

# LACAN BETWEEN CULTURAL STUDIES AND COGNITIVISM

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

## I. CULTURAL STUDIES VERSUS THE "THIRD CULTURE"

### THE STRUGGLE FOR INTELLECTUAL HEGEMONY

We are witnessing today the struggle for intellectual hegemony — for who will occupy the universal place of the "public intellectual" — between postmodern-deconstructionist cultural studies and the cognitivist popularizers of "hard" sciences, that is, the proponents of the so-called "third culture." This struggle, which caught the attention of the general public first through the so-called "de Man affair" (where opponents endeavored to prove the proto-Fascist irrationalist tendencies of deconstruction), reached its peak in the Sokal-*Social Text* affair. In cultural studies, "theory" usually refers to a mixture of literary/cinema criticism, mass culture, ideology, queer studies, and so on. It is worth quoting here the surprised reaction of Dawkins:

I noticed, the other day, an article by a literary critic called "Theory: What Is It?" Would you believe it? "Theory" turned out to mean "theory in literary criticism."...The very word "theory" has been hijacked for some extremely narrow parochial literary purpose — as though Einstein didn't have theories; as though Darwin didn't have theories.<sup>1</sup>

Dawkins is here in deep solidarity with his great opponent Stephen Jay Gould, who also complains that "there's something of a conspiracy among literary intellectuals to think they own the intellectual landscape and the reviewing sources, when in fact there are a group of nonfiction writers, largely from sciences, who have a whole host of fascinating ideas that people want to read about."<sup>2</sup> These quotes clearly stake the terms of the debate as the fight for ideological hegemony in the precise sense this term acquired in Ernesto Laclau's writings: the fight over a particular content that always "hegemonizes" the apparently neutral universal term. The third culture comprises the vast field that reaches from the evolutionary theory debate (Dawkins and Dennett versus Gould) through physicists dealing

with quantum physics and cosmology (Hawking, Weinberg, Capra), cognitive scientists (Dennett again, Marvin Minsky), neurologists (Sacks), the theorists of chaos (Mandelbrot, Stewart), authors dealing with the cognitive and general social impact of the digitalization of our daily lives, up to the theorists of auto-poetic systems who endeavor to develop a universal formal notion of self-organizing emerging systems that can be applied to “natural” living organisms and species as well as social “organisms” (the behavior of markets and other large groups of interacting social agents). Three things should be noted here: (1) as a rule, we are not dealing with scientists themselves (although they are often the same individuals), but with authors who address a large public in such a way that their success outdoes by far the public appeal of cultural studies (suffice it to recall the big bestsellers of Sacks, Hawking, Dawkins and Gould); (2) as in the case of cultural studies, we are not dealing with a homogenized field, but with a rhizomatic multitude connected through “family resemblances,” within which authors are often engaged in violent polemics, but where interdisciplinary connections also flourish (between evolutionary biology and cognitive sciences, and so on); (3) as a rule, authors active in this domain are sustained by a kind of missionary zeal, by a shared awareness that they all participate in a unique shift in the global paradigm of knowledge.

As a kind of manifesto of this orientation, one could quote the “Introduction” to *The Third Culture: Beyond the Scientific Revolution*, in which the editor (John Brockman) nicely presents the large narrative that sustains the collective identification of the various scientists interviewed in the book.<sup>3</sup> According to Brockman, back in the ‘40s and ‘50s, the idea of a public intellectual was identified with an academic versed in “soft” human (or social) sciences who addressed issues of common interest, took a stance on the great issues of the day and thus triggered or participated in large and passionate public debates. What then occurred, with the onslaught of “French” postmodern deconstructionist theory, was the passing of that generation of public thinkers and their replacement by “bloodless academics,” that is, by cultural scientists whose pseudo-radical stance against “power” or “hegemonic discourse” effectively involves the growing disappearance of direct and actual political engagements outside the narrow confines of academia, as well as the increasing self-enclosure in an elitist jargon that precludes the very possibility of functioning as an intellectual engaged in public debates. Happily, however, this retreat of the “public intellectual” was counteracted by the surge of the third culture, by the emergence of a new type of public intellectual, the third culture author, who, in the eyes of the general public, more and more stands for the one “supposed to know,” trusted to reveal the keys to the great secrets that concern us all. The problem is here again the gap between effective “hard” sciences and their third culture ideological proponents who elevate scien-

tists into subjects supposed to know, not only for ordinary people who buy these volumes in masses, but also for postmodern theorists themselves who are intrigued by it, “in love with it,” and suppose that these scientists “really know something about the ultimate mystery of being.” The encounter here is failed. No, popular third-culturalists do *not* possess the solution that would solve the crisis of cultural studies; they do not have what cultural studies is lacking. The love encounter is thus failed: the beloved does not stretch his or her hand back and return love.

### **THE “THIRD CULTURE” AS IDEOLOGY**

It is thus crucial to distinguish here between science itself and its inherent ideologization, its sometimes subtle transformation into a new holistic “paradigm” (the new code name for “world view”). A series of notions (complementarity, anthropic principle, and so on) are here doubly inscribed, functioning as scientific *and* ideological terms. It is difficult to effectively estimate the extent to which the third culture is infested with ideology. Among its obvious ideological appropriations (but are they merely secondary appropriations?) one should, again, note at least two obvious cases: first, the often present New Age inscription, in which the shift in paradigm is interpreted as an advance beyond the Cartesian mechanistic-materialist paradigm toward a new holistic approach that brings us back to the wisdom of ancient Oriental thought (the Tao of physics, and so on). Sometimes, this is even radicalized into the assertion that the scientific shift in the predominant paradigm is an epiphenomenon of the fact that humanity is on the verge of the biggest spiritual shift in its entire history, that we are entering a new epoch in which egoistic individualism will be replaced by a transindividual cosmic awareness. The second case is the “naturalization” of certain specific social phenomena, clearly discernible in so-called cyber-revolutionism, that relies on the notion of cyberspace (or the Internet) as a self-evolving “natural” organism; the “naturalization of culture” (market, society, and so on as living organisms) overlaps here with the “culturalization of nature” (life itself is conceived as a set of self-reproducing information — “genes are memes”). This new notion of life is thus neutral with respect to the distinction between natural and cultural (or “artificial”) processes — the Earth (as Gaia) as well as the global market both appear as gigantic self-regulated living systems whose basic structure is defined in terms of the process of coding and decoding, of passing information, and so on. So, while cyberspace ideologists can dream about the next step of evolution in which we will no longer be mechanically interacting “Cartesian” individuals, in which individuals will cut their substantial links to their bodies and conceive of themselves as part of the new holistic mind that lives and acts through them, what is obfuscated in such direct “naturalization”

of the Internet or market is the set of power relations — of political decisions, of institutional conditions — within which “organisms” like the Internet (or the market, or capitalism) can only thrive. We are dealing here with an all too fast metaphoric transposition of certain biological-evolutionist concepts to the study of the history of human civilization, like the jump from “genes” to “memes,” that is, the idea that not only do human beings use language to reproduce themselves, multiply their power and knowledge, and so on, but also, at perhaps a more fundamental level, language itself uses human beings to replicate and expand itself, to gain a new wealth of meanings, and so on.

