

Psychoanalysis in Context

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Edited by

Alvin Henry

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P U B L I S H I N G

Psychoanalysis in Context,
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INTRODUCTION

Challenge, frustration, joy. The preparation of this collection of essays has been all three—and sometimes all three at the same time. As I went about the process of organizing, and editing the essays you have before you, my awareness of the complexity of the tensions existing within the field of psychoanalytic theory—not to even mention the transformations they undergo in the realm of literary criticism—grew in leaps and bounds. Since psychoanalytic criticism underwent a thorough backlash in the academy, I assumed at the start of this project that a gathering of psychoanalytic criticism would proceed in a state of communal joy, of the marginalized united in their pursuit of a similar path of critical inquiry. Although I knew of the competing camps within the field, I was unprepared for the often-fierce internal debates among these sub-groups. At the same time, I was awed by the underlying similarities uniting even the most seemingly contentious perspectives—and by just how productive these debates have been in advancing theoretical and literary inquiries. This anthology should be read as a conversation among the many threads of psychoanalysis and the many threads of psychoanalytically-inflected literary criticisms rather than as putting forth a prescriptive approach or singular methodology. I hope that this collection signals the emergence of a reinvigorated psychoanalytic criticism that has adapted, for the better, to the world of new historicism and to the dialectical turn towards new formalism.

To invoke psychoanalysis as a method is to enter into a contentious debate as to what literature is. Psychoanalytic criticism assumes the existence of subjects possessing depth and complexity. This discursive assumption has been met with challenges from the French post-structuralists, and more recently from Jürgen Habermas's critique of the subject of modernity. This collection reveals a deep scepticism for any analysis that would read characters simply as sources for psychological experiment. The authors in this volume approach psychoanalysis as a method for reading texts—specifically as a humanistic practice of contextualizing and locating the unconscious, repetitions, condensations, and displacements not just of characters, but of the complex networks that encompass, shape, and inform the texts as wholes. At the same time, they historicize the psychoanalysis that they utilize as a mode of interpretation. Although our

contributors condone the project of reading characters as one of the means for understanding the workings of overarching formal or cultural systems, they also develop reading practices that help contextualize the historical moment of the authors examined. Aesthetic features, for example, become both a reflection of the dialectical relationship between the historical and the text while also serving to illuminate the role of the psyche—whether fictional or possessing a possible social referent—within this dialectic. This introduction to the collection shall not pretend to present the essays as a unified system, but I do hope it will serve to highlight the disjunctions as well as the common ground subtending even such disparate projects. While trying to balance the psychoanalytic perspectives, the collection reflects a deeper preoccupation with methods of inquiry to indicate a new critical geography.

The idea of a cohesive psychoanalysis began to fracture even during Freud's lifetime. Jung, Alder, Jones, Klein, Lacan, and even Freud's own daughter, Anna, offered new tributaries in the field. In more recent times the academy has been more welcoming to thinkers who have incorporated semiotics, structuralism, and post-structuralism, i.e. Lacan, Kristeva, Irigaray, and Deleuze and Guattari. This collection acknowledges this bias and discursive advantage; by soliciting essays from around the globe, and from thinkers who work with different forms of literature, I have attempted to balance the collection in terms of the types and forms of theoretical perspectives represented within it. Although I strove to achieve balance, there was no way to give voice to every perspective. For example, Wilfred Bion does not make an appearance in the collection even though many psychoanalysts practice a technique inspired by his work. On the other hand, the Frankfurt School, which also adopted and revised many psychoanalytic terms, does make a brief appearance, and not in the form of the usual nod to Adorno or Benjamin. The act of negotiating coverage and giving representation to certain perspectives inevitably brings with it disappointment and potential criticism. I strove to fill this anthology with the best interventions from around the globe.

