind here, and it concerns the characterization of his thought as Lacanian. Žižek is often a more careful and faithful reader of Lacan than he is sometimes given credit for (Owens, 2008), he is also, even as a self-proclaimed dogmatic Lacanian, somewhat adventurous in his philosophical and political deployment of Lacanian concepts. While there is often considerable merit in such extrapolations, it also means that gaps start to open in Žižek's, as opposed to Lacan's, utilization of the concept. The momentum generated in many of Žižek's applications of the death drive sometimes propel the concept beyond the remit of psychoanalysis itself, such that it becomes separated from the interlocking components of the psychoanalytic conceptual field - an argument which cannot easily be made of Lacan's own utilization of the concept. The death drive is not primarily a philosophical concept in Lacan's work, despite being doubtlessly informed by currents in philosophy (such as Heidegger's *being-unto-death*). The opposite often holds for Žižek, for whom the death drive is more typically a broadly philosophical - even metaphysical - rather than a technical psychoanalytic concept. The death drive in Žižek's hands is not one amongst other psychoanalytic conceptual tools; it becomes an ahistorical concept, a pivot in a metaphysical myth of human origins, a veritable meta-concept.

My agenda in this paper is twofold. I offer, firstly, an expository thread joining many of the multiple depictions of the Lacanian death drive in Žižek's work. My aim is thus to ground the philosophical abstraction which is simultaneously such a strength yet also a prospective limitation of Žižek's work. Secondly, although this is not primarily a comparative analysis, I will note a series of apparent discontinuities between how Lacan and Žižek utilise the concept, foregrounding the originality of Žižek's contributions, and how he pushes beyond Lacan at many points. My overview unfolds in three stages. I highlight, firstly, the most counter-intuitive

aspects of Žižek's Lacanian re-articulations. I include in this section a series of references to Lacan's own reconceptualization of the death drive and number of challenges addressed to Žižek's use of the concept. In the second part of the paper I briefly discuss two vignettes drawn from Franklin Shaffner's (1973) film *Papillon*, which prove helpful illustrations of many of the Lacanian ideas in question. In the third section of the paper I expand upon a series of conceptual dilemmas following on from Žižek's mobilisations of the death drive, offering in addition a number of responses to the questions and allegations posed in the first section.

### ***Death drive redux***

"Lacan", says Žižek, "parts with the Romantic ideology of a 'daemonic' self-destructive Will: the death drive is *not* a 'will to die'" (2008, p. 288). This, an example of Žižek's many reversals of received wisdom on the death drive, provides an appropriate departure point for our analysis. Indeed, the best way of orienting one's self to Žižek's Lacanian conceptualization of the death drive is by contrasting it with a number of commonplace assumptions routinely attached to the concept. Four notions in particular should be highlighted in this respect, namely, the death drive: (1) as biological instinct; (2) as cosmic principle, that is, as Thanatos opposed to Eros; (3) as Nirvana-like release of tension; and (4) as impulse to self-annihilation.

#### ***(1) Not of nature: The death drive is not an instinct***

Let us begin with the idea of death drive as instinct, an idea against which Žižek constantly rails. We find a fine example of such an argument in the opening pages of his first English book (an indication, no doubt of the importance of the concept in Žižek's work), the path-breaking (1989) *The Sublime Object of Ideology*:

[W]e have to abstract Freud's biologism: 'death drive' is not a biological fact but a notion indicating that the human psychic apparatus is subordinated to a blind automatism of repetition beyond pleasure-seeking, self-preservation, accordance between man and his milieu. Man is – Hegel *dixit* – 'an animal sick unto death', an animal excoriated by an insatiable parasite (reason, *logos*, language). In this perspective, the 'death drive', this dimension of radical negativity... defines *la condition humaine* as such.... All 'culture' is in a way a reaction-formation, an attempt to limit, canalize – to *cultivate* this imbalance, this traumatic kernel, this

radical antagonism through which man cuts his umbilical cord with nature, with animal homeostasis (Žižek, pp. 4-5).

Rather than the death drive being merely a product of nature, an organic yearning to return to the inanimate, it is posited here – in good Lacanian fashion – as a form of ‘automatism’ generated within the functioning of a symbolic system. Žižek here alludes to Lacan’s (2006a) treatment of the topic in his ‘Seminar on “The Purloined Letter”’ where the death drive is understood as a form of constitutive repetition, indeed, precisely as *repetition automatism*.

It helps, by way of intellectual contextualization, to add a few comments on Lacan’s treatment of the death drive in the mid 1950s. In the ‘Purloined Letter’ seminar (originally delivered in 1955), Lacan castigates those post-Freudians who have dismissed Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and rejected the notion of the death drive. The concept, like Freud’s controversial text, is not, Lacan insists, an add-on, a mere excursion or *faux-pas* in Freudian doctrine. It is, by contrast, a vital psychoanalytic concept “designed to respond to certain paradoxes in clinical work” such as “the dreams found in traumatic neurosis and the negative therapeutic reaction” (2006a, p. 34).

This being said, Lacan at the time often invokes “the death instinct” in a parenthetical way, enclosing the term in scare quotes to indicate he is taking some distance from the notion of death drive *as instinct*. It is clear, nevertheless that the more accurate term with which to describe phenomena of the death drive for Lacan is *repetition automatism* (his preferred translation of Freud’s *Wiederholungszwang*, typically translated into English as *repetition compulsion*). Lacan’s elision of the term ‘compulsion’ is, of course, more than incidental: in his prioritization of the operations of signification Lacan wishes to avoid the overtly psychological overtones of the term. Interestingly though, Lacan does not jettison reference to the “death instinct” for an important conceptual reason. For Lacan, this antithetical combination of terms that Freud has brought together deserves to be understood precisely as an *antinomy* - Lacan uses the definitive article in speaking of “the “death instinct”” as “the antinomy *par excellence*” (2006a, p. 33) – an antinomy which calls attention to the impasses of psychical functioning that clinical work reveals. Lacan thus is simultaneously opposed to thinking death drive naively *as instinct* – something which brings psychoanalytic conceptualization “into the fold of... a general psychology” (p. 33) – yet he wants also to foreground the deadlock (in Lacanian terms, the

‘real’) that the concept embodies, pointing as it does to the irresolvable conflicts within the operations of the psyche.

Lacan goes on to offer a compelling account connecting a cross-section of Freud’s writings to make the point that repetition is – as he will again insist in his 1964 Seminar *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* – an essential notion for psychoanalysis. It is, indeed, for Lacan, an inherent feature of the Freudian notion of the unconscious and the conception of memory thus implied. This idea, claims Lacan, is already present in Freud’s *Project for a Scientific Psychology* which includes a system (the  $\Psi$  system), a precursor of the unconscious, which is “unable to satisfy itself except by *refinding an object that has been fundamentally lost*” (Lacan, 2006a, p. 34). Moreover:

Freud situates himself right from the outset in the opposition Kierkegaard taught us about, regarding whether the notion of existence is founded upon reminiscence or repetition... Freud makes the latter take its decisive step by ravishing [or, *seizing*] the necessity included in this repetition from the human agent identified with consciousness. Since this repetition is symbolic repetition, it turns out that the symbol’s order can no longer be conceived of there as constituted by man but must rather be conceived of as constituting him.... It is because Freud does not compromise regarding the original quality of his experience that we see him constrained to evoke therein an element that governs it from beyond life – an element he calls the death instinct (Lacan, 2006a, p. 34).

Freud is thus credited with having already implicitly known that repetition is fundamentally *symbolic* in nature and that it is *determining* as opposed to *determined by* human subjects. This over-riding form of agency is “beyond life” in the sense that it is the result of the automatism of the symbolic, occurring thus at a fundamentally different level to that of experience. We might note here – anticipating a theme in what is still to come – that the death drive in Lacan’s hands has been de-literalised; Lacan’s notion involves death *in form* (the mortification of the symbolic) rather than in *content* (as relating to issues of mortality, the demise of the organic, the biological, etc.).

All of these Lacanian arguments resonate in the Žižek extract cited above. And yet the elasticity of Žižek's application of the term is nevertheless apparent: the death drive is something, indeed *many* things – a parasite, an imbalance, an antagonism – which enables, or rather *compels*, the subject to transcend the domain of the natural-animal:

How... do we pass from animal sexuality (instinctual coupling) to properly human sexuality? By submitting animal sexuality (its “life instinct”) to the death drive. The death drive is the transcendental form which makes [human] sexuality proper out of animal instincts (2010, p. 305).

Here a first red flag: in this reference to death drive as a “transcendental form”, Žižek declares not only the philosophical ambitions he has for the concept, but its apparent compatibility with, and prospective assimilation within, the ideas of German idealism. Lacanian doctrine surely agrees with the division Žižek draws between instinctual animal sexuality and human drive-based sexuality. That being said, it is hard to imagine the Lacan of the mid 1950s consenting to such a characterization (“transcendental form”), especially given the priority he accords to thinking the death drive – or more accurately, repetition automatism – precisely *not* as transcendental, but as occurring within the symbolic domain, according to operations of the signifier.<sup>1</sup>

Žižek often returns to this topic of the rupture underlying the emergence of the distinctively human:

[T]he passage from ‘nature’ to ‘culture’ is not direct... something has to intervene between the two: a kind of “vanishing mediator” which is neither Nature nor Culture – this In-between is silently presupposed in all evolutionary narratives... the Freudian name for this in-between, of course, is the death drive (Žižek, 2000, 36).