The standard counter-argument cultural studies’ proponents make to third culture criticism is that the loss of the public intellectual bemoaned in these complaints is effectively the loss of the traditional type (usually white and male) of modernist intellectual. In our postmodernist era, that intellectual was replaced by the proliferation of theoreticians who operate in a different mode (replacing concern with one big issue with a series of localized strategic interventions) and who effectively do address issues that concern the public at large (racism and multiculturalism, sexism, how to overcome the Eurocentrist curriculum, and so on) and thus trigger public debates (like the “political correctness” or sexual harassment controversies). Although this answer is all too easy, the fact remains that themes addressed by cultural studies do stand at the center of public politico-ideological debates (hybrid multiculturalism versus the need for a close community identification, abortion and queer rights versus Moral Majority fundamentalism, and so on), while the first thing that strikes one apropos of the third culture is how their proponents, busy as they are clarifying the ultimate enigmas (“reading the mind of God,” as Hawking was once designated), silently pass over the burning questions that effectively occupy the center stage of current politico-ideological debates.

Finally, one should note that, in spite of the necessary distinction between science and ideology, the obscurantist New Age ideology is *an immanent outgrowth of modern science itself* — from David Bohm to Fritjof Capra, examples abound of different versions of “dancing Wu Li masters,” teaching us about the Tao of physics, the “end of the Cartesian paradigm,” the significance of the anthropic principle and holistic approach, and so on.<sup>4</sup> To avoid any misunderstanding, as an old-fashioned dialectical materialist, I am ferociously opposed to these obscurantist appropriations of quantum physics and astronomy. These obscurantist sprouts, I believe, are not simply imposed from outside, but function as what Louis Althusser would have called a “spontaneous ideology” among scientists themselves, as a kind of spiritualist supplement to the predominant reductionist-proceduralist attitude of “only what can be precisely defined and measured counts.” What is much more worrying than cultural studies’ “excesses” are the New Age obscurantist

appropriations of today's "hard" sciences that, in order to legitimize their position, invoke the authority of science itself ("today's science has outgrown the mechanistic materialism and points toward a new spiritual holistic stance..."). Significantly, the defenders of scientific realism (like Brichmont and Sokal) only briefly refer to some "subjectivist" formulations of Heisenberg and Bohr that can give rise to relativist/historicist misappropriations, qualifying them as the expression of their author's philosophy, not part of the scientific edifice of quantum physics itself. Here, however, problems begin: Bohr's and Heisenberg's "subjectivist" formulations are not a marginal phenomenon, but were canonized as "Copenhagen orthodoxy," that is, as the "official" interpretation of the ontological consequences of quantum physics. The fact is, the moment one wants to provide an ontological account of quantum physics (which notion of reality fits its results), paradoxes emerge that undermine standard common sense scientific objectivism. This fact is constantly emphasized by scientists themselves, who oscillate between the simple suspension of the ontological question (quantum physics functions, so do not try to understand it, just do the calculations...) and different ways out of the deadlock (Copenhagen orthodoxy, the Many Worlds Interpretation, some version of the "hidden variable" theory that would save the notion of a singular and unique objective reality, like the one proposed by David Bohm, which nonetheless involves paradoxes of its own, like the notion of causality that runs backwards in time).

The more fundamental problem beneath these perplexities is: can we simply renounce the ontological question and limit ourselves to the mere functioning of the scientific apparatus, its calculations and measurements? A further impasse concerns the necessity to somehow relate scientific discoveries to everyday language, to translate them into it. It can be argued that problems emerge only when we try to translate the results of quantum physics back into our common sense notions of reality. But is it possible to resist this temptation? All these topics are widely discussed in the literature on quantum physics, so they have nothing to do with cultural studies' (mis)appropriation of sciences. It was Richard Feynman himself who, in his famous statement, claimed that "nobody really understands quantum physics," implying that one can no longer translate its mathematical-theoretical edifice into the terms of our everyday notions of reality. The impact of modern physics *was* the shattering of the traditional naïve-realist epistemological edifice: sciences themselves opened up a gap in which obscurantist sprouts were able to grow. So, instead of putting all the scorn on poor cultural studies, it would be much more productive to approach anew the old topic of the precise epistemological and ontological implications of the shifts in the "hard" sciences themselves.

## THE IMPASSE OF HISTORICISM

On the other hand, the problem with cultural studies, at least in its predominant form, is that it *does* involve a kind of cognitive suspension (the abandonment of the consideration of the inherent truth-value of the theory under consideration) characteristic of historicist relativism. When a typical cultural theorist deals with a philosophical or psychoanalytic edifice, the analysis focuses exclusively on unearthing its hidden patriarchal, Eurocentrist, identitarian “bias,” without even asking the naïve, but nonetheless necessary questions: “OK, but what *is* the structure of the universe? How *is* the human psyche “really” working?” Such questions are not even taken seriously in cultural studies, since it simply tends to reduce them to the historicist reflection upon conditions in which certain notions emerged as the result of historically specific power relations. Furthermore, in a typically rhetorical move, cultural studies denounces the very attempt to draw a clear line of distinction between, say, true science and pre-scientific mythology, as part of the Eurocentrist procedure to impose its own hegemony by devaluating the Other as not-yet-scientific. In this way, we end up arranging and analyzing science proper, premodern “wisdom,” and other forms of knowledge as different discursive formations evaluated not with regard to their inherent truth-value, but with regard to their socio-political status and impact (a native “holistic” wisdom can thus be considered much more “progressive” than the “mechanistic” Western science responsible for the forms of modern domination). The problem with such a procedure of historicist relativism is that it continues to rely on a set of silent (non-thematized) ontological and epistemological presuppositions about the nature of human knowledge and reality — usually a proto-Nietzschean notion that knowledge is not only embedded in, but also generated by, a complex set of discursive strategies of power (re)production. So it is crucial to emphasize that, at this point, Lacan parts with cultural studies’ historicism. For Lacan, modern science is resolutely *not* one of the “narratives” comparable in principle to other modes of “cognitive mapping.” Modern science touches the real in a way totally absent in premodern discourses.