This collection of essays began while finishing a bottle of wine at the end of a conference I organized entitled, "Literature and Psychoanalysis," at the University of California, Berkeley, in 2007. Literally the dregs—or rubbish to be more psychoanalytically attuned—of a more conversation-oriented project, the essays in the volume attempt to return to the psychoanalytic thought created over the last few decades while also challenging these developments from an academic rather than a purely clinical orientation. In these ways, the essays, I hope, present psychoanalysis in context—fully aware of the historical production of the theories evoked,

attentive to the contexts under analysis, and conscious of the turn to and away from theories that may be shaping our understanding of psychoanalytic thought and of our own reading practices.

Not since Shoshana Felman's editing of *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise* in 1982, has there been another major collection of essays that attempts to question and answer the relationship between texts and psychoanalysis. In Felman's spectacular collection, the authors open up the question of the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis that sparked decades of interest and brought waves of critical remarks on the use of psychoanalysis in literary studies. While they did indeed explore the tenuous relationship between psychoanalysis and literature, new insights by both psychoanalysts and literary scholars over the past thirty years have complicated their brilliant readings. As such, the conference at Berkeley began to take up the critical currents—including the negative waters—of psychoanalytically inflected literary criticism. This collection brings together scholars from around the globe who are swimming in different rivers yet all invested in the same intellectual journey.

The essays reflect scholarship that has addressed the many critiques directed at psychoanalysis when applied in the humanities and social sciences. Many of the essays explore the complexities of the Oedipal Complex—a much debated phenomena or fantasy—to produce not only fresh criticism but also to push forward revisions to the psychoanalytic corpus. In editing the essays, the authors took great care to extricate theory from an all too easy devolution into cant. The essays provide numerous entry points for scholars less familiar with psychoanalytic ideas while also advancing a new set of readings of psychoanalysis itself for scholars or clinicians desiring a more theoretical reading. As with any text involving theoretical concepts, the balancing act between composing accessible language and being in conversation with your subfield is always a challenging feat. The essays in the volume straddle these professional obligations by reviewing and defining key terms and then carefully explicating their arguments.

The heterogeneous essays are divided into three broad areas that are in dialogue with one another. Section One, "The Question of Genre," opens with Adrienne Seely's "Nothing/Animate: Robot, Woman, and the Ends of Humanist Narrative in Spielberge's *A.I.*," an essay that enables us to see the psychoanalytic dimensions of narrative structure. Interrogating the film from the perspective of Gilles Deleuze's analysis of the literature of sadism and masochism, Seely complicates frequent claims that *A.I.* offers viewers a straight-forward experience of Oedipal wish-fulfillment. The

chapter demonstrates that *A.I.* continually stages scenarios in which Father figures, whether they be the master inventor who aspires to parthenogenetic procreation or the biological father of the traditional family, strive to assert Symbolic dominance, yet instead accomplish a performance of the phallus as negative object, or per Lacan, "...an object which gives body to a certain fundamental loss in its very presence," thereby necessitating a compensatory negation of the existence of *both* "the Woman" and "the Robot" as whole subjects. With both Woman and Robot aligned in the category of subjects "who do not exist," *A.I.* creates a masochistic narrative structure in which they seek a love outside a paternally-oriented Symbolic order that is marked formally as "sadistic." Through devices of suspension, 'interrupted love,' and the child's subjugation to social law through the maternal contract rather than via the Name-of-the-Father, the film hypostasizes a realm where maternity enforces a Symbolic order made precarious by chiasmic figurations of the Real, in the form of twin ecological catastrophes which threaten, call into question, and ultimately terminate humanity's existence as a species. As a narrative whose form is determined by masochistic structuring, the link between Woman and her Robot son hyperbolizes the 'non-being' which founds both of their subject-positions, making demonstrable a lack which is, the film asserts, fundamental to all subjectivity.