It is interesting that Žižek invokes Freud rather than Lacan here, a tacit admission, perhaps, that in thinking death drive as a type of third term between nature and culture (a more overly Freudian than Lacanian line of analysis) Žižek has departed somewhat from the Lacanian framework he claims to adhere to. Indeed, neither nature nor culture serves as a privileged analytic term for Lacan; his preferred basic analytical categories (imaginary, symbolic and the real) cannot be correlated to, or appealed to as supporting, such an ostensibly dichotomous

pairing. Indeed, given the degree to which Jacques Derrida (1978) lambasts the structuralist tendency (particularly in Levi-Strauss) to rely on such a binary opposition, it is surprising that Žižek utilizes it, even if only schematically, and as a means to draw attention to the apparent efficacy of a third mediating factor.

Staying though with Žižek's emerging argument: the death drive is both the reason why the human animal is fundamentally *de-natured*, never the subject of evolutionary adaptation to their environment,<sup>2</sup> and a 'vanishing mediator', that which enables the transition between nature and culture. More than just this, the death drive, we are told, entails a crucial ethical dimension. In respect of the drive, insists Žižek, "[w]e are at the exact opposite of vitalist biologism", indeed – and here lies one of our explanatory challenges in what follows – "*the status of the drive itself is inherently ethical* (2002, p. 273).

Žižek is certainly on solid Lacanian ground in stressing, firstly, the de-natured quality of the human and a generally 'anti-adaptationist' position, and, secondly, in insisting upon the ethical as opposed to biological status of death drive. But the conceptualization of the death drive as a type of transitioning modality between nature and culture strikes one as at odds with Lacan. (One can argue after all that there is no pure state of nature or culture; these are symbolic categories mapped onto the domain of the real within which no such distinctions can be said to exist).

This philosophical re-working of Freud's death drive also poses a series of subsequent problems. Psychoanalysis, as we know, is a discipline well aware of the charm – and fantasmatic necessity – of myths of origin (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1968). Yet here the concept of the death drive is being called into service as the privileged concept ("the transcendental form") in a psychoanalytic account of human origins. The death drive in Žižek's hands is both a psychoanalytic idea and something more (something which it is, arguably, *not* for Lacan): a type of meta-concept, a grounding quasi-ontological presumption which is afforded explanatory primacy despite itself remaining largely unexplained. More pointedly yet: the death drive functions here as a myth of origins which is deployed as an answer to multiple philosophical and meta-psychological conundrums (the 'denaturing' of the human, the underlying nature and impetus of human autonomy). This is our first challenge then to Žižek's utilization of the

concept: does his version of the death drive not effectively become a master signifier of Žižekian philosophy?

***(2) Against Thanatos: The death drive is not a cosmic principle***

Adjusting “Freud’s own misleading formulations”, Žižek insists that death drive is not to be understood along the lines of a conflict between two opposed forces, but as “the inherent self-blockage of the drive” (2010, p. 305). The factor of the death drive’s own *inner impossibility* proves a formidable conceptual challenge, one to which Žižek characteristically responds by means of philosophical references (often by invoking the idea of self-relating negativity in German Idealism (1999b)). On several occasions he draws on the work of Jonathan Lear – who advances his own critique of the Freudian death drive (2000, 2006) – to argue that the conceptualization of Eros and Thanatos as opposing forces “is a false escape, a pseudo-explanation generated by [Freud’s]... inability to properly conceptualize the dimension “beyond the pleasure principle”” (Žižek, 2014b, p. 122).

The fact that the mental apparatus regularly disrupts its own functioning is not, for Lear (2000), reason to posit a broader, over-arching teleological principle (the death drive). Freud, says Lear (2006), claims to be discovering a new life force, when in fact he is covering over a trauma – an explanatory lapse – In psychoanalytic theory itself. Žižek agrees. The assertion of Thanatos as a cosmic principle and the re-conceptualization of libido as Eros are attempts to sublimate a more traumatic realization (that of the ontological inconsistency of mind, of ‘reality’):

The apparent “radicalization” is effectively a philosophical domestication: the break that disrupts the functioning of the universe, its ontological fault... is transformed into one of two positive cosmic principles, thus re-establishing a pacifying harmonious vision of the universe as a battlefield of two opposing principles... Freud regresses [here] to pagan wisdom (2014b, p. 123).

Lear and Žižek concur: what is labelled (indeed, substantialized) as Thanatos can simply be viewed as the inner inconsistency of the psychic apparatus. More clearly yet, in *Living in the End Times*, Žižek (2010) states:



The “death drive” is not an opposing force with regard to libido, but a constitutive gap which distinguishes the drive from instinct...[such that the drive is] always derailed, caught in a loop of repetition, marked by an impossible excess. Eros and Thanatos are not two opposed drives that compete and combine their forces (as in eroticized masochism); there is only one drive, the libido, striving for enjoyment, and the “death drive” is the curved space of its formal structure (p. 305).

There is little to fault in Žižek’s Lacanism here. Moreover, his use of scare-quotes suggests that – as we have seen in Lacan – he is working with the “death-drive” as something of a parenthetical concept. It indicates, furthermore, that he is reluctant to employ the idea in a way that implies a substantial entity: death drive is rather – and here Žižek adds his own distinctive philosophical touch – a type of negative inherence, “a constitutive gap”, the “curved space” of a structure. This also helps account for why Žižek typically drops the definitive article, rarely referring to *the* death drive, preferring to utilize the concept in a de-substantialised, *non*-definitive – indeed, *non-singular* – sense, such that it can be evinced in a wide number of psychical and philosophical forms and circumstances. We return here again thus to the idea – and here Žižek most certainly is a faithful reader of Lacan – of death drive as *form* rather than content.

Nevertheless, Žižek seems to be playing something of a double game here. On the one hand he insists on the Lacanian axiom according to which there is one drive (which *is* the libido), thereby emphasising the necessarily *psychical* nature of the death drive. In such ostensibly ‘psychological’ descriptions, the death drive *as drive* is clearly characterized as an excess. On the other hand, he is clearly wary – once again, a good Lacanian – of reading the death drive exclusively within such ‘psychological’ parameters and is always ready thus to operationalize the concept philosophically as a type of ontological absence or failure (constitutive gap, inconsistency, radical negativity). This rapid movement between the death drive conceptualized as ‘psychological’ surplus (and/or a type of negative agency) to philosophical theorizations of ontological failure is evident in a number of interviews with Žižek:

[For] Lacan... to properly grasp what Freud was aiming at with the death drive (the fundamental libidinal stance of the human individual for self-sabotaging; the basic idea of psychoanalysis is the pursuit of unhappiness, people do everything possible

not to be happy), is to read it against the background of negativity, a gap as fundamental to human subjectivity... Psychoanalysis in this way is no longer just... a theory of how we can cure certain diseases; it's a kind of a mental and philosophical theory of the utmost radical dimensions of human beings (Žižek, 2013).

Death drive here is read both as a libidinal stance and “the background of negativity”, with little sense of how the relation between the two is to be understood. Žižek puts forward a similar view in his discussions with Glyn Daly:

the human mind presuppose[s] a certain non-economic gesture, a certain failure...[a] fundamental malfunction which cannot be explained in terms of cognitive evolutionism... German idealism and psychoanalysis have specific terms for this malfunction... absolute self-relating negativity [and] death drive [respectively]... In other words, the Freudian notion of death drive is not a biological category but has a philosophical dignity... death drive is...[the] name for this excess of negativity (Žižek & Daly, 2004, p. 61).

Žižek seems to equivocate in these descriptions. Death drive is at once agency *and* absence, psychical attribute *and* excess of negativity. How then are we to bridge these seemingly incompatible descriptions? Although it is always risky to generalize with Lacan – particularly given the huge corpus of still unpublished seminars – we might say, certainly with reference to the Lacan of the 1950's, that this is definitely a Žižekian as opposed to typically Lacanian mode of depicting the death drive. In Lacan's earliest seminars, for example, he is interested in refining the technical concepts of psychoanalysis for effective (and properly psychoanalytic) clinical work, not primarily in extrapolating them for broader philosophical or ostensibly metaphysical types of analysis. We may thus ask of Žižek: is the death drive primarily of the subject – as is seemingly the case in Freud – or does it refer rather to a type of ontological impasse? The same problem is noted by Johnston (2008), who observes that Žižek vacillates between identifying the death drive “either with the gap in the order of being (i.e. the meta-transcendental condition for the genesis of subjectivity) or with the subject itself” (p. 109).

### ***(3) The opposite of dying: The death drive is not Nirvana-like release***

The death drive, argues Žižek, is not to be confused with the ‘Nirvana principle’; it is not “the striving to escape the life cycle of generation and corruption and to achieve the ultimate equilibrium, the release from tensions (1999a, p. 190). For Freud, argues Žižek, the death drive

is not merely a decadent reactive formation – a secondary self-denial of the originally assertive will to power, the weakness of the will, its escape from life, disguised as heroism – but the innermost radical possibility of a human being (1999a, p. 190).

Žižek again defies expectation here, invoking the death drive not in a fatalistic form – as, for instance, a mute psychical determination to die – but as a mode of *human possibility*. In his interviews with Daly Žižek argues that we should read the concept against “the usual inscription of psychoanalysis into the naturalistic deterministic framework...[in which] the human being is controlled by unconscious desires”, indeed, that we approach the death drive as “a name for autonomy” (Žižek & Daly, 2004, p. 135).