Cultural studies here needs to be put in its proper context. After the demise of the great philosophical schools in the late ‘70s, European academic philosophy itself, with its basic hermeneutical-historical stance, paradoxically shares with cultural studies the stance of cognitive suspension. Excellent studies have recently been produced on great past authors, yet they focus on the correct reading of the author in question, while mostly ignoring the naïve, but unavoidable question of truth-value — not only questions such as “Is this the right reading of Descartes’ notion of the body? Is this what Descartes’ notion of the body has to repress in order to retain its consistency?” and so on, but also “Which, then, *is* the true status of the body? How do *we* stand towards Descartes’ notion of the

body?" And it seems as if these prohibited "ontological" questions are returning with a vengeance in today's third culture. What signals the recent rise of quantum physics and cosmology if not a violent and aggressive rehabilitation of the most fundamental metaphysical questions (e.g., what is the origin and putative end of the universe)? The explicit goal of people like Hawking is a version of TOE (Theory Of Everything), that is, the endeavor to discover the basic formula of the structure of the universe that one could print and wear on a T-shirt (or, for a human being, the genome that identifies what I objectively am). So, in clear contrast to cultural studies' strict prohibition of direct "ontological" questions, third culture proponents unabashedly approach the most fundamental pre-Kantian metaphysical issues — the ultimate constituents of reality, the origins and end of the universe, what consciousness is, how life emerged, and so on — as if the old dream, which died with the demise of Hegelianism, of a large synthesis of metaphysics and science, the dream of a global theory of *all* grounded in exact scientific insights, is coming alive again.

In contrast to these two versions of cognitive suspension, the cognitivist approach opts for a naïve, direct inquiry into "the nature of things" (What is perception? How did language emerge?). However, to use a worn-out phrase, by throwing out the bath water, it also loses the baby, that is, the dimension of proper philosophico-transcendental reflection. That is to say, is historicist relativism (which ultimately leads to the untenable position of solipsism) really the only alternative to the naïve scientific realism (according to which, in sciences and in our knowledge in general, we are gradually approaching the proper image of the way things really are out there, independently of our consciousness of them)? From the standpoint of a proper philosophical reflection, it can easily be shown that both of these positions miss the properly transcendental-hermeneutical level. Where does this level reside? Let us take the classical line of realist reasoning, which claims that the passage from premodern mythical thought to the modern scientific approach to reality cannot simply be interpreted as the replacement of one predominant "narrative" with another, in that the modern scientific approach definitely brings us closer to what "reality" (the "hard" reality existing independently of the scientific researcher) effectively is. A hermeneutic philosopher's basic response to this stance would be to insist that, with the passage from the premodern mythic universe to the universe of modern science, *the very notion of what "reality" (or "effectively to exist") means or what "counts" as reality has also changed*, so that we cannot simply presuppose a neutral external measure that allows us to judge that, with modern science, we come closer to the "same" reality as that with which premodern mythology was dealing. As Hegel would have put it, with the passage from the premodern mythical universe to the modern scientific universe, the measure, the

standard that we implicitly use or apply in order to measure how “real” what we are dealing with is, has itself undergone a fundamental change. The modern scientific outlook involves a series of distinctions (between “objective” reality and “subjective” ideas/impressions of it; between hard neutral facts and “values” that we, the judging subjects, impose onto the facts; and so on) which are *stricto sensu* meaningless in the premodern universe. Of course, a realist can retort that this is the whole point: only with the passage to the modern scientific universe did we get an appropriate notion of what “objective reality” is, in contrast to the premodern outlook that confused “facts” and “values.” Against this, the transcendental-hermeneutic philosopher would be fully justified to insist that, nonetheless, we cannot get out of the vicious circle of presupposing our result: the most fundamental way reality “appears” to us, the most fundamental way we experience what “really counts as effectively existing,” is always already presupposed in our judgments of what “really exists.” This transcendental level was very nicely indicated by Kuhn himself when, in his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, he claimed that the shift in a scientific paradigm is *more* than a mere shift in our (external) perspective on/perception of reality, but nonetheless *less* than our effectively “creating” another new reality. For that reason, the standard distinction between the social or psychological contingent conditions of a scientific invention and its objective truth-value falls short here: the very distinction between the (empirical, contingent socio-psychological) genesis of a certain scientific formation and its objective truth-value, independent of the conditions of this genesis, already presupposes a set of distinctions (e.g., between genesis and truth-value) that are by no means self-evident. So, again, one should insist here that the hermeneutic-transcendental questioning of the implicit presuppositions in no way endorses the historicist relativism typical of cultural studies.

### KNOWLEDGE AND TRUTH

In what, then, does the ultimate difference between cognitivism and cultural studies consist? On the one hand, there is neutral objective knowledge, that is, the patient empirical examination of reality. Cognitivists like to emphasize that, politically, they are not against the Left — their aim is precisely to liberate the Left from the irrationalist-relativist-elitist postmodern imposter; nonetheless, they accept the distinction between the neutral theoretical (scientific) insight and the eventual ideologico-political bias of the author. In contrast, cultural studies involves the properly dialectical paradox of a truth that relies on an engaged subjective position. This distinction between knowledge inherent to the academic institution, defined by the standards of “professionalism,” and, on the other hand, the truth of a (collective) subject engaged in a struggle (elaborated, among others, by

philosophers from Theodor Adorno to Alain Badiou), enables us to explain how the difference between cognitivists and proponents of cultural studies functions as a shibboleth: it is properly visible only from the side of cultural studies. So, on the one hand, one should fully acknowledge the solid scholarly status of much of the cognitivist endeavor — often, it is academia at its best; on the other hand, there is a dimension that simply eludes its grasp. Let me elaborate this relationship between truth and the accuracy of knowledge by means of a marvelous thought experiment evoked by Daniel Dennett in his *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*: You and your best friend are about to be captured by hostile forces, who know English but do not know much about your world. You both know Morse code, and hit upon the following impromptu encryption scheme: for a dash, speak a truth; for a dot, speak a falsehood. Your captors, of course, listen to you two speak: “Birds lay eggs, and toads fly. Chicago is a city, and my feet are not made of tin, and baseball is played in August,” you say, answering “No” (dash-dot; dash-dash-dash) to whatever your friend has just asked. Even if your captors know Morse code, unless they can determine the truth and falsity of these sentences, they cannot detect the properties that stand for the dot and dash.<sup>5</sup> Dennett himself uses this example to make the point that meaning cannot be accounted for in purely syntactic inherent terms: the only way to ultimately gain access to the meaning of a statement is to situate it in its life-world context, that is, to take into account its semantic dimension, the objects and processes to which it refers. My point is rather different. As Dennett himself puts it, the two prisoners, in this case, use the world itself as a “one-time pad.” Although the truth-value of their statements is not indifferent but crucial, it is not this truth-value as such, in itself, that matters; what matters is the translation of truth-value into a differential series of pluses and minuses (dashes and dots) that delivers the true message in Morse code. And is something similar not going on in the psychoanalytic process? Although the truth-value of the patient’s statements is not indifferent, what really matters is not this truth-value as such, but the way the very alternation of truths and lies discloses the patient’s desire — a patient also uses reality itself (the way [s]he relates to it) as a “one-time pad” to encrypt his or her desire. And, in the same way, theory uses the very truth-value (accuracy) of post-theoretical knowledge as a medium to articulate its own truth-message.