Simon Porzak's essay, "Beyond the Poetic Principle: Speculations on Mallarmean Intertextuality," might be considered the dialectical partner to Seely's argument for a reconfiguration of the father figure. Porzak considers the practice of poetry - defined as the work of entering into and maintaining a position of mastery in the poetic language of one's models - from a psychoanalytic perspective, and in particular through a case study of the relationship between Edgar Allan Poe and his great admirer Stéphane Mallarmé. Theories of poetic intertextuality, notably Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, define this labor of inheritance and mastering purely in masculine terms, rehearsing the psychoanalytic drama of the son's struggle to accede to the father's position. However, even as masculine poets seek to deny the fact, they are structurally incapable of becoming permanently identified with the father, since their language is not their own; castration, then, can never be warded off for long. The impossibility of maintaining mastery over poetic language has long been recognized, of course - notably, by Poe, who analyzes repetition, automatism, mastery, and the structural failure at the heart of phallic poetics. Writing after and in the spirit of Poe, Mallarmé thus takes another approach to poetics, by practicing a non-phallic, feminine art of poetry.

The final essay in this section offers a different answer to the question

of the “father” in the study of genre. In “Realities, Fictions and the Abandonment of Seduction: Rethinking Otherness in the Psychoanalytic Approach to Tragedy,” Nicholas Ray reflects on the relationship between psychoanalytic theory and some of the key tragic dramas in which it has sought exemplars and prototypes. Drawing on the work of French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche, Ray examines the close historical and theoretical connections between Freud’s interpretative appeal to tragic drama (*Oedipus*, *Hamlet*) and his professed abandonment of the seduction theory in 1897. Arguing that the abandonment of seduction is concomitant in Freud with the loss of a certain thinking of the other, Ray goes on to consider the ways in which Freud’s readings of tragic drama tend to simplify the modes of radical alterity that they articulate. In order to sketch out the possibility of an alternative psychoanalytic approach to tragedy, the essay invokes Laplanche’s postulation of a ‘general theory of seduction’ – a hypothesis which is consistent with the most radical tendencies of Freud’s thinking yet is also capable of re-opening the question of otherness within tragic drama in new and potentially exciting ways.

The essays in “Contextualizing Cultural Critique” work to negotiate what it means for literature and culture in general to be vehicles for critical psychoanalytic thought. The section opens with Vera Profit’s essay that asks how the question of evil pushes the limits of literary representation. She questions whether there can be a psychoanalytic theory or explanation of evil and if group dynamics can function as a means to explore the operation of evil. Her essay “‘It Was As A Rebel That He Fell:’ The Abuse of Power, Scapegoating and Lying in Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s *Der Verdacht*” focuses upon a multi-faceted detective novel written geographically and chronologically in close proximity to the Holocaust, the quintessence of evil. First published in its entirety in 1953, Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s (1921—1990) *Der Verdacht* tells of a Swiss physician, Fritz Emmenberger, during crucial phases of his life: as a medical student, as a concentration camp physician, and after 1945, as the CEO of a clinic. Hans Bärlach, a Swiss policeman and the novel’s second major figure, endeavors to prove that Emmenberger, presently the administrator of a Zurich hospital, is identical with Dr. Nehle, who performed medical experiments in Stutthof without the benefit of anesthesia. Ultimately Bärlach confirms the suspicion that lies at the novel’s core. To ascertain the exact nature of the evil traits (beyond the obvious) within Emmenberger’s character, Profit draws upon the works of such leading thinkers as Fromm and Frankl, but also those of M. Scott Peck. Prior to his *People of the Lie*, the diagnosis of evil had never entered the psychiatric

lexicon. To allow for this designation within the medical sphere, Dr. Peck's treatise elucidates the nature of both individual and group evil. In his landmark study the then practising psychiatrist illustrates eight characteristics of evil individuals. They are: victimization of body and/or spirit, failure to recognize the separateness of others, their depersonalisation, unmitigated narcissism, the unsubordinated use of power, scapegoating, lying, and the total inability to tolerate legitimate criticism. Profit concentrates her study on the abuse of power, scapegoating and lying.