Significantly also, the death drive for Žižek must be grasped as a type of *life in excess of life*. Lacan likewise insists that “It is not... a perversion of instinct but rather a desperate affirmation of life that is the purest form... of the death instinct (2006c, p. 263). To elaborate on this let us turn to a lengthy passage – one that occurs repeatedly in varying forms of re-articulation across Žižek’s work – which represents perhaps his definitive description of the death drive:

The Freudian death drive has nothing whatsoever to do with the craving for self-annihilation, for the return to the inorganic absence of any life-tension; it is, on the contrary, the very opposite of dying – a name for the ‘undead’ eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain. The paradox of the Freudian ‘death drive’ is therefore that it is Freud’s name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis, for an uncanny excess of life, for an ‘undead’ urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death... The ultimate lesson of psychoanalysis is that human life is never ‘just life’: humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached

to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things (Žižek, 2006a, p. 61).

It pays, in attending to the foregoing description, to note the particular type of ‘thing’ the death drive is taken to be: eternal life, a repetitive cycle, ‘undead’ urge, uncanny excess, and so on. This contrasts with a series of phrases in foregoing extracts, where Žižek stresses how the a-substantial death drive is akin to nothing so much as a form of self-relating negativity (“constitutive gap”, “inherent self-blockage” (2010, p. 305). The apparent inconsistency of Žižek’s application of the term is again notable. This problem is foregrounded by his use of what can only be an intentionally imprecise phrase. The death drive, we are repeatedly told, ‘*is the Freudian name for...*’ an expression which – stylistic quirk though it may be – avoids more carefully specifying what the death drive actually *is*. One is tempted to come straight out and ask the naïve question: what type of ‘thing’ is the death drive? Is Žižek not hedging his bets by thinking the death drive across such a divergent range of examples (as parasite, compulsion, ‘vanishing mediator’, primal imbalance, etc.), such that it loses all precision as an analytical category (a problem the early Lacan avoids by focussing on the notion of repetition automatism)? More critically yet: is ‘self-relating negativity’ an explanatory cop-out. How, after all, are we to think a ‘negative inherence’?

If the conceptual inconsistency of ‘self-relating negativity’ is not as yet apparent, let us turn to a passage in which Žižek relates the death drive to the unconscious:

The unconscious intervenes when something ‘goes wrong’ in the order of causality that encompasses our daily activity: a slip of the tongue... a failed gesture... However... psychoanalytic interpretation does not simply fill in this gap by way of providing the hidden complete network of causality that ‘explains’ the slip: the cause whose ‘insistence’ interrupts the normal functioning of the order of causal is not another positive entity...it belongs rather to the order of the *nonrealized* or *thwarted* ... that is in itself structured as a gap, a void insisting indefinitely on its fulfilment... The psychoanalytic name for this gap, of course, is the death drive, while its philosophical name in German Idealism is ‘abstract negativity’, the point of absolute self-contraction that constitutes the subject as the void of pure self-relating (2005a, p. 90).

While this makes a degree of intuitive sense – interpretations of the unconscious intentionality behind lapses of speech and action never quite complete the picture – Žižek’s above formulation seems to involve an inconsistency in its characterization. The “nonrealized”, we are told, is structured as a gap. Here, no doubt, we are in the terrain of the Lacanian real, that which we recognize only by effects of irreconcilability, dissonance, non-completeness. Žižek’s subsequent phrase however is puzzling, indeed, grammatically ambiguous. In his description of “a void insisting indefinitely on its fulfilment” (p. 112), it is not immediately clear what ‘it’ refers to. ‘It’ is not the void surely, because the void is presumably precisely a nothingness which must therefore be lacking in agentic force?

Žižek seems to be insisting simultaneously upon a cause – indeed, more than this, a causative order that continually threatens to disrupts psychic life, indeed, that underlines the unconscious work as such – and yet also upon the effective *nonexistence* (or *non-substantial* existence) of such a causative agency. Is the above description not in itself incoherent inasmuch as the death drive here is taken to be simultaneously an absence, a gap, a kind of impossibility and yet nevertheless also something which exercises a force (‘insists’)? Similarly puzzling is “the fulfilment” in question. We are left considering what ‘it’ refers to; does the ‘it’ refer to the void or to the causative agency, or, paradoxically, as it appears, both? While one appreciates that a disruptive form of causality might in some sense be ‘fulfilled’, how is a void to be fulfilled without the void becoming something more than just void, indeed, without the void becoming somehow personified, being made subject, subjectivized?

***(4) The excess of life: The death drive is not an impulse to self-annihilation***

In drawing a contrast with Heidegger’s *Sein-zum-Tode* (‘being-towards-death’), Žižek remarks that for Lacan

the death drive does not relate to the finitude of our contingent temporal existence, but designates the endeavour to escape the dimension that traditional metaphysics designated as that of immortality, the indestructible life that insists beyond death (1999b, p. 211).

Leaving aside the contradiction thus posed – the death drive in the above extracts seems akin both to immortality and *the wish to obliterate immortality* – we should add a few words on what

exactly is implied by 'indestructible life'. What is it then that is within and yet also beyond the stuff of merely organic life?

When Žižek speaks of "an excess of obscene life... a pressure, a compulsion which persists beyond death" (2006a, p.182) he is unmistakably evoking the notion of *jouissance*, that charge of libidinal gratification that inevitably accompanies the death drive. While in many of Žižek's more overtly metaphysical elaborations of the death drive the notions of libido and *jouissance* fall by the wayside, there are moments when these concepts are explicitly invoked. In *The Ticklish Subject* for example, Žižek (2000) explores the difference between attachment and dis-attachment, a distinction that recalls Freud's meta-psychological opposition between life and death drives:

Dis-attachment is... death drive at its purest, the gesture of ontological 'de-railment' which throws the order of Being 'out of joint', the gesture of dis-investment, of 'contraction'/withdrawal from being immersed in the world... this negative tendency to disruption is none other than *libido* itself: what throws a (future) subject 'out of joint' is none other than the traumatic encounter with *jouissance* (p. 289).

This description is followed a few pages later by an apparent equation: "drive equals *jouissance* since *jouissance* is... 'pleasure in pain', that is, a perverted pleasure provided by the very painful experience of repeatedly missing one's goal" (p. 297).

The phenomenon of enjoyment (*jouissance*), remarks Stavrakakis, "reveals a knot between libido and the death drive" (2007, p. 202). *Jouissance* is thus a form of enjoyment that is willing to exceed the parameters of life. As Lacan (2007) puts it in Seminar XVII, "the path towards death is nothing other than what is called *jouissance*" (p. 18), a comment which echoes Freud's earlier observation that "even the subject's destruction of himself cannot take place without libidinal satisfaction" (1924, p. 170).<sup>3</sup> As Rose (1986) puts it in a helpful gloss: all drives are characterized by their aggression, their tenacity,

[i]t is this very insistence which places the drive outside any register of need, and beyond an economy of pleasure. The drive touches on an area of excess (it is 'too much'). Lacan calls this *jouissance* (p. 57).

One appreciates why this aspect of the death drive is not more often affirmed in Žižek's work: stressing the link between *jouissance* and the death drive risks implying that *jouissance* is the *cause* of the death drive, indeed that the death drive is *epiphenomenal* rather than – such is Žižek's apparent implication – effectively 'meta-causative'. So, while Žižek often fails to stress this connection, it seems nevertheless crucial, certainly in bridging philosophical and clinical domains, to stress that the death drive entails just such an economy of *jouissance*. Doing so goes some way to accounting for the repetitive – and indeed *compulsive* – quality of death drive phenomena, something that is not adequately explained by passing reference to philosophical notions of self-relating negativity. In emphasizing the link between *jouissance* and death drive, moreover, one stresses – something of a psychoanalytic imperative – both the necessarily *sexual* quality of drive (and thereby of death drive, all drives being variants on the death drive for Lacan) and the intimate relation between that which is excessive, 'traumatic', and the sexual.<sup>4</sup> To be human in this framework is to be the host of a self-overcoming tendency, a parasitic form of enjoyment, which pursues its gratifications past the thresholds of moderation, health, and, ultimately, the subject's biological best interests. A question arises here however: in stressing the factor of *jouissance*, are we not necessarily grounding the death drive in the body, in the libidinal, in physicality?

Lacan often proves wary of the Freudian notion of libido, certainly in terms of its biologicistic connotations and in view of its proximity to the ego and the imaginary, both of which Lacan clearly treats with considerable suspicion. Nevertheless, in his (1964) Seminar XI, Lacan devises a new – and somewhat bizarre – conceptual figure by way of thematising the relationship between the libido and death: the lamella. Žižek takes up this concept with gusto, describing the lamella as

a weird organ that is magically autonomized, surviving without the body whose organ it should have been... [T]he lamella does not exist, it *insists*: it is unreal... its status is purely phantasmatic. This blind, indestructible insistence of libido is what Freud labeled the 'death drive' (2006b, p. 62).

With this concept Lacan is in effect asking us to imagine the scenario in which libido becomes somehow separated from the body, horrifyingly solidified, 'substantialized' in an uncanny, plastic form. The lamella is thus Lacan's myth of physicalized, indestructible libido. While it

may be cut to pieces, subjected to untold instances of violence, this libido-made-flesh simply reassembles itself, and continues, unperturbed, in its ghastly existence.