On the other hand, politically correct proponents of cultural studies often pay for their arrogance and lack of a serious approach by confusing truth (the engaged subjective position) and knowledge, that is, by disavowing the gap that separates them, by directly subordinating knowledge to truth (say, a quick socio-critical dismissal of a specific science like quantum physics or biology without proper acquaintance with the inherent conceptual structure of this field of knowledge). Essentially, the problem of cultural studies is often the

lack of specific disciplinary skills: a literary theorist without proper knowledge of philosophy can write disparaging remarks on Hegel's phallogocentrism, on film, and so on. What we are dealing with here is a kind of false universal critical capacity to pass judgments on everything without proper knowledge. With all its criticism of traditional philosophical universalism, cultural studies effectively functions as a kind of *ersatz*-philosophy, and notions are thus transformed into ideological universals. In postcolonial studies, for instance, the notion of "colonization" starts to function as a hegemonic notion and is elevated to a universal paradigm, so that in relations between the sexes, the male sex colonizes the female sex, the upper classes colonize the lower classes, and so on. Especially with some "progressive" interpreters of contemporary biology, it is popular to focus on the way the opposing positions are overdetermined by the politico-ideological stance of their authors. Does Dawkins' "Chicago gangster theory of life," this reductionist determinist theory about "selfish genes" caught in a deadly struggle for survival, not express the stance of a competitive, bourgeois individualist society? Is Gould's emphasis on sudden genetic change and ex-aptation not a sign of the more supple, dialectical and "revolutionary" Leftist stance of its author? Do those who emphasize spontaneous cooperation and emerging order (like Lynn Margulis) not express the longing for a stable organic order, for a society that functions as a "corporate body"? Do we thus not have here the scientific expression of the basic triad of Right, Center and Left — of the organicist conservative notion of society as a whole, of the bourgeois individualist notion of society as the space of competition between individuals, and of the revolutionary theorist notion of sudden change? (Of course, the insistence on a holistic approach and emerging order can be given a different accent: it can display the conservative longing for a stable order, or the progressive utopian belief in a new society of solidary cooperation where order grows spontaneously from below and is not imposed from above.) The standard form of the opposition is the one between the "cold" mechanist probing into causality, displaying the attitude of the scientific manipulator in the service of the exploitative domination of nature, and the new "holistic" approach focused on spontaneously emerging order and cooperation, pointing toward what Andrew Ross called a "kinder, gentler science." The mistake here is the same as that of Stalinist Marxism, which opposed "bourgeois" to "proletarian" science, or that of pseudo-radical feminism, which opposes "masculine" to "feminine" discourse as two self-enclosed wholes engaged in warfare. We do not have *two* sciences, but *one* universal science split from within, that is, caught in the battle for hegemony.<sup>6</sup>

## THEORETICAL STATE APPARATUSES

The academically-recognized “radical thought” in the liberal West does not operate in a void, but is indeed a part of power relations. Apropos of cultural studies, one has to ask again the old Benjaminian question: not “How does one explicitly *relate* to power?” but “How is one *situated within* predominant power relations?” Does cultural studies not also function as a discourse that pretends to be critically self-reflective, to render visible the predominant power relations, while it effectively obfuscates its own mode of participating in them? So it would be productive to apply to cultural studies itself the Foucauldian notion of productive “bio-power” as opposed to “repressive”/prohibitory legal power: what if the field of cultural studies, far from effectively threatening today’s global relations of domination, fits within this framework perfectly, in the same way that sexuality and the “repressive” discourses that regulate it are fully complementary? What if the criticism of patriarchal/identitarian ideology betrays an ambiguous fascination with it, rather than a will committed to undermining it? There is a way to *avoid* responsibility and/or guilt precisely by emphasizing one’s responsibility or too readily assuming guilt in an exaggerated way, as in the case of the politically correct white male academic who emphasizes the guilt of racist phallogocentrism, and uses this admission of guilt as a stratagem *not* to confront the way he, as a “radical” intellectual, perfectly fits the existing power relations of which he pretends to be thoroughly critical. Crucial here is the shift from British to American cultural studies. Even if we find the same themes and notions in both, the socio-ideological functioning is thoroughly different: we shift from the effective engagement with working class culture to the academic radical chic.

However, despite these critical remarks, the very fact that there is resistance to cultural studies proves that it remains a foreign body unable to fit fully into the existing academy. Cognitivism is ultimately the attempt to get rid of this intruder, to re-establish the standard functioning of academic knowledge — “professional,” rational, empirical, problem-solving, and so on. The distinction between cognitivism and cultural studies is thus not simply the distinction between two doctrines or two theoretical approaches; it is ultimately a much more radical distinction between two totally different modalities or, rather, *practices* of knowledge, inclusive of two different institutional apparatuses of knowledge. This dimension of “theoretical state apparatuses,” to use the Althusserian formulation, is crucial: if we do not take it into account, we simply miss the point of the antagonism between cognitivism and cultural studies. It is no wonder that cognitivists like to emphasize their opposition to psychoanalysis: two exemplary cases of such non-academic knowledge are, of course, Marxism and psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis differs from cognitivist psychology and psychotherapy in at least three crucial features: (1) since it does not present itself as empir-

ically-tested objective knowledge, there is the perennial problem (in the United States, where psychiatric care is sometimes covered by medical insurance) of the extent to which the state or insurance will reimburse the patient; (2) for the same reason, psychoanalysis has inherent difficulties in integrating itself into the academic edifice of psychology or medical psychiatry departments, so it usually functions as a parasitic entity that attaches itself to cultural studies, comparative literature or psychology departments; (3) as to their inherent organization, psychoanalytic communities do not function as “normal” academic societies (like sociological, mathematical or other societies). From the standpoint of “normal” academic societies, the psychoanalytic society cannot but appear as a “dogmatic” discipline engaged in eternal factional struggles between sub-groups dominated by a strong authoritarian or charismatic leader; conflicts within psychoanalytic communities are not resolved through rational argumentation and empirical testing, but rather resemble sectarian religious struggles. In short, the phenomenon of (personal) transference functions here in an entirely different way than in the “standard” academic community. (The dynamics in Marxist communities are somewhat similar.) In the same way that Marxism interprets the resistance against its insights as the “result of the class struggle in theory,” as accounted for by its very object, psychoanalysis also interprets the resistance against itself to be the result of the very unconscious processes that are its topic. In both cases, theory is caught in a self-referential loop: it is in a way *the theory about the resistance against itself*. Concerning this crucial point, the situation today is entirely different than, almost the opposite of, that of the ‘60s and early ‘70s when “marginal” disciplines (like the cultural studies’ version of psychoanalysis) were perceived as “anarchic,” as liberating us from the “repressive” authoritarian regime of the standard academic discipline. What cognitivist critics of cultural studies play upon is the common perception that, today, (what remains of) the cultural studies’ version of psychoanalysis is perceived as sectarian, Stalinist, authoritarian, engaged in ridiculous pseudo-theological factional struggles in which problems over the party line prevail over open empirical research and rational argumentation. Cognitivists present themselves as the fresh air that does away with this close and stuffy atmosphere — finally, one is free to formulate and test different hypotheses, no longer “terrorized” by some dogmatically imposed global party line. We are thus far from the anti-academic/establishment logic of the ‘60s: today, academia presents itself as the place of open, free discussion, as liberating us from the stuffy constraints of “subversive” cultural studies. And although, of course, the “regression” into authoritarian prophetic discourse is one of the dangers that threatens cultural studies, its inherent temptation, one should nonetheless focus attention on how the cognitivist stance succeeds in unproblematically presenting the framework of the institutional academic university discourse as the very locus of intellectual freedom.