We can understand Profit's goal as shifting the sphere of psychoanalysis's power from literature to culture. In "The Family Romance in Black and White: Paternal Abdication and the 'Touch of the Mother' in Marita Bonner's 'One Boy's Story,'" Laura Dawkins pushes the boundary between a cultural analysis of African American culture and a literary reading of fictional characters. Dawkins focuses on a critically neglected tale from the Harlem Renaissance that scrutinizes the applicability of Freudian psychoanalytic paradigms to the historically disrupted African American family. Suggesting that nuclear family relationships cannot be abstracted from the cultural context within which they evolve, Bonner replaces "universalizing" paradigms with a socially inflected model of the Oedipal drama. Dawkins demonstrates that the resolution of the Oedipal crisis—dependent on the son's separation from the mother and subsequent identification with a paternal figure—is irrevocably fractured for the African American boy, since he remains excluded from the patriarchal order that he has been socially conditioned to value. Dawkins argues that Bonner foregrounds the role of the black mother in shaping her son's truncated journey to manhood, exposing how this mother is paradoxically dispossessed of her maternal role yet granted the negative authority to confer her own degraded status upon her offspring. A precursor of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, "One Boy's Story" suggests that the disinherited black mother, like Morrison's Sethe, can claim her child only through an act of violence. Almost forty years before African American women charged Daniel Patrick Moynihan with scapegoating black mothers by attributing the destructive effects of an oppressive white society to undue maternal influence within the black family, Bonner similarly revealed that a confluence of social, historical, and economic forces conspire to sabotage the black boy's Oedipal quest—even as the boy's mother, in her frenzy to shelter him from an inimical society, appears to become the "castrating" matriarch, the agent of her son's unmaning.

Dawkins reads the image of the African American family through the Oedipal drama; Profit reads the concept of evil through the Frankfurt school of critical theory. In "The Psychological Oppen: Reality and a

Modernist Male,” Brian Glaser further repositions the role of psychoanalytic criticism as a fluctuation inflected by gender and material culture. Glaser challenges the celebration of materialism that is prevalent in critical scholarship on the poetry of George Oppen. Putting Oppen’s ways of thinking in conversation with the ideas of his contemporary Hans Loewald, it makes the argument that Oppen’s materialism ought to be viewed not only in the context of his political commitments, as is often done, but also in the context of his experience of gender identity—fatherhood in particular. Because of the patterns that become apparent through the latter way of reading Oppen, this approach also raises the question of how to distinguish insight or wisdom from mechanism or defense in reading the poetry of a modernist male.

The section concludes with Shirley Zisser’s reading of psychosis in the context of the nineteenth century. In “The ‘Hellish Tatoo: Schizography in Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Tell-Tale Heart,’” Zisser seeks to further elucidate how literature contains and is a symptom of culture. In a close reading of Poe’s short story, Zisser argues that the preference for the dash reveals a schizographic language phenomena, showing that the latter’s dialectical structure between madness and paranoia collapses signification. Zisser suggests that the dash and the psychoanalytic idea of foreclosure function as the dominant tropes or markers of delusion. She further demonstrates how the world beyond the dash signifies an “unmetabolized raw form, as Thing, eroding ravines in the biological organism from whence it emanates.”

The final section of the collection, “Key Concepts,” offers a set of revised or supplementary definitions to the psychoanalytic canon. Michael Angelo Tata’s essay “Introduction...the *object petit c*: Lacanian Materiality and the Society of the Sinthome” might be considered a response to the chapters in Section One that call for a revision of the Oedipal Complex and to Profit’s call for a psychoanalytically informed investigation of the realities of late Capitalism. Tata begins his essay with a review of the fundamental Lacanian concept of the *objet a* and traces its transformation into what he terms the *objet c*, or ‘object a’ transmuted into a commodity proper. As the core of Lacanian materiality, the *objet a* speaks to a version of desire according to which the self is a jug and the object, a plug. Basically, every object works this way for Lacan, stopping up a vessel which otherwise might overflow or spill its contents and cause the self in whom desire inheres the pains of incompleteness.