With the lamella Lacan seems to be confronting the residual biologism that clings to the notion of death drive, forcing his audience to reconsider the question of the apparent physicality of libido. He is simultaneously outing the biological imagination that has attached to the concept – exaggerating it, sending it up in a nightmarish figure – and sending an important methodological message. Lest we think Lacan has thoroughly abandoned Freud here, it is worth taking note that his mythical postulate in fact takes inspiration from Freud's biological speculations in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where he (Freud) notes "The instinctual forces which seek to conduct life into death may... be operating in protozoa from the first (1920, p. 63). Lacan (1979) thus sees and raises Freud's hypothetical biology with the notion of the lamella, which is

related to what the sexed being loses in sexuality, it is, like the amoeba in relation to sexed beings, immortal – because it survives any division... This... is the libido... qua pure life instinct... life that has no need of organ, simplified, indestructible... life. It is precisely what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction (Lacan, 1979, pp. 197-98).

This is a conspicuous – and image-rich – instance of mythologization in Lacan's work of the period (the 1960's), particularly given that he was moving ever closer to modes of formulation cleansed of imaginary components (such as algebraic mathemes, topology, etc.). Lacan's – and thereby Žižek's – methodological point in respect of the mythical construct of the lamella seems evident: it is only in this way that the death drive should be related to biology, that is, in a strictly *mythological* sense.

A further prospective discrepancy between Lacan and Žižek emerges here. If Lacan's use of the lamella concept is strategic, meant (at least in part) as a refutation of the biological imagination that seems inevitably to accompany the notion of libido, then Žižek (2006) perhaps errs in collecting such literal or 'imaginarised' examples (the creature from the Alien movies, the dismembered hand of Surrealist cinema, Edgar Allan Poe's maelstrom, etc.). Here Lacan is surely influenced by the anthropology of Levi-Strauss, which is to say that the importance of



mythical forms of explanation resides less with the multiple singular examples that seem to confirm a given myth, than with the myth's function of raising a conceptual impossibility to a higher order of impossibility (Leader, 2003). Differently put, the excessive physicality of the lamella dramatizes the 'impossibility' of what is being thought, namely the speculative idea that libido is both simultaneously of the body and somehow more than (the merely biological) body.

All this being said, the lamella myth nevertheless effectively conveys a crucial point about the death drive: it functions not as an impulse towards self-destruction, but rather as indestructible life, as a parasitic 'entity', as a mode of unnatural ('undead') libidinal animation which exceeds what is required of the organism as biological unity. Mari Ruti (2012) offers a series of synonyms that helpfully support this characterization: the 'undeadness' of the death drive should be understood as a type of surplus vitality, an excessive energy, a form of bodily agitation, a 'too muchness'. And to be as clear as possible: to speak of what exceeds the biological is simply to stress that the death drive is apparent in the human tendency to "deviate from patterns of self-preservation and adaptation in relation to its enveloping environs", as Johnston (2008, p. 223) so adeptly puts it. We should emphasize here

the constitutive discord between drive and body: drive as eternal-'undead', disrupts the instinctual rhythm...[f]or that reason, drive as such is death drive (Žižek, 2008, p. 72).

Similarly:

we are dealing with a 'kind of denaturalization' of the natural instinct that inflates it into an immortal passion raised to the level of the absolute (Žižek, 1999a, p. 191).

It is, furthermore, for reason of this 'undead' libidinal animation that drive (and thus death drive) must be understood as 'a-subjective'. Neither psychological expression nor attribute of the subject, drive is instead something in which the subject is caught, "a kind of acephalous force, it is not the name of a subjective attitude: one can only assume an attitude *towards* drive (Žižek, 2000, p. 297).

### *L'entre-deux-morts*

Having uncovered a series of crucial (and typically counter-intuitive) facets of the Lacanian death drive as discussed by Žižek, let us turn now to a cinematic example which will hopefully illustrate aspects of the concept and also link to a series of further elaborations of Freud's *todestrieb*. Franklin Shaffner's (1973) film *Papillon* tells the story of Henri Charriere's wrongful incarceration in the notorious penal system of French Guiana. For the duration of his ordeal Charriere is known simply as 'Papillon' for reason of the butterfly he has tattooed on his chest. That this is an apt signifier soon becomes apparent – this emblem of flight encapsulates Charriere's prison experience for a simple reason: he is tirelessly driven by the compulsion to escape.

Two scenes from the film stand out. After witnessing the sufferings that Charriere (Steve McQueen) undergoes – a debilitating period of solitary confinement, a botched escape attempt with his friend Dega (Dustin Hoffman) followed by a further five years in solitary – we see the dazed Papillon emerging from an underground cell. Unnaturally pale after five years of enforced darkness, emaciated and dramatically aged, the blinking Papillon is something entirely different from the robust figure of Charriere seen in the opening half of the film. He appears – in the well-known Lacanian phrase – to be “between two deaths”. It is, in other words, as if Charriere had already died; this husk of a man with the rotten teeth and snowy beard seems nothing so much as the remainder of Charriere's demise. The fact of Charriere's symbolic death is soon confirmed. Responding to the verbal attack of another prisoner, “Who do you think you are?” Papillon meekly replies: “Nobody”.

Written off as a broken man by the prison authorities, the now decrepit Papillon is transferred to Devil's Island, an isolated penal colony from which escape is considered all but impossible. There, in these relatively improved conditions – there are neither jailers nor cells – Papillon is reunited with Dega. It is initially an unhappy reunion for Dega, who tries to flee from his former friend, wary of what Papillon represents, namely the disruption of the peaceable life that he, Dega, has managed to make for himself within such meagre circumstances. Dega, in obvious contrast to Papillon, is the living embodiment of the pleasure/reality principle: he has foresworn any hope of a life beyond incarceration, and has contented himself in this remote place tending to his garden, feeding his pigs.

Despite all he has gone through, Papillon's desire to escape remains undiminished, and he quickly hatches a wild scheme. Shrugging off Dega's protestations, Papillon plunges off a perilously high cliff-face into the ocean. Clinging to a sack of coconut shells, he begins his apparently suicidal quest, paddling toward the mainland. Then comes the film's second memorable scene: the contorted figure of Papillon – a man who has by now persisted, it would seem, beyond his own death – crying out, "Hey you bastards, I'm still here!"

The achievement of Schaffner's film is that it bypasses the sentimentality that this scene could so easily have elicited. What might otherwise have been framed as a testimony to the tenacity of the human spirit, a celebration of an unquenchable thirst for freedom, takes on here an altogether and more disquieting prospect. In the above scene, we see not a triumph of life or dignity, but something which exceeds both. The figure of Papillon exists at a point beyond identification, in an ambiguous state, simultaneously monstrous and yet nevertheless somehow sublime; an incarnation of a striving, a 'thirst', yes – indeed, a drive – but of a decidedly inhuman and disturbing sort: that of the death drive. The figure of Papillon, in short, encapsulates a series of the above themes (psychical repetition beyond the interests of the pleasure/reality principle, a type of excessive libidinal animation, a paradoxical form of autonomy) and points toward several additional notions (the realm between two deaths) that we will shortly move on to discuss.

### *Symbolic mortification*

We turn now to the third section of the paper, where we extend our survey of Žižek's work and develop a series of responses to several of the critical challenges posed above. In order to do this, we must turn to the most distinctive aspect of the Lacanian theorization of the death drive. I have in mind here Lacan's insistence that the death drive must be understood as a function of the symbolic order (or, the signifier). This conceptualization of the symbolic dimension of the death drive is subject to a series of variations in Lacan's work, each of which is discussed by Žižek (1989, 2014a) (and Ragland-Sullivan, 1992).

As is well known, in the early 1950s Lacan was focused on thinking the concepts of classical psychoanalysis – and, crucially, the role of speech – through the ideas of structural linguistics. In *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* (written in

1953) we have, for example, Lacan's (2006a) insistence upon a "profound relationship uniting the notion of the death instinct to problems of speech", and the assertion that "a rigorous logic governing intellectual productions underlies this joining of forces" (p. 260). Freud's grandson's famous repetitive 'fort'-'da' game is understood not according to "the outdated notion primary masochism", but as an operation of negation: "his action destroys the object that it causes to appear and disappear by *bringing about* its absence and presence in advance" (Lacan, 2006a, p. 262).

This game of repeated negation and reappearance is enabled by a pairing of phonemes ('fort'/'da'). It is thus, following Lacan's logic, linguistic (indeed, *synchronic*) structure that necessarily mediates the experience of loss and that, furthermore, makes death, or death *of a symbolic sort, death via negation*, possible. As Lacan puts it elsewhere: "the negativity of discourse, insofar as it brings into being that which is not, refers us to the question of nonbeing, which manifests itself in the symbolic order" (2006d, p. 316). Or, perhaps more directly yet: "the signifier... materializes the instance of death" (2006a, p. 16). It is worth stressing here that for Lacan "the death instinct... expresses the limit of the subject's historical function" (pp. 261-262). The limit of death here is, as it were, raised to a higher power; Lacan refers thus not to "the end of the individual's life", but to "the subject being understood as defined by his historicity", that is, to the subject within the symbolic realm.

It is in the context of the 'fort'-'da' example that Lacan deploys the Hegelian credo according to which "the symbol manifests itself first... as the murder of the thing" (Lacan, 1977, p. 104). This "murder of the thing" means that the immediate physicality of things comes to be eclipsed by the signifier. Not only are material objects demoted to a level beneath that of the symbolic network; they are relegated in an even more significant sense: the world of unmediated access to things themselves is now lost, irretrievable. The signifier is thus always linked to death for it replaces the world of material objects which "in its immediate, corporeal, reality is annihilated..."; The thing "must "die" in order for its reality to reach its conceptual unity through its symbol" (Žižek, 2014a, p. 74). Lacanian commentator, Adrian Johnston, offers a wonderful formulation in this respect:

insofar as the denaturalization of nature brought about by the sociocultural overwriting of vital being involves the colonization of the living (i.e. the organic

body) by the dead (i.e., the symbolic order), one could say... that human life is lived under the dominance of a lifeless set of cadaverizing signifiers (2008, p. 188).