## II. IS FREEDOM NOTHING BUT A CONCEIVED NECESSITY?

### YOU CANNOT, BECAUSE YOU SHOULD NOT!

So, how does Lacanian theory enable us to avoid the impasse of cultural studies and to confront the challenge of the cognitivist and/or evolutionary naturalization of the human subject? In Andrew Niccol's futuristic thriller *Gattaca* (1998), Ethan Hawke and Uma Thurman prove their love for each other by throwing away the hair each partner provides to be analyzed in order to establish his or her genetic quality. In this futuristic society, authority (access to the privileged elite) is established "objectively," through genetic analysis of the newborn — we no longer have symbolic authority proper, since authority is directly grounded in the real of the genome. As such, *Gattaca* merely extrapolates the prospect, opened up today, of the direct legitimization of social authority and power in the real of the genetic code: "by eliminating artificial forms of inequality, founded on power and culture, socially egalitarian programs could eventually highlight and crystallize natural forms of inequality far more dramatically than ever before, in a new hierarchical order founded on the genetic code." Against this prospect, it is not enough to insist that the democratic principle of what Etienne Balibar calls *egaliberté* has nothing to do with the genetic-biological similarity of human individuals, but aims instead at the principal equality of subjects qua participants in the symbolic space. *Gattaca* confronts us with the following dilemma: is the only way to retain our dignity as humans by way of accepting some limitation, of stopping short of full insight into our genome, short of our full naturalization, that is, by way of a gesture of "I do not want to know what you objectively/really are, I accept you for what you are"?

Among the modern philosophers, it was Kant who most forcefully confronted this predicament, constraining our knowledge of the causal interconnection of objects to the domain of phenomena in order to make a place for noumenal freedom, which is why the hidden truth of Kant's "*You can, therefore you must!*" is its reversal: *You cannot, because you should not!* The ethical problems of cloning seem to point in this direction. Those who oppose cloning argue that we *should not* pursue it, at least not on human beings, because it is *not possible* to reduce a human being to a positive entity whose innermost psychic properties can be manipulated — biogenetic manipulation *cannot* touch the core of human personality, so we should prohibit it. Is this not another variation on Wittgenstein's paradox of *prohibiting the impossible*: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence"? The underlying fear that gains expression in this prohibition, of course, is that the order of reason is actually inverted, that is, that the ontological impossibility is grounded in ethics: we should claim that we cannot do it, because otherwise *we may well*

*do it*, with catastrophic ethical consequences. If conservative Catholics effectively believe in the immortality of the human soul and the uniqueness of human personality, if they insist we are not just the result of the interaction between our genetic code and our environs, then why do they oppose cloning and genetic manipulations? In other words, is it not that *these Christian opponents of cloning themselves secretly believe in the power of scientific manipulation, in its capacity to stir up the very core of our personality?* Of course, their answer would be that human beings, by treating themselves as just the result of the interaction between their genetic codes and their environs, freely renounce their dignity: the problem is not genetic manipulation as such, but the fact that its acceptance signals how human beings conceive of themselves as just another biological machine and thus rob themselves of their unique spirituality. However, the answer to this is, again: but why should we not endorse genetic manipulation *and* simultaneously insist that human beings are free responsible agents, since we accept the proviso that these manipulations do not really affect the core of our soul? Why do Christians still talk about the “unfathomable mystery of conception” that man should not meddle with, as if, nonetheless, by pursuing our biogenetic explorations, we may touch some secret better left in shadow — in short, as if, by cloning our bodies, we *at the same time also clone our immortal souls?*

So, again, we are back at the well-known conservative wisdom that claims that the only way to save human freedom and ethical dignity is to restrain our cognitive capacities and renounce probing too deeply into the nature of things. Today’s sciences themselves seem to point toward a way out of this predicament. Does contemporary cognitivism not often produce formulations that sound uncannily familiar to those acquainted with different versions of ancient and modern philosophy, from the Buddhist notion of Void and the German Idealist notion of reflexivity as constitutive of the subject up to the Heideggerian notion of “being-in-the-world” or the deconstructionist one of *différance*? The temptation arises here to fill in the gap by either reducing philosophy to science, claiming that modern naturalizing cognitivism “realizes” philosophical insights, translating them into acceptable scientific form, or, on the contrary, by claiming that, with these insights, post-modern science breaks out of the “Cartesian paradigm” and approaches the level of authentic philosophical thought. This short-circuit between science and philosophy appears today in a multitude of guises: Heideggerian cognitivism (Hubert Dreyfuss), cognitivist Buddhism (Francisco Varela), the combination of Oriental thought with quantum physics (Capra’s “Tao of physics”), up to deconstructionist evolutionism. Let’s take a brief look at the two main versions of this short-circuit.

## I. DECONSTRUCTIONIST EVOLUTIONISM

There are obvious parallels between the recent popularized readings of Darwin (from Gould to Dawkins and Dennett) and Derridean deconstruction. Does Darwinism not practice a kind of “deconstruction,” not only of natural teleology, but also of the very idea of nature as a well-ordered positive system of species? Does the strict Darwinian notion of “adaptation” not claim that, precisely, *organisms do not directly “adapt,”* that there is *stricto sensu* no “adaptation” in the teleological sense of the term? Contingent genetic changes occur, and some of them enable some organisms to function better and survive in an environment that is itself fluctuating and articulated in a complex way, but there is no linear adaptation to a stable environment: when something unexpectedly changes in the environment, a feature which hitherto prevented full “adaptation” can suddenly become crucial for the organism’s survival. So Darwinism effectively prefigures a version of Derridean *différance* or of the Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*, according to which contingent and meaningless genetic changes are retroactively used (or “exapted,” as Gould would have put it) in a manner appropriate for survival. In other words, what Darwin provides is a model explanation of how a state of things which appears to involve a well-ordered teleological economy (animals doing things “in order to...”), is effectively the outcome of a series of meaningless changes. The temporality here is future anterior, that is, “adaptation” is something that always and by definition “will have been.” And is this enigma of how (the semblance of) teleological and meaningful order can emerge from contingent and meaningless occurrences not also central to deconstruction?