Since any object can do far more than this, Tata finds Lacan’s concept of the material world somewhat ontologically impoverished, and uses the mysteries of the commodity to enrich it, capitalizing upon Tata’s insight

into transcendent objecthood in the formula ‘in-x-more-than-x,’ which designates the upper limit of the object. For present American society, the symptom’s enjoyment is critical: hence it is for this “Society of the Sinthome” that the *objet c* carries meaning, setting in motion its psychological distress at the same time that it locates within that distress a source of intense de-individuated pleasure and beauty. A parcel of reality whose fragmented and partial character inspires a virtual, transient and phantasmic wholeness to absorb and overtake the split subject, the *objet c* marks an emotional turning point in the history of Lacanian angst, as in the wake of de-sublimation, hedonism becomes a kind of categorical imperative, and there is no longer any reason to lament the subject’s bar. This compulsory openness Lacanian commentator Slavoj Žižek heralds with a powerful ambivalence, and hence it is with his subjective responses to various aspects of contemporary popular culture that this invocation ends.

Whereas Tata challenges the notion of one of Lacan’s most fundamental concepts, Erica Galioto strives to produce an alliance across multiple psychoanalytic discourses by redefining Freud’s notion of transference. In her essay “‘A Transference of the Most Fortuitous Kind’: Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is The Night* and the Freudian Transference” Galioto makes a new contribution to scholarship on the novel by arguing that Dick Diver does not, in fact, disintegrate, but rather initiates his own recovery due entirely to what may be called a Freudian transference with Rosemary Hoyt. This article shows that Fitzgerald actually presents us with the two different dimensions of transference as Freud defines them: one that slips into a counter-transference with resistance on both sides; and one that veers into the love that Freud believes to be curative in the clinical setting. Noting the differences between the two transference situations allows readers to see that Rosemary functions as a catalyst to a new subjective position for Dick, not as the agent of his supposed demise. Viewing the transference from two different vantage points, one of resistance and one of love, permits us to generalize on both the potential danger and the potential success of employing love, or the transference as such, in cases of mental illness.

For both Tata and Galioto, psychoanalytic concepts must be interrogated before they can be extended in complex manners. Hilary Thompson continues this reading practice but she forces a confrontation among the various schools of psychoanalytic thought and the historical legacy of colonialism. In “From Necropolis to Polis: Melancholic Citizenship in *Baumgartner’s Bombay*” Thompson reads Anita Desai’s novel *Baumgartner’s Bombay* alongside first Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory,

and then postcolonial theory, to demonstrate the polarity yet ironic compatibility of psychic and social or political models of melancholia. Contending that melancholia has had a conceptually paradoxical status as an intensely withdrawn and imploded individual state yet also a tantalizing model for explaining collective historical traumas and large-scale social maladies, Thompson argues for the surprising possible interweaving of these models. First she departs from a view of Freud as having occluded melancholia's social and political dimensions, suggesting instead that his seminal 1917 study "Mourning and Melancholia" might be usefully read in light of his later melancholia-infused imaginings of ancient cities. Thompson then brings out the implications of conceiving of melancholia as and in a cityscape by intertwining interpretations based on Freud and later psychoanalytic theorists Abraham and Torok with ones derived from cultural theorists Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Anne Cheng. If both a narrow use of psychoanalytic theory and a wide-ranging application of cultural theory can equally diagnose and describe the complexities of such a blatantly melancholic and seemingly historically traumatized protagonist as Desai's Baumgartner, Thompson suggests that we can infer that melancholia might call forth both a psychic and cultural dimension in inter-relation.