In Lacan's work of the later 1950s there is a shift from the quasi-phenomenological focus upon the spoken word, to a more structuralist theorization of the 'machinic' operations of the symbolic (Ragland-Sullivan, 1992). His prioritization of the symbolic over the registers of biology and individual human experience – "Man is, prior to his birth and beyond his death, caught up in the symbolic chain" (2006e, p. 392) – picks up notable momentum here. What comes to the fore now is the opposition between the imaginary domain of meaning as experienced by the subject, and the mechanisms of the signifier proceeding apace irrespective of considerations of conscious subjectivity and/or imaginary identifications. So, whereas the imaginary level is governed by the pleasure principle and strives to attain homeostatic balance, "the symbolic order in its blind automatism is always troubling this homeostasis; it is 'beyond the pleasure principle'" (Žižek, 1989, p. 132). In Lacan's own words: the symbolic order tends "beyond the limits of life" and is rejected by "the whole of the domain of the imaginary, including the structure of the ego. And the death instinct is only the mask of the symbolic order" (1991b, p. 326). One might savour this last phrase as an essential piece of Lacanian, emphasizing as it does that the symbolic order is more death-like than (biological) death itself.

According to Žižek (1989, 2014a), a further shift occurs around the time of Lacan's *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (Seminar VII, 1959-1960). In this seminar when Lacan starts conceptualizing the operations of the symbolic order as themselves operating according to the pleasure principle ("the unconscious 'structured like a language', its 'primary process' of metonymic-metaphoric displacement, is s...[as] governed by the pleasure principle" (Žižek, 1989, p. 132)). This means that the symbolic order is always minimally off-balance, destabilized and threatened by the prospect of traumatic *jouissance* that cannot be integrated into the symbolic itself. The death drive, claims Žižek, is no longer to be found *in* the signifier, or within the automatism of the *operations* of the symbolic order. It is more fundamentally to be conceived along the lines of a 'second death', a death of the symbolic, which is to say, of a more complete and total destruction made possible by the symbolic itself. Lacan puts it this way:

If everything that is immanent or implicit in the chain of natural events may be considered as subject to the so-called death drive, it is only because there is a signifying

chain. Freud's thought... requires that what is involved be articulated as a destruction drive, given that it challenges everything that exists... This [destructive] dimension is introduced as soon as the historical chain is isolated, and the history presents itself as something memorable and memorized in the Freudian sense, namely something that is registered in the signifying chain and dependent on its existence (1992, p. 212).

Or, as Žižek glosses the issue, the death drive is

the possibility of... the radical annihilation of the symbolic texture through which...so-called reality is constituted. The very existence of the symbolic order implies a possibility of its radical effacement, of 'symbolic death' – not the death of the... 'real object' in its symbol, but the obliteration of the signifying network itself (Žižek, 1989, p. 132).

This should not be taken as implying a 'non-symbolic' death drive, a death drive that can be divorced from the symbolic frame (that is, from the possibility of symbolization/historicization). As Žižek insists:

the "death instinct" designates the ahistorical possibility that is implied, opened, by the process of symbolization/historicization: the possibility of its own radical erasure (2014a, p. 74).

The death drive here is for Žižek simultaneously ahistorical, outside of the symbolic (it is, after all, the 'transcendent form' which effects the transition from nature to culture), yet it is paradoxically made (retroactively) possible by the symbolic itself. Žižek seems to depart somewhat from Lacan here, emphasising more than the French analyst the ostensibly ahistorical dimension of the death drive. Lacan clearly stresses in his *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1992) that "The death drive is to be situated in the historical domain; it is articulated at a level that can only be defined as a function of the signifying chain", even if, admittedly, such a historical/signifying domain is located as "a reference point...situated relative to the functioning of nature" (p. 211).

While not neglecting this apparent difference – Žižek's more emphatic insistence on the ahistorical – we should turn our attention to grasping the more general implication for the Lacanian death drive. The paradoxical issue of the death drive as at once "outside" the symbolic

(and historical) and yet *not*, might be approached in the following way. If it is only via the symbolic that negation is made possible, then the prospect of a higher order of symbolic destruction is attainable only by virtue of the signifier – the negation of *all* that is. Just as there is no absence in the ‘real’ for Lacan, there is, likewise, no notion of a totalizing whole (‘the all’) that has not been made possible by the symbolic.

Žižek offers a related clarification elsewhere which assists us also in respect of the problem of understanding death drive as type of substance:

The trap to be avoided... is that of conceiving this pure life drive as a substantial entity subsisting prior to its being captured in the Symbolic network: this ‘optical illusion’ renders invisible that it is the very mediation of the Symbolic order that transforms the organic ‘instinct’ into an unquenchable longing... In other words, this ‘pure life’ beyond death... is it not the *product* of symbolization, so that symbolization itself engenders the surplus that escapes it? (2005b, p. 145).

Differences in degree of emphasis aside, Lacan and Žižek converge on this general thesis: that the appearance of an outside of the symbolic (a ‘pure life’ of the death drive, for example) must itself be viewed as produced via instances of signification. This, I would argue, undercuts somewhat Žižek’s appeal to an ahistorical dimension, inasmuch as the very appearance of the ahistorical is itself – certainly for Lacan – an effect of the symbolic (of signification) that is itself historically located (“history presents itself as something... that is registered in the signifying chain and dependent on its existence” (1992, p. 212)). Lacan, in short, – at least in Seminar VII – is far less willing to make sweeping appeals to the ahistorical aspect of the death drive than is Žižek.<sup>5</sup>

### *A higher order of death, or, You only die twice*

The foregoing conceptualizations of the death drive in relation to the symbolic can help us make sense of one of the apparent inconsistencies noted in the first section (death drive as simultaneously a kind of immortality and the impulse to bring this immortality to an end). Crucial here is the aforementioned Lacanian idea of a zone “between two deaths” (Lacan, 1992, pp. 270-287), which necessarily includes the notion of a second or symbolic death. What though are the historical sources of this important concept, and what exactly does it mean?

We find an exploration of this theme in Lacan's (2006f) 'Kant with Sade' (originally published in 1963), where, speaking of Sade's novel *Juliette*, Lacan gives examples of the perverse libertine's insatiable thirst for a never-ending series of torments. As Nobus (2015) puts it in his commentary on *Kant with Sade*,

Despite the horrendous ordeals to which they are being subjected, many of the libertines' victims [in Sade's fiction] are remarkably resilient and, as if transcending the very limits of their human existence, distinctively indestructible... the libertines... prefer to see them kept in a state of beautiful half-deadness or, as Lacan himself had called it following his analysis of Sophocles' *Antigone*, in a zone "between two deaths" (p. 81).

Nobus (2015) identifies a third historical antecedent to Lacan's concept: the doctrine of Pope Pius, which aimed to capture what was designated to capture – as Lacan puts it – the "point at which the very cycles of the transformation of nature are annihilated" (Lacan, 1992, p. 248).<sup>6</sup> The fact of biological death constitutes a merely imaginary death because the matter that remains behind is itself a new form of life which, as Sade puts it in his portrayal of the Pontiff's views, "enriches the soil, fertilizes it, and serves in the regeneration of the other kingdoms" (Sade, 1797/1968, p. 770). The mere feat of physical demise is not, thus, enough for Sade, who, ostensibly following Pope Pius's ideas, insists that "to do justice to Nature's extreme cruelty, one would need to be able to wrest away the 'second life', so that decaying corpses are prevented from re-entering a new cycle of regeneration" (Nobus, 2015, p. 84).

There is some latitude, as Žižek (1989) indicates, in how we might understand the notion of two deaths. We might intuitively imagine, for a start, that bodily death typically precedes symbolic death. In fact, biological death is often an occasion not for symbolic death, but via various commemorative acts, the granting of new symbolic life (indeed, for symbolic re-birth). In this sense, for famous or notorious historical figures, symbolic death is far harder to attain than physical demise. In the case of the marginal and dispossessed, or those – like Papillon, or more famously, the figure of Antigone – who have been removed from society, and precisely *not* consigned to history, a symbolic death typically occurs before actual death.<sup>7</sup>



This adds something significant: the push toward death that seems such an obvious component of the death drive – an association strenuously denied by Žižek in the context of ordinary biological life – *is* still relevant. The death drive *does* after all entail the craving for a type of death, but this is not merely biological death, but death at a wholly different level of ambition:

[W]hat the death drive strives to annihilate is not... [the] biological cycle of generation and corruption, but rather the symbolic order, the order of the symbolic pact that regulates social exchange and sustains debts, honours, obligations. The death drive is thus to be conceived against the background of the opposition between... [the] social life of symbolic obligations, honours, contracts, debts, and its ‘nightly’ obverse, an immortal, indestructible passion that threatens to dissolve this network of symbolic obligations (Žižek, 1999a, p. 190).

We need to read annihilation here in a different key, as aimed not merely at the stuff of life, but at the level of the *symbolic trace*, indeed, – here in foregoing reference to proves instructive - as preventing any possible form of re-birth. It may at first seem difficult to imagine what this might amount to, at least within the terms of everyday – or clinical – reality. Žižek’s (1999a) reference to the tragic figures of Wagner’s operas condemned to infernal immortality prove less than illuminating in this respect.<sup>8</sup> I have opted thus to include a few fragments from a clinical case of melancholia – melancholia being a state in which one bears witness, as Freud (1923) puts it, to “a pure culture of the death instinct” (p. 53) - to elaborate the matter at hand.