One can thus effectively claim that Darwinism (of course, in its true radical dimension, not as a vulgarized evolutionism) “deconstructs” not only teleology or divine intervention in nature, but also the very notion of nature as a stable positive order — this makes the silence of deconstruction about Darwinism, the absence of deconstructionist attempts to “appropriate” it, all the more enigmatic. Dennett, the great proponent of cognitivist evolutionism, himself acknowledges (ironically, no doubt, but nonetheless with an underlying serious intent) the closeness of his “pandemonium” theory of human mind to cultural studies deconstructionism in his *Consciousness Explained*: “Imagine my mixed emotions when I discovered that before I could get my version of the idea of ‘the self as the center of narrative gravity’ properly published in a book, it had already been satirized in a novel, David Lodge’s *Nice World*. It is apparently a hot theme among the deconstructionists.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, a whole school of cyberspace theorists (the best known among them is Sherry Turkle) advocate the notion that cyberspace-phenomena render palpable in our everyday experience the deconstructionist “decentered subject.” According to these theorists, one should endorse the “dissemination” of the unique self into a multiplicity of

competing agents, into a “collective mind,” a plurality of self-images without a global coordinating center, that is operative in cyberspace and disconnect it from pathological trauma — playing in virtual spaces enables individuals to discover new aspects of “self,” a wealth of shifting identities, and thus to experience the ideological mechanism of the production of self, the immanent violence and arbitrariness of this production/construction.

However, the temptation to be avoided here is precisely the hasty conclusion that Dennett is a kind of deconstructionist wolf in the sheep’s clothing of empirical science. There is a gap that forever separates Dennett’s evolutionary naturalization of consciousness from the deconstructionist “meta-transcendental” probing into the conditions of (im)possibility of philosophical discourse. As Derrida argues exemplarily in his “White Mythology,” it is insufficient to claim that “all concepts are metaphors,” that there is no pure epistemological cut, since the umbilical cord connecting abstract concepts with everyday metaphors is irreducible. First, the point is not simply that “all concepts are metaphors,” but that the very difference between a concept and a metaphor is always minimally metaphorical, relying on some metaphor. Even more important is the opposite conclusion, that the very reduction of a concept to a bundle of metaphors already has to rely on some implicit *philosophical, conceptual* determination of the difference between concept and metaphor, that is to say, on the very opposition it tries to undermine.<sup>9</sup> We are thus forever caught in a vicious circle: true, it is impossible to adopt a philosophical stance freed from the constraints of naïve, everyday life-world attitudes and notions; however, although *impossible*, this philosophical stance is at the same time *unavoidable*. Derrida makes the same point apropos of the well-known historicist thesis that the entire Aristotelian ontology of the ten modes of being is an effect/expression of Greek grammar. The problem is that *this reduction of ontology (of ontological categories) to an effect of grammar presupposes a certain notion (categorical determination) of the relationship between grammar and ontological concepts which is itself already metaphysical-Greek*.<sup>10</sup>

We should always bear in mind this delicate Derridean stance, through which the twin pitfalls of naïve realism and direct philosophical foundationalism are avoided: “philosophical foundation” for our experience is *impossible*, and yet *necessary* — although all we perceive, understand and articulate, is, of course, overdetermined by a horizon of pre-understanding, this horizon itself remains ultimately impenetrable. Derrida is thus a kind of metatranscendentalist, in search of the conditions of possibility of this very philosophical discourse. If we miss this precise way in which Derrida undermines philosophical discourse *from within*, we reduce deconstruction to just another naïve historicist relativism. Derrida’s position here is thus the opposite of Foucault’s. In answer to a criticism that he speaks from a position whose possibility is not accounted for within the frame-

work of his theory, Foucault cheerfully retorted: “These kinds of questions do not concern me: they belong to the police discourse with its files constructing the subject’s identity!” In other words, the ultimate lesson of deconstruction seems to be that one cannot postpone *ad infinitum* the *ontological* question, and what is deeply symptomatic in Derrida is his oscillation between, on the one hand, the hyper-self-reflective approach that denounces in advance the question of “how things really are” and limits itself to third-level deconstructive comments on the inconsistencies of philosopher B’s reading of philosopher A, and, on the other hand, direct “ontological” assertions about how *différance* and arche-trace designate the structure of all living things and are, as such, already operative in animal nature. One should not miss here the paradoxical interconnection between these two levels: the very feature that prevents us from forever directly grasping our intended object (the fact that our grasping is always refracted, “mediated,” by a decentered otherness) is the feature that connects us with the basic proto-ontological structure of the universe.

Deconstructionism thus involves two prohibitions: it prohibits the “naïve” empiricist approach (“let us examine carefully the material in question and then generalize hypotheses about it...”), as well as global ahistorical metaphysical theses about the origin and structure of the universe. This double prohibition that defines deconstructionism clearly and unambiguously bears witness to its Kantian transcendental origins. Is not the same double prohibition characteristic of Kant’s philosophical revolution? On the one hand, the notion of the transcendental constitution of reality involves the loss of a direct naïve empiricist approach to reality; on the other hand, it involves the prohibition of metaphysics, that is, of an all-encompassing world-view providing the noumenal structure of the universe as a whole. In other words, one should always bear in mind that, far from simply expressing a belief in the constitutive power of the (transcendental) subject, Kant introduces the notion of the transcendental dimension in order to answer the fundamental and insurpassable deadlock of human existence: a human being compulsorily strives toward a global notion of truth, of a universal and necessary cognition, yet this cognition is simultaneously forever inaccessible to him or her.

## 2. COGNITIVIST BUDDHISM

Is the outcome any better in the emerging alliance between the cognitivist approach to mind and the proponents of Buddhist thought, where the point is not to naturalize philosophy, but rather the opposite, that is, to use the results of cognitivism in order to (re)gain access to ancient wisdom? The contemporary cognitivist denial of a unitary, stable, self-identical self — that is, the notion of the human mind as a pandemonic playground of

multiple agencies, that some authors (most notably Francisco Varela)<sup>11</sup> link to the Buddhist denial of the self as the permanent substance underlying our mental acts/events — seems persuasive in its critical rejection of the substantial notion of self. The paradox upon which cognitivists and neo-Buddhists build is the gap between our common experience that automatically relies on and/or involves a reference to some notion of self as the underlying substance that “has” feelings and volitions and to which these mental states and acts “happen,” and the fact, well known even in Europe at least from Hume onwards, that, no matter how deeply and carefully we search our self-experience, we encounter only passing, elusive mental events, and never the self as such (that is, a substance to which these events could be attributed). The conclusion drawn by cognitivists and Buddhists alike is, of course, that the notion of self is the result of an epistemological (or, in the case of Buddhism, ethico-epistemological) mistake inherent to human nature as such. The thing to do is to get rid of this delusive notion and to fully assume that there is no self, that “I” am nothing but that groundless bundle of elusive and heterogeneous (mental) events.