The last chapter is a tour-de-force reading of "Camus's *The Stranger* and Miller's Ordinary Psychosis." Maire Jaanus performs a close reading of Camus's *The Stranger* in an effort to decipher the psychic functioning of its protagonist, in the process yielding rich insights into Lacanian notions of the unconscious and Henry Alain-Miller's ideas on the spectrum of psychosis. Interpreting Meursault as a persona suffering a deep disconnect from the symbolic and imaginary registers of psychic life, Jaanus illustrates the deep connection between Meursault's *bodily* ego, which fails to found itself in the imaginary, and the forms of the phenomenal world that surround and sustain it. As the literal supports of its self-coherence, this bodily ego depends essentially on union with its environment, from which it also sources its *jouissance*—a *jouissance* properly derived, in non-psychotic individuals, from symbolic interactions with the Other via language. Reading across the varying eras of Lacan's theorization of the unconscious, Jaanus traces Lacan's shift from conceptualizing the latter as the "speaking unconscious," which constantly registers and interprets language, to that of the "real unconscious," which is amorphous and formless *jouissance*. Jaanus performs a stunning reading of Meursault's shootings as a means of interrupting and preventing his engulfment into the terrors of the real unconscious. She also offers an original reading of Meursault's behaviors at the trial as an example of

ordinary psychosis; this reading responds to decades of arguments that assert an ethical quandary upon the killing. Jaanus complicates the idea of psychosis with the role of hate in Meursault's life; his delusions cease when he becomes hated—he gains verification of being in a relationship and not being alone. The chapter closes with a stunning reply to Edward Said's identity politics reading of the novel. Jaanus reveals how Said (and Freud) limits his readings to the phallic—to identity politics—and cannot imagine corporeal fantasies beyond the sexual.

I hope that the essays in this collection open scholars to the questions and concerns of psychoanalysis, in particular its applicability to literary studies in the twenty-first century. The authors represent just a small number of critics engaged in reformulating the ideas of psychoanalysis to be relevant and attuned to the insights gleaned from the explosion of theory and its backlash. And most importantly, I hope that you enjoy reading these fresh and thought provoking essays.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Simon Porzak is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley. His research focuses on the intersections of science and culture at the fin-de-siècle, with an emphasis on technology, genre fiction, and perversion. His dissertation examines the transformations of the female voice as love-object and locus of fetishistic desire in opera and literature from 1880 to 1910. He is also chief editor of the interdisciplinary journal *Qui Parle*.

Vera B. Profit is Professor of German and Comparative Literature at the University of Notre Dame. Her three previous monographs concern authors representing both French and German 20th Century poetry. However, this essay serves not only as a radical departure from those endeavors, but also affords a glimpse into her current book-length study. This project's provisional title reads as follows: *Toward a Literary and Psychological Definition of Human Evil: Dürrenmatt, Wilde and Frisch*. She earned her Ph.D. at the University of Rochester and, as part of her academic training, spent a year at the University of Vienna, another at the Sorbonne.

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Nicholas Ray is Lecturer in Critical and Cultural Theory in the School of English at Leeds University, UK. He is the author of *Tragedy and Otherness* (2009) and co-translator of Jean Laplanche's most recent volume, *Sexual* (forthcoming, 2011).

Michael Angelo Tata is the Executive Editor of the Sydney-based electronic journal of literature, art and new media nebu[lab]. His *Andy Warhol: Sublime Superficiality* arrived to critical acclaim from Intertheory Press in 2010. His essays appear most recently in the collections *Neurology and Modernity* (Palgrave Macmillan) and *Passage to Manhattan: Critical Essays on Meena Alexander* (Cambridge Scholars) and in the British journal *Parallax* (Routledge). Forthcoming poetry and graffiti will appear in the British journal *Rattle*.

Hilary Thompson is Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Bowdoin College, U.S.A. She has published on Virginia Woolf, Kazuo Ishiguro, Amitav Ghosh, and Anita Desai. Her current research focuses on concepts of eschatology in global modernist literature.