### ***Obliterating the (symbolic) trace***

One of my patients who experienced an engulfing sense of depressive anxiety often spoke about his fantasies of suicide. The suicidal thoughts were not distressing; they were, surprisingly perhaps, calming, a source of consolation. The only drawback of such imagined scenes was that they were never absolute enough. They always ran up against a limit: the problem of the bodily remains that would be discovered, and the related and seemingly more significant issue of the symbolic impact of such a discovery. Suicide, he felt, would be inadequate inasmuch as there would always be parts of him left behind, not just his damaged body, but symbolic elements, various traces of his life. (The point can also be made through Lacan’s declaration that “[A]s a

subject, it is through his disappearance that he makes his mark” (2006f, 657)). Death itself, in short, was not enough. We see here an example of how the ambitions of a higher order death exemplifies the death drive as reaching beyond the merely biological. There is perhaps no better example of the death drive than the wish not merely to die *but that one might be erased from history* such that one had never existed at all.

The most effective illustration of this facet of the death drive is, arguably, found not in Žižek but in Lacan, indeed, in Lacan’s allusion, in *Kant with Sade*, to Sade’s last will and testament. In the fifth clause of his will Sade stated that he wanted his body to be buried without ceremony in a ditch, such that

[t]he ditch once covered over... acorns shall be strewn, in order that the spot become green again... [and] the traces of my grave may disappear from the face of the earth as I trust the memory of me shall fade out of the minds of all (Sade, 1806/1991, p. 157).

This wish, apparently accompanied by Sade’s desire that all his physical possessions be destroyed such that his bodily end be followed by the expiration of all symbolic traces of his existence, sheds light on an initially baffling feature presented in the above case of melancholia.

The symptom concerned the extreme difficulty my patient experienced when it came to the acceptance of gifts. Even small tokens of appreciation, an impersonal present from work colleagues, for example, caused considerable discomfort. A far more pronounced crisis ensued in connection with seasonal gifts – something my patient had repeatedly stressed he did not want – from his family. Suffice to say, the unwanted gift, once delivered, precipitated not just conflict but a rift in the family that ultimately proved irremediable. It helps to cite again several of the lines quoted above, so as to press the point home: “the death drive strives to annihilate... not the biological cycle... but rather the symbolic order, the order of the symbolic pact which regulates social exchanges and sustains debts, honours, obligations” (Žižek, 1999a, p. 190). Not only did the patient wish to avoid symbolic debts and reciprocations, he seemed, more importantly yet, desperate *not to leave an impression*. It is not difficult then to appreciate why for some melancholic subjects a deep sense of relief might arise from cutting social and symbolic ties or,

better yet, from somehow dropping out of society altogether; doing so amounts to a type of de-registration from the symbolic.

### **Out of death, *ex nihilo***

Lacan offers a puzzling pronouncement in respect of the death drive in his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* when he insists that the death drive is also “the will to create from zero, to begin again” (1992, p. 212). One begins to realize now how this at first glance implausible comment might hold. The second death, after all is to be differentiated from natural death, it is “absolute death – the destruction, the eradication, of the cycle itself, which then liberates nature from its own laws and opens the way for the creation of new forms of life *ex nihilo*” (Žižek, 1989, p. 134). There is thus a profound connection between death drive and creative sublimation: “in order for (symbolic) creation to take place, the death drive... has to accomplish its work of... emptying the place and thus making it ready for creation” (Žižek, 2004, p. 167). The Marquis de Sade’s final wishes can thus be read as of a piece with – and not contrary to – his aesthetic energies. In this sense, the death drive “is nothing but...[this] notion of the ‘second death’ – the possibility of the total ‘wipe-out’ of historical tradition opened up by the very process of symbolization/historicization” (Žižek, 1989, p. 135-36).

The iconoclastic potential of the death drive (as “total ‘wipe-out’”) pertains not only to the field of creative sublimation; the factor of *ex nihilo* emergence refers equally to the autonomy of the subject. Our earlier description of *Papillon* proves helpful here. By persisting beyond both his own symbolic death and the bounds of the pleasure/reality principle, Papillon ceases to be what he once was. He turns his back on the symbolic (‘big’) Other, that is, on the trans-subjective network of collective beliefs, laws and customs that functions both to bind society and to mediate the stuff of subjective experience.

Whereas the symbolic order had provided a place (a name, a societal role, a viable ‘subject-position’) for Charriere, this is not the case for Papillon. By entering ‘the zone between two deaths’, Papillon eschews both the values and laws of the Other and the role it plays as a symbolic regulatory mechanism in moderating what it is he *wants* (that is, the compulsive drive to escape, no matter the cost). This shift into symbolic death likewise signals a change in *jouissance*; what might otherwise seem extreme, irrational – indeed, what to others would be

almost unbearably painful – is now *enjoyed*. The lethal impetus of libidinal enjoyment is now given virtually free reign; the ‘life’ of symbolic death can be lived (largely) in adherence to drive, beyond the remit of symbolic conventions.<sup>9</sup> As Dawkins points out however, such a subject

does not completely escape the symbolic order, he or she recreates it to satisfy an undying urge to continue: dead but alive; living yet dead. In other words, the death drive is obsession with continuation, not death itself, which is why it is the continuation that is important in conceptualizing the death drive: it is not the cessation of life but its continuation in the form of death (Dawkins, 2015).

The death drive thus entails the prospect of a form of radical autonomy that is not over-determined by the Other, one which is able to ‘recreate’ the symbolic in a way that satisfies such an *undying urge to continue*. It is also in this respect, by crossing the thresholds of symbolic death and the pleasure principle, that Papillon takes on the quality of ethical grandeur, at least in the sense of the Lacanian ethical imperative whereby “the only thing one can be guilty of is giving ground relative to one’s desire” (Lacan, 1992, p. 321). The words with which Žižek praises Antigone – the paradigm of the ethical sublime in Lacan’s Seminar VII because she does not give up a (self-destructive) duty of desire – fit Papillon perfectly:

[Papillon] goes to the limit... ‘doesn’t give way on [his] desire’... and becomes, in this persistence in the ‘death drive’, in the very being-towards-death, frighteningly ruthless, exempted from the circle of everyday feelings and considerations, passions and fears (1989, p. 117).

We understand then in what sense the death drive is for Žižek “the elementary form of the *ethical act*” (1998a, p. 6).<sup>10</sup>

### ***Historicization’s limits***

The idea of symbolic death as enabling a qualified ‘stepping outside of history’ provides Žižek with an argument against modes of critical historicism (typically associated with Michel Foucault’s genealogical critiques) in which any human value can and should be subject to historical re-contextualization.<sup>11</sup> Žižek argues not only that the death drive presents us with the

possibility of a-history – an assertion logically consistent with the notion of symbolic death – but, furthermore, that the death drive is a non-historicizable condition of historicity itself. He relies on two longstanding Lacanian axioms to do so, namely the ideas, firstly, that there is a difference between any symbolic content and the *place* it occupies, and, secondly, that there needs to be an opening of sorts – a lack, a space of sorts – if there is to be any chance of movement or exchange within a given symbolic system. The process of historicization, in short, necessitates an empty space of sorts, around which the symbolic network articulates itself:

human history distinguishes itself from animal evolution precisely because of... [its] reference to this ahistoric, un-historicizable space, which is the retroactive product of symbolization itself... It is reference to an empty space that makes it possible for us to imagine...total, complete annihilation.... The “death drive” is the Freudian name for... the “second death,” it is the possibility for a-history that is opened by the process of symbolization/historicization (Žižek, 2014a, p. 176).

This has important implications for an argument we will pick up shortly, according to which the death drive is not a type of (demonic, deathly) content but – as already intimated – *a form*, and, more pertinently yet, a form of emptiness or ontological incompleteness. To make this argument more readily accessible to a psychoanalytic audience, Žižek invokes the distinction between primary and secondary repression. Every part of repressed content, he stresses, is ‘historicizable’ in the sense that it can – theoretically – be retranslated back into the system Cs/Pcs, everything that is, except the form of the Unconscious itself, the empty place itself that collects repressed content:

This empty place is created by the primordial repression that relates to ‘normal’ repression as a kind of transcendental, a priori frame to its empirical, a posteriori content. This gesture of ‘primordial repression’... whose name is death drive, cannot be historicized, since it is the non-historical condition of historicity itself (Žižek, 1999c, p. 261).

It is in this sense that the death drive designates an opening – an empty frame, in Žižek’s terms – within which the events of historicization can, in effect, take place. The gap that appeared to have opened between Lacan and Žižek in respect of the ahistorical seems now to have lessened.

Insofar as the ahistorical is not a force, a thing (death drive, for example, conceived as positive entity) but is understood rather as the *empty place* within which symbolic activity is made possible, then this dimension of the ahistorical as the void – or site – that makes the history possible, fits with Lacan's (1992) theorization of related issues in his Seminar VII.

### ***The double split: Bifurcated life and death***

What our above reference to Papillion makes clear is that there are – at least for Lacan and Žižek – two related modes of the death drive. This is a fact that easily prompts confusion, and (as in the case of my own earlier comments) allegations of inconsistency in respect of how the term is applied. Sometimes the death drive presents as an excessive libidinal force, as a type of 'unholy' animation which exceeds the parameters of the merely biological. The notion of the lamella provides the perfect illustration of this *deathly (or 'undead') life*, namely that of the denatured, depersonalized circuit of the drive. Yet, in addition to this state of unnatural life ('life' here being qualified in terms of *jouissance*/libido), there is also the state of mortification, of being *dead while alive* ('death' here being qualified in terms of a relation to the symbolic).