Is, however, this conclusion really unavoidable? Varela also rejects the Kantian solution of the self, the subject of pure apperception, as the transcendental subject nowhere to be found in our empirical experience. Here, though, one should introduce the distinction between egoless/selfless mind events or aggregates and the subject as identical to this void, to this lack of substance, itself. What if the conclusion that there is no self is too quickly drawn from the fact that there is no representation or positive idea of self? What if self is precisely the “I of the storm,” the void in the center of the incessant vortex/whirlpool of elusive mental events, something like the “vacuola” in biology, the void that is nothing in itself, that has no substantial positive identity, but which nonetheless serves as the irrepresentable point of reference, as the “I” to which mental events are attributed. In Lacanian terms, one has to distinguish between the “self” as the pattern of behavioral and other imaginary and symbolic identifications (as the “self-image,” as that what I perceive myself to be) and the empty point of pure negativity, the “barred” subject (S̄). Varela himself comes close to this when he distinguishes among: (1) the self qua the series of mental and bodily formations that has a certain degree of causal coherence and integrity through time; (2) the capitalized Self qua the hidden substantial kernel of the subject’s identity (the “ego-self”), and, finally; (3) the desperate craving/grasping of the human mind for/to the self, for/to some kind of firm bedrock. From the Lacanian perspective, however, is this “endless craving” not *the subject itself*, the void that “is” subjectivity?

Neo-Buddhists are justified in criticizing cognitivist proponents of the “society of mind” notion for endorsing the irreducible split between our scientific cognition (which

tells us that there is no self or free will) and the everyday experience in which we simply cannot function without presupposing a consistent self endowed with free will. Cognitivists have thus condemned themselves to a nihilistic stance of endorsing beliefs they know are wrong. The effort of neo-Buddhists is to bridge this gap by translating/transposing the very insight that there is no substantial self into our daily human experience (this is ultimately what Buddhist meditative reflection is about). When Ray Jackendoff, author of one of the ultimate cognitivist attempts to explain consciousness, suggests that our awareness-consciousness emerges from the fact that we are, precisely, *not* aware of the way awareness-consciousness itself is generated by worldly processes — that there is consciousness only insofar as its biological-organic origins remain opaque<sup>12</sup> — he comes very close to the Kantian insight that there is self-consciousness, that I think, only insofar as “*das Ich oder Er oder Es (das Ding), welches denkt*”<sup>13</sup> remains impenetrable for me. Varela’s counter-argument that Jackendoff’s reasoning is confused, that these processes we are unaware of are just that — processes that are not part of our daily human experience but totally beyond it, hypostatized by the cognitivist scientific practice<sup>14</sup> — thus misses the point. This inaccessibility of the substantial-natural self (or, rather, of the substantial-natural base to my self) *is* part of our daily non-scientific experience, precisely in the guise of our ultimate failure to find a positive element in our experience that would directly “be” our self (the experience, formulated already by Hume, that no matter how deeply we analyze our mental processes, we never find anything that would be our self). So what if one should here apply to Varela the joke about the madman who was looking for his lost key under a street light and not in the dark corner where he effectively lost it, because it was easier to search under the light? What if we are looking for the self in the wrong place, in the false evidence of positive empirical facts?

### THE INACCESSIBLE PHENOMENON

Our result is thus that there is effectively no way to overcome the abyss that separates the transcendental *a priori* horizon from the domain of positive scientific discoveries. On the one hand, the standard “philosophical reflection of science” (positive sciences “do not think”; they are unable to reflect on their horizon of pre-understanding accessible only to philosophy) more and more resembles an old automatic trick losing its efficiency; on the other hand, the idea that some “postmodern” science will attain the level of philosophical reflection (say, that quantum physics, by including the observer in the observed material objectivity, breaks out of the frame of scientific objectivism/naturalism and reaches the level of the transcendental constitution of reality) clearly misses the proper level of transcendental *a priori*.

It is true that modern philosophy is in a way “on the defensive” against the onslaught of science. Kant’s transcendental turn is linked to the rise of modern science not only in the obvious way (providing the *a priori* of Newtonian physics), but in the more radical way of taking into account how, with the rise of modern empirical science, a direct metaphysical “theory of everything” is no longer viable and cannot be combined with science. So the only thing philosophy can do is to “phenomenalize” scientific knowledge and then to provide its *a priori* hermeneutic horizon, given the ultimate inscrutability of the universe and man. It was Adorno who had already emphasized the thorough ambiguity of Kant’s notion of transcendental constitution: far from simply asserting the subject’s constitutive power, it can also be read as the resigned acceptance of the *a priori* limitation of our approach to the real. And it is our contention that, if we think to the end the consequences of this notion of the transcendental subject, we can nonetheless avoid this debilitating deadlock and “save freedom.” How? By reading this deadlock as its own solution, that is, by yet again displacing the epistemological obstacle into a positive ontological condition.

To avoid any misunderstanding: we are not aiming here at illegitimate short-circuits in the style of “the ontological undecidability of the quantum fluctuation grounds human freedom,” but at a much more radical pre-ontological openness/gap, a “bar” of impossibility in the midst of “reality” itself. What if *there is no “universe”* in the sense of an ontologically fully-constituted cosmos? That is to say, the mistake of identifying (self)consciousness with misrecognition, with an epistemological obstacle, is that it stealthily (re)introduces the standard, premodern, “cosmological” notion of reality as a positive order of being. In such a fully-constituted, positive “chain of being,” there is, of course, no place for the subject, so the dimension of subjectivity can only be conceived of as something which is strictly codependent with the epistemological misrecognition of the true positivity of being. Consequently, the only way to effectively account for the status of (self)consciousness is to assert *the ontological incompleteness of “reality” itself*: there is “reality” only insofar as there is an ontological gap, a crack, in its very heart. It is only this gap that accounts for the mysterious “fact” of transcendental freedom, that is, for a (self)consciousness that is effectively “spontaneous” and whose spontaneity is not an effect of the misrecognition of some “objective” causal process, no matter how complex and chaotic this process is. And where does *psychoanalysis* stand with regard to this deadlock? In a first approach, it may seem that psychoanalysis is the ultimate attempt to fill in the gap, to re-establish the complete causal chain that generated the “inexplicable” symptom. However, does Lacan’s strict opposition between cause and the law (of causality) not point in a wholly different

direction? Lacan states:

Cause is to be distinguished from that which is determinate in a chain, in other words from the law. By way of example, think of what is pictured in the law of action and reaction. There is here, one might say, a single principle. One does not go without the other....There is no gap here....Whenever we speak of cause, on the other hand, there is always something anti-conceptual, something indefinite....In short, there is a cause only in something that doesn't work.... The Freudian unconscious is situated at that point, where, between cause and that which it affects, there is always something wrong. The important thing is not that the unconscious determines neurosis — of that one Freud can quite happily, like Pontius Pilate, wash his hands. Sooner or later, something would have been found, humoral determinates, for example — for Freud, it would be quite immaterial. For what the unconscious does is to show the gap through which neurosis recreates a harmony with a real — a real that may well not be determined.<sup>15</sup>

The unconscious intervenes when something “goes wrong” in the order of causality that encompasses our daily activity: a slip of the tongue introduces a gap in the connection between intention-to-signify and words, a failed gesture frustrates my act. However, Lacan's point is, precisely, that 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 causality is not another positive entity. As Lacan emphasizes, it belongs rather to the order of the *nonrealized* or *thwarted*, that is, it is *in itself structured as a gap*, a void insisting indefinitely on its fulfillment. (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.)