SECTION I.

THE QUESTION OF GENRE

CHAPTER ONE

NOTHING/ANIMATE: ROBOT, WOMAN, AND THE ENDS OF HUMANISM IN SPIELBERG'S *A.I.*

ADRIENNE M. SEELY

A.I. bookends its human narrative with two environmental catastrophes, the first global in its reach, the last cosmic. With a long shot showing ocean waves crashing toward the camera, the initial apocalyptic event of planet-wide flood is coldly, bluntly described in the film's opening as a dream-tragedy without context, a devastation of human life whose victims remain un-depicted, rendering it an unimaginable abstraction—an event left inconceivable to the film's viewer, and, as we will see, to the characters whose existences it must materially structure. The crashing waves dominating this opening shot establish an inhuman environment, a reign of natural forces which threaten human life yet are most remarkable for the impeccable indifference of their attack. In a mode of fairy-tale speech unsettled by the apocalyptic character of its information-content as well as the *sangfroid* of its tone, a patrician voice-over tells us that “those were the years” when the ice caps “had melted...because of the greenhouse gasses”—that is, as a straightforward symptom of human behavior. Described in the elusive middle voice—syntactically active and semantically passive—and with the causal clause attached *a posteriori*, the narration leaves the particular catalyzing power of human action oddly unspoken.

This devoiced character of humanity's role in the global disaster, and thus the sense that he is only its victim rather than its perpetrator, marks the presence of a distinct human anxiety over agency from the beginning of the film. As rendered by this narration, the consequences of mankind's heedless self-propagation, resounding through the medium of nature, have returned to humanity as its own destruction in the form of the oceans' “rising up [in order] to drown” the bastions of (clearly Anglo-European) human civilization: “Amsterdam, Venice, New York—forever lost.” The

quasi-revolutionary cast of the phrasing here marks nature's 'revolt' as being seen in the mold of a classic 'revenge-of-the-oppressed' narrative, but this very attribution of violent agency unfolds a claim to moral innocence enunciated by the narrator's voice, which both tells humanity's story and seems to speak its piece. Through its waste, its 'symptom' as a species, humanity has emitted an unconscious message, a provocation to the world which, despite merely enacting a stimulus/response mechanism, seems to him to 'answer' in the guise of a hostile otherness—an agency that he interprets as independent of him, while in fact only manifesting a symptom of his symptom.

Only in functioning as his symptom does nature become the agent of mankind's destruction, but as a manifestation of his devoiced consciousness, and perhaps guilt, with respect to the offense of his global action, it returns in the guise of something more. This flooding back into his consciousness is clearly an irruption of the Real, a material excrescence which takes on moral valences as the automatism of the response is taken to signify a form of (to use Professor Hobby's phrase) "self-motivated" 'answer' from the Real. The oceans' implacable rise thus implies the raging of an expelled superego, projected onto the Real's material automatism, onto the indifferent medium of nature—humanity's repressed guilt punishing it, by way of a symbolic imbrication that manages and preserves humanity's own symbolic order against the onslaught of the Real. The flood, after all, has the potential to destroy not only humanity's physical existence, but also its sense of itself as a species—as 'the' species in fact—as it becomes aware of itself as a form of life among others, a form as threatened and contingent as any other.

The view of Nature as a reckless, 'causeless' principle of punishment allows humanity to deny both its own guilt and awareness of its harm to nature, and the pure reflexivity of its own destruction. Encountering it in a mode of pseudo-subjectivity, as persecutory superego, allows him to forget that "the Other does not exist" as a closed, consistent order, and to thus avoid confronting the blind, contingent automatism constitutive of his *own* symbolic order, his superego imperatives.

Layers of denial are perceptible in this subtle, powerful opening; firstly, that mankind as a species has come to an awareness of itself as threatened, and we see this denial in Professor Hobby's speech, which asserts an idealizing counter-narration that lauds the artificial being as the "dream of man," rather than avowing the material necessity, to man's survival, of robot labor. Secondly, that the threat is posed by an automated 'response' from a dream-like Nothingness—from nothing, that is, other than humanity itself.

By casting its symptom as an other to itself, mankind explains and controls the cataclysm—the break in the boundary between the Symbolic order and the Real figured by the flood. The very transparency of nature’s mechanism, its uncanny indifference to human life, necessitates viewing it as an entity with affect and agency, as a thing ambiguously humanistic and causelessly hostile to human life. Humanity maintains its self-consciousness by legitimating the existence of an otherness that is nothing but his own symptom—the coded message in which the subject receives from the Other its own message in reverse form, the truth of its desire—perhaps the desire to be punished for the eminence of his crime. Bringing the flood into the realm of the symbolic by interpreting it as a subject, as other, denies its most essential, radical otherness, and makes it party to the pact linking subjects together in a single action, in the symbolic web—as Lacan describes the symbolic order itself as the unified “human action *par excellence*.”¹ By bringing it into his language, he makes it the very part and parcel of humanist ideology. The view of nature as an other to himself, as a subject, paradoxically makes it possible for mankind to confirm that there exists *nothing but* the human.

Nature is the first entity in *A.I.* that emerges as mankind’s insurgent symptom in the Lacanian sense, but, as the opening voice-over describes, as humanity struggles to maintain itself and its self-consciousness in denial of the potential (literal) sea change or ‘horizon shift’ invoked by global devastation—we quickly meet surrogates. Indeed, to borrow an idea from Slavoj Žižek’s analysis of the nostalgia of certain Holocaust films, “perhaps the trauma [itself] is the fantasy we construct to protect ourselves from something else.”² The paranoid sense of the flood as persecutory superego that humanity seems to embrace here might already be a false attempt to recover—by nostalgic hyperbolization of a ‘real trauma,’ the Flood—from the *actual* real kernel of trauma at work.

In this connection, the opening narration makes it clear that the massive global death-toll of the flood is explicitly structured by the injustice of economic disparity: human society filters the destructive force of nature in such a way that “millions were displaced...hundreds of millions of people starved in poorer countries; elsewhere a high degree of prosperity reigned.” The implication of this curt summary is the annihilation

¹ Jacques Lacan, *Freud’s Papers on Technique 1953-54*, trans. John Forrester (New York: Norton, 1991), 230.

² Slavoj Žižek, “The Superego and the Act,” (lecture, The European Graduate School, Saas-Fee, Switzerland, August 1999), <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/zizek/zizek-superego-and-the-act-1999.html>.

of the poor, and the survival and prosperity of those already prosperous—indeed, that “people” starved and, in a sort of capitalist wet dream, “prosperity”—almost an entity unto itself—survived. The film does not show the starvation of the poor; the focus of the story on those who survived thus characterizes the narrative as taking place in a realm that has been and must be protected, not only from death and poverty but from the survivors’ *awareness* of them, by their cordoning-off of islands of “prosperity”—suggesting a human race maintaining an ethically moribund culture in ecologically fragile pockets of civilization, buffered and served by the beings that repopulate the extinct human laborer-underclass anew (and improved)—the robots, who serve as “so essential an economic link in the chain mail of society,” according to our narrator.

Perhaps, then, the ‘true’ trauma dissimulated by ‘Real’ trauma consists in the enormous injustice of humanity’s global economic structures, the huge disparity of wealth among the nations of the world, and in the levels of human life, indeed in the definition of what is (or what will be) human, resulting from the gap. The consequence of the flood is not only that the developed nations finally rid themselves (through no apparent fault of their own, by an ‘autonomous’ act of nature) of the parasite of third-world dependents, and the endless obligation to aid them, to share the wealth, but further, that the survivor