What is required then is a reconfiguration of how both life and death are to be understood:

Life is the horrible palpitation of the 'lamella', of the non-subjective... 'undead' drive which persists beyond ordinary death; death is the symbolic order itself, the structure which, as a parasite, colonizes the living entity. What defines the death drive in Lacan is this double gap: not the simple opposition between life and death, but the split of life itself into 'normal' life and horrifying 'undead' life, and the split of the dead into 'ordinary' dead and the 'undead' Machine (Žižek, 2008, p. 112).

Understanding the Lacanian concept of the death drive then requires not the common-sense division of life from death, but the internal division that occurs *within* both life and death alike. We can thus distinguish between being made dead while still alive (the function of symbolic mortification, the cadavarising role of the signifier), on the one hand, and the phenomena of undead life (of libidinal animation), on the other:

For a human being to be 'dead while alive' is to be colonized by the 'dead' symbolic order; to be 'alive while dead' is to give body to the remainder of Life-Substance

which has escaped the symbolic colonization ('lamella')... [W]e are dealing... [here with] the split between... the 'dead' symbolic order which mortifies the body and the non-symbolic Life-Substance *of jouissance* (2008, p. 112).

We have thus a distinction between

the parasitical symbolic machine (language as a dead entity which 'behaves as if it possesses a life of its own') and its counterpoint, the 'living dead' (the monstrous Life-Substance which persists in the Real outside the Symbolic) – this split which runs within the domains of Life and Death constitutes the space of the death drive (Žižek, 2008, p. 112).

The notion of the death drive applies then to two apparently discontinuous spheres: those of symbolic mortification (death in or via the symbolic order) and those where the obscene stuff of enjoyment, the libidinal insistence of drive overflows the symbolic and overruns the self-preservative imperatives of the organism (a type of *deathly – or 'undead' - life*). This goes some way to addressing our earlier concerns in respect of how Žižek invoked the death drive simultaneously as excessive libidinal 'substance' (*jouissance*) and as form of negativity (the mortification imposed by the symbolic). The dual location of the death drive is also thus illuminated, that is, the fact that the death drive is both (as libidinal force) *of* the subject, and 'psychical' as such, yet also of the broader ontological realm more generally.

Importantly also, Žižek emphasizes that death drive is not a thing or an objective property – certainly not any kind of biological substrate – but, precisely *a space*, a gap that opens within both of the related ontologies of life and death. In short, the states of both life and death are thus problematized: organic life is, in the human subject, always subject to symbolic mortification, just as biological vitality is always subject to the deathliness of the drive. This enables us to respond to our earlier question about the ontological nature of the death drive: death drive does not itself attain a clear ontological status, but is rather the result of the ontological incompleteness of both life and death. How though are we to go about thinking of the death drive in this thoroughly de-substantialized sense – in terms of which the death drive as positive entity can be said not to exist – without resorting to philosophical formulations ('self-relating negativity', 'negative inherence') which seem to beg, rather than provide, further explanation?

### *'The death drive does not exist'*

Support for such a de-substantializing approach to the death drive is to be found in a source we have already cited, namely Lear's (2000, 2006) critique of the Freudian death drive. Lear argues that Freud errs in postulating a death drive to account for the breakdowns in the operations of the pleasure principle. More particularly, in respect of the idea of a compulsion to repeat, Lear (2000) asks:

Why... consider the compulsion to repeat a compulsion *to* repeat?... [T]o talk of a compulsion *to* repeat is to suggest that the aim or the point of the compulsion is to produce a repetition... it is implicitly to import a teleological assumption... On the contrary, there is a more austere hypothesis that better fits the evidence: that the mind has a tendency to disrupt itself, that these disruptions are not *for* anything – they are devoid of purpose (p. 77).

It is not so much that humans are possessed of an elemental insistence of repetition, argues Lear. It is rather that the mental effort to fashion meaning from meaningless disruptions – such as external trauma or internal self-disruptions – simply malfunctions. We can, accordingly, “sketch a picture of the mind that is functioning with an inherent tendency toward disruption – and not thereby commit ourselves to that disruption's being the expression of an overarching principle” (Lear, 2000, p. 107). One might allow then the possibility of mind as a “self-disrupting organism” existing “in conditions of excess” (p. 112), without requiring any over-arching principle by way of explanation. Impasses and failures in psychical functioning, do not, in other words, need to be accounted for in terms of the imposition of an external ‘demonic’ force (death drive, for instance, as instinctual/organic impetus); such breakdowns may be inherent to psychical functioning as such. While there are, of course, important differences in the arguments advanced by the two philosophers – Žižek notably *does* wish to retain the death drive as an explanatory principle whereas Lear does not – their arguments do harmonize in refuting the ‘positivization’ of the death drive seen as a substantial or stand-alone entity.

None of this is to say that the death drive may not *appear* precisely as a type of intrusion, as a kind of disruptive content. An example of sorts helps to make the point. When CD-burning software first became available, I spent a lot of time duplicating CDs, only to be frustrated by the



results. In many instances the copied album's sound was imperfect, blighted by a low-level ticking noise, by 'specks' in the audio track. While these disruptions sounded like marks, like an imposed and unwanted additional layer of sound, they were not 'positive' sounds at all – they were nothing more than gaps in information, the result of the inefficiency of the copying software.

Analogously then, the death drive is just such a (ontological) gap enlarged until it seems to be a thing itself, a type of content. We might extend the analogy: one can imagine that the imperfections of the duplicating software deteriorate further and further, until, after many uses, the blemishes in the sound become so pronounced and prominent as to almost completely obliterate the content. While it would be difficult not to hear the noise of such disruptions as a substantive something – akin perhaps to scratches on vinyl – such noises would in fact be nothing more than the imperfections and breakdowns inherent in the system of reproduction itself. Or, to return to Žižek's argument in respect of death drive as the very possibility of historicization, we can reiterate that the death drive does not exist *as content*, but rather as the form of ontological incompleteness.

***'Self-relating negativity': On the agency, cause and reflexivity of the drive***

We have covered a considerable amount of conceptual ground since the opening pages of this essay, posing and responding to a series of critical challenges to Žižek's numerous portrayals of the death drive. Yet at least three crucial issues remain. We have seen, firstly, how the death drive may be taken as negative inherence, a type of 'active nothing' or, more precisely, an instance of "the self-disruption of substance... its inner malfunctioning" (Johnston, 2008, p. 189)). This theorization, philosophically elegant as it may be, does not quite do justice to the *self-sabotaging quality* of the death drive so evident in Freud's (1920) discussion of the negative therapeutic reaction. Such an approach seems not, in other words, to account for the agency so frequently attributed to the drive, that is, to explain the drive as *libidinal force*.

A second consideration relates to my argument that that the death drive functions as a grounding quasi-ontological presumption in Žižek's philosophy, a virtual psychoanalytic 'myth of origins'. We have seen that the death drive is tantamount to a type of 'supra-agency' in Žižek's work, both in the sense that it is capable of over-riding other forms of agency (such as

the pleasure/reality principle) and in the sense that it is not subject to other orders of causality. The death drive could thus be said to be ‘meta-causative’; it is, for Žižek, after all, the ‘conceptual form’ mediating the transition of the subject from Nature to Culture. A causative dilemma comes to the fore here. For if it is the case that the death drive is ‘meta-causative’ in the sense just described, then it (the death drive) must – paradox notwithstanding – *contain within itself its own origin*.

A third and final concern must also be voiced here. I cited above Žižek’s puzzling account of the death drive as ‘the fulfilment of the void’, a description that implies a counter-intuitive order of reflexivity. And yet the idea of reflexivity cannot work here, surely, given that the drive as such is, as Žižek so often tells us, ‘headless’, a-subjective? The most direct means of unlocking these three inter-related dilemmas – of the agency, the causation and the reflexivity of the drive – involves the idea of the drive’s inner impossibility. It requires, more to the point, engaging the death drive *as drive*.

To appreciate the specificity of the concept of the drive, we need, firstly, to distinguish drive from desire:

[D]esire concerns the gap that forever separates it from its object, it is about the lacking object; drive, by contrast takes the lack itself as object, finding a satisfaction in the circular movement of missing satisfaction itself (Žižek, 2015b, pp. 372-373).

Two points should immediately be stressed here: firstly, drive is object-less, and, secondly, it entails satisfaction (indeed, *jouissance*) at its own failure (an idea of obvious relevance to the self-sabotaging aspect of the death drive and the prospect of the drive’s reflexivity.) Žižek frequently revisits this distinction – something of a conceptual imperative within Lacanian theory – in ways that stress the inherent deathliness of the drive:

[T]he weird movement called “drive” is not driven by the “impossible” quest for the lost object; *it is a push to directly enact the “loss” – the gap, cut, distance – itself....* drive is not an infinite longing for the Thing which gets fixated onto a partial object; “drive” IS this fixation itself in which resides the “deathly” dimension of every drive (Žižek, 2009, p. 229).