And the psychoanalytic notion of fantasy accounts precisely for the illusory/failed attempt to fill in this ontological gap. The basic paradox of the Freudian notion of fantasy resides in the fact that it subverts the standard opposition of “subjective” and “objective.” Of course, fantasy is by definition not “objective” (in the naïve sense of “existing” independently of the subject's perceptions); however, it is also not “subjective” (in the sense of being reducible to the subject's consciously experienced intuitions). Fantasy rather belongs to the “bizarre category of the objectively subjective — the way things actually, objectively seem to you even if they don't seem that way to you.”<sup>16</sup> When, for example, the subject actually experiences a series of fantasmatic formations that interrelate as so many permutations of each other, this series is never complete; rather, it is always as if the actually experienced series presents so many variations of some underlying “fundamental” fantasy that is never actually experienced by the subject. (In Freud's “A Child Is Being Beaten,” the two consciously experienced fantasies presuppose, and thus relate to, a third one, “My father is beating me,” which was never actually experienced and can only be

retroactively reconstructed as the presupposed reference of — or, in this case, the intermediate term between — the other two fantasies.) One can go even further and claim that, in this sense, the Freudian unconscious itself is “objectively subjective.” When, for example, we claim that someone who is consciously well-disposed toward Jews nonetheless harbors profound anti-Semitic prejudices he is not consciously aware of, do we not claim that (insofar as these prejudices do not render the way Jews really are, but the way they appear to him) *he is not aware how Jews really seem to him?*

Furthermore, does this not allow us to throw a new light on the mystery of Marxian commodity fetishism? What the fetish objectivizes is “my true belief,” the way things “truly seem to me,” although I never effectively experience them this way — Marx himself here uses the term “*objektiv-notwendiges Schein*” (a necessarily objective appearance). So, when a critical Marxist encounters a bourgeois subject immersed in commodity fetishism, the Marxist’s reproach to him is not, “A commodity may seem to you a magical object endowed with special powers, but it really is just a reified expression of relations between people”; the Marxist’s actual reproach is rather, “You may think that the commodity appears to you as a simple embodiment of social relations (that, for example, money is just a kind of voucher entitling you to a part of the social product), but *this is not how things really seem to you* — in your social reality, by means of your participation in social exchange, you bear witness to the uncanny fact that a commodity really appears to you as a magical object endowed with special powers.”

This is also one of the ways of specifying the meaning of Lacan’s assertion of the subject’s constitutive “decenterment.” The point is not that my subjective experience is regulated by objective unconscious mechanisms that are “decentered” with regard to my self-experience and, as such, beyond my control (a point asserted by every materialist), but rather something much more unsettling: I am deprived of even my most intimate “subjective” experience, of the way things “really seem to me,” of the fundamental fantasy that constitutes and guarantees the core of my being, since I can never consciously experience it and assume it. According to the standard view, the dimension that is constitutive of subjectivity is that of the phenomenal (self)experience. In other words, I am a subject the moment I can say to myself: “No matter what unknown mechanism governs my acts, perceptions and thoughts, nobody can take from me what I see and feel now.” Say, when I am passionately in love, and a biochemist informs me that all my intense sentiments are just the result of biochemical processes in my body, I can answer him by clinging to the appearance: “All you’re saying may be true, but, nonetheless, nothing can take from me the intensity of the passion that I am experiencing now....” Lacan’s point, however, is that the psychoanalyst is the one who, precisely, *can* take this from the subject,

insofar as his or her ultimate aim is to deprive the subject of the very fundamental fantasy that regulates the universe of the subject's (self)experience. The Freudian subject of the unconscious emerges only when a key aspect of the subject's *phenomenal* (self)experience (his or her fundamental fantasy), becomes *inaccessible* (that is, is primordially repressed). At its most radical, the unconscious is the *inaccessible phenomenon*, not the objective mechanism, that regulates my phenomenal experience. So, in contrast to the commonplace that we are dealing with a subject the moment an entity displays signs of "inner life" — that is, of a fantasmatic self-experience that cannot be reduced to external behavior — one should claim that what characterizes human subjectivity proper is rather the gap that separates the two, that is, the fact that fantasy, at its most elementary, becomes inaccessible to the subject; it is this inaccessibility that makes the subject "empty" (§). We thus obtain a relationship that totally subverts the standard notion of the subject who directly experiences him or herself, and his or her "inner states": an "impossible" relationship between the *empty, nonphenomenal subject* and the *phenomena that remain inaccessible to the subject* — the very relation registered by Lacan's formula of fantasy,  $\S\Diamond$  a.

Geneticists predict that in about ten to fifteen years, they will be able to identify and manipulate each individual's exact genome. Potentially, at least, each individual will thus have at his or her disposal the complete formula of what (s)he "objectively is." How will this "knowledge in the real," the fact that I will be able to locate and identify myself completely as an object in reality, affect the status of subjectivity? Will it lead to the end of human subjectivity? Lacan's answer is negative: what will continue to elude the geneticist is not my phenomenal self-experience (say, the experience of a love passion that no knowledge of the genetic and other material mechanisms determining it can take from me), but the "objectively subjective" fundamental fantasy, the fantasmatic core inaccessible to my conscious experience. Even if science formulates the genetic formula of what I objectively am, it will still be unable to formulate my "objectively subjective" fantasmatic identity, this objectal counterpoint to my subjectivity, which is neither subjective (experienced) nor objective.

1. John Brockman, *The Third Culture: Beyond the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 23.
2. *Ibid.*, 21.
3. *Ibid.*, "Introduction."
4. See, as one among the thousand paradigmatic passages: "Is there, as David Bohm says, an 'implicate order' to matter that is beyond our present comprehension and presumes a 'wholeness' to all things? Can we conceive of a 'Tao of physics,' as Fritjof Capra's million-selling book terms it, in which Eastern philosophies parallel the mind-wrenching paradoxes of the quantum world?" (Pat Kane, "There's Method in the Magic," in *The Politics of Risk Society*, ed. Jane Franklin [Oxford: Polity Press, 1998], 78-79.)
5. See Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 421.
6. It is interesting to note how the opposition of "hard" science, whose conceptual structure embodies the stance of domination, and "gentle" science bent on collaboration and so on, comes dangerously close to the New Age ideology of two mental universes, masculine and feminine, competitive and cooperative, rational-dissecting and intuitive-encompassing. In short, we come dangerously close to the premodern sexualization of the universe, which is conceived of as the tension between the two principles, Masculine and Feminine.
7. Perry Anderson, "A Sense of the Left," *New Left Review* 231 (September/October 1998): 76.
8. Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), 410.
9. See Jacques Derrida, "La mythologie blanche," *Poétique* 5 (1971): 1-52.
10. See Jacques Derrida, "Le supplement de la copule" in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972).
11. See Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).
12. See Ray Jackendoff, *Consciousness and the Computational Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).
13. "The I/Ego or He or It (the Thing), which thinks."
14. See Varela, *op. cit.*, 126.
15. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 22.
16. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 132. (Dennett, of course, evokes this concept in a purely negative way, as a nonsensical *contradictio in adjecto*.)