So, in the case of desire, there is invariably something of the object at play, an object that the subject wishes – via a series of metonymic displacements – to reclaim. (We can see in this respect how Papillon has made the transition from desire to drive: what motivates his near-suicidal leap into the ocean in his final escape attempt is no longer a displaced desire for an object – the desire, say, to return to some version of home – but a circular, unending fixation with a repeatedly failed act which by now has eclipsed the object altogether.) Drive, by contrast, is the libidinal stuckness that occurs *en route* to the ostensible object of desire, which, in the final analysis, is wholly dispensable.<sup>12</sup>

It is, furthermore, in the action of the drive that a *denatured* element appears: “We become ‘humans’” states Žižek (2008) “when we get caught into a closed, self-propelling loop of repeating the same gesture and finding satisfaction in it” (p. 63).<sup>13</sup> The factor of human emergence must be stressed here: the specifically human dimension arises “when a mere by-product is elevated into an autonomous aim... [M]an perceives as a direct goal what for the animal has no intrinsic value” (Žižek, 2008, p. 61). Given then that drive is a compulsion to continue, to *not* attain its ostensible object, then we appreciate how failure is a crucial part of its economy. This libidinal factor – that is, the compulsion to enjoy – helps us understand something about both the force (the agency) and the self-thwarting quality of the death drive. What had seemed an inconsistency regarding the exact nature of the death drive is (i.e. ontological impasse or libidinal urge) is, furthermore, easier now to grasp. These two factors must be understood in tandem. Indeed, they are necessarily interwoven in the sense that a given failure itself becomes libidinated, a source of *jouissance*. In his interviews with Glyn Daly Žižek uses the example of the ‘fort’/’da’ game discussed above. Something here has gone wrong, says Žižek: the child’s mother is absent, and symbolization is the (failed) means of restitution through which the loss is both enacted and repetitively ‘enjoyed’ (Žižek & Daly, 2004).

How though to grasp the cause – indeed, the origin – of the death drive? Well, in light of the above discussion, we can argue that the drive does not need an origin, certainly not in the sense of an originating object or any activity or process beyond the sphere of its own activity. All that drive requires is failure – particularly perhaps of a minimally traumatic sort – that then becomes gratifyingly rearticulated. It is precisely in this way that we should read the otherwise philosophically abstract notion of self-relating negativity, that is, via the role of a type of

mediating *jouissance*. Žižek makes much the same point – touching also on the apparent reflexivity of the drive – In his description of the logical pre-history of the drive:

drives are... not simply happy self-enclosed circular movements that generate pleasure; their circular movement is a repeated failure, a repeated attempt to encircle some central void. What this means is that the drive is not a primordial fact... what logically precedes the drive is the ontological failure – the thwarted movement towards a goal, some form of radical ontological negativity – and the basic operation of the drive is to find enjoyment in the very failure to reach full enjoyment (2014b, p. 206).

Toward the beginning of this essay I discussed – somewhat incredulously – Žižek’s idea that the death drive entailed ‘the fulfilment of the void’. This, I suggested, was a puzzling formulation that implied a type of subjectivization, the prospect, that is to say, of the emergence of the subject. It now becomes apparent that my musings may have inadvertently hit the mark. This becomes easier to understand now that we appreciate that the drive is at once a-subjective (‘acephalous’) and yet, via the impetus of the enjoyment it incurs, also a mediator between the not-yet-subject and the subject (or, the *instinctual* and the properly *human*). Bruce Fink develops just such an argument in insisting that “the drives involved in compulsive repetition of the traumatic... seek to insert the subject in some way, to bring the subject into being where formerly there had been no subject” (2014, p. 62). Of the multiple paradoxes and logical reversals that we have encountered in this critical overview of Žižek’s Lacanian re-articulations of the death drive, this is perhaps both the most challenging and also the most crucial: the idea that the death drive is the ‘self-relating negativity’ that in effect constitutes the subject as such.

### **Conclusion: Re-marking the death drive**

There is of course more that could be said in tracing the historical development of the death drive concept – from the biological and clinical parameters of Freud’s initial conceptualization to the linguistic and symbolic dimensions of Lacan’s reconceptualization (as epitomised in his emphasis on the notions of repetition automatism and the zone between two deaths, respectively), and on to the deployment of the concept as something of a master signifier in Žižek’s philosophical thought, where it becomes a “mental and philosophical theory of the utmost radical dimensions of human beings” (Žižek, 2003). A case in point is the topic with

which I have ended, that is, the issue of the death drive's role in the realization of the Lacanian/Žižekian subject, a topic that is itself surely deserving of a more developed discussion elsewhere.

While Žižek seems to revel in the paradoxical and self-contradictory nature of the death drive, I have tried to show that many of the inconstancies can be accounted for by a gradual piecing together of Žižek's many scattered comments and discussions pertaining to the concept. It can of course be claimed that this does injustice to the concept, which, as Lacan so often stressed, is of necessity at odds with itself, "a relation of polar opposites" (2006c p. 261), a "dialectical negativity... inscribed in the life forces... taken up in man" (2006b, p. 116). It could be alleged that my overview is reluctant to accept that Žižek's understanding of the death drive is distinctly contradictory. It could similarly be said that I have remained at pains to try and make sense of multiple accounts that have emerged in varying periods and different contexts of Žižek's work, treating them as if they were themselves immune to intermittent eruptions of the death drive. I hold a different position. If a form of the death drive is at work in Žižek's many re-articulations of the death drive, it is more akin to a form of repetition which itself represents an apparent standing outside of history such that even in Žižek's more Hegelian and philosophical extrapolations of the term, we can still discern a type of insistent remarking of the same Lacanian conceptual co-ordinates.

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<sup>1</sup> Lacan offers a comment in Seminar II (1988b) which supports such a reading. Speaking of matters of issues pertaining to the death drive, he notes that “this isn’t simply Freudian metaphysics” (p. 24).

<sup>2</sup> The death drive thus becomes a crucial pivot in Lacan’s anti-adaptationist stance (see Van Haute, 2002), which, incidentally, is one of the reasons that the Lacanian subject cannot be considered – certainly for Lacan – in any way a *psychological* subject.

<sup>3</sup> Freud, not incidentally, makes a similar remark in *Civilization and its Discontents*, maintaining there that the death drive “eludes our perception...unless it is tinged with eroticism” (p. 120).

<sup>4</sup> We should signal a crucial Freudian antecedent to these ideas. In his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud (1905) calls attention to the intimate connection between sexual arousal and disturbing affect:

[I]ntense affective processes, including even terrifying ones, trench upon sexuality... The sexually exciting effects of many emotions which are in themselves unpleasurable... feelings of apprehension, fright or horror, persist in a great number of people throughout their adult life (1979, p. 123).

<sup>5</sup> It is notable here also that whereas Lacan often explicitly links the historical domain and the signifying chain (1992, pp. 211-12, for example), referring even in one instance to “the historical chain”, Žižek tends to avoid such an automatic association, leaving open, more markedly than the Lacan of the late 1950’s, the possibility that the symbolic and the historical may be disassociated.

<sup>6</sup> Nobus (2015) stresses that the term ‘*seconde mort*’ does not appear in Pope Pius’s discourse (which makes mention only of a ‘*seconde vie*’), noting that

“One could...credit Lacan with having invented the notion, were it not for the fact that it had already appeared in the Bible...[in] *Revelation[s]* (Chapter 20, 6 and Chapter 21, 8):... “the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers....and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire...: which is the second death” (p. 86).

<sup>7</sup> It is hard miss the political resonance of such terms: those condemned to live in the context of symbolic non-existence, be they Fanon’s ‘wretched of the earth’, those invoked by Agamben’s ‘bare life’ or Butler’s ‘ungrieveable lives’, are almost invariably those who are politically oppressed.

<sup>8</sup> *Apropos* Wagnerian characters condemned to a fate of eternal suffering, Žižek asks, “Where is the death drive here? It does *not* reside in a simple longing to die, to find peace in death, but in a desperate endeavour to escape the clutches of their ‘undead’ eternal life, of their horrible wandering around in guilt and pain...” (1999b, p. 211).

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<sup>9</sup> We should be wary here of implying that, even in such circumstances, a state of pure drive exists. As Fink (2014) argues: “It is perhaps only in the case of autism that something like a “pure drive” can be observed” (p. 59). Then again is it not also true that the unswayable determination of a figure like Papillon can be reasonably described in just such a way, as ‘autistic’?

<sup>10</sup> The ethical here entails a ‘stepping outside of history’, and in a double sense. Not only are such sublime figures (Papillon, Antigone) ‘exempted’ from symbolic (and thereby historical) registration in the sense discussed above, they also - paradoxically enough – become, at least potentially, immortal figures, figures who transcend their historical circumstances to embody the universal case of those who have suffered similar fates.

<sup>11</sup> Copjec’s (1994) *Read my Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* provides an adroit encapsulation of a series of related debates.

<sup>12</sup> This ‘stuckness’, along with its inherent failure (to attain its putative object) is what underlies the ethical dimension of the drive and death drive alike for Žižek. As his concluding comments in *For They Know Not What They Do* attest:

*the status of the drive itself is inherently ethical...the image that most appropriately exemplifies drive is not “blind animal thriving” but the ethical compulsion to mark repeatedly... a lost Cause...[This is] the drive: the compulsion to encircle again and again the site of the lost Thing, to mark it in its very impossibility...the embodiment of the drive...in its most elementary [is] the tombstone which marks the site of the dead (2000, p. 273).*

<sup>13</sup> Or, in more elementary terms, we might imagine

an individual trying to perform some simple manual task – say, grab an object which repeatedly eludes him: the moment he changes his attitude, starting to find pleasure in just repeating the failed task, squeezing the object which, again and again, eludes him, he shifts from desire to drive (Žižek, 2008, p. 7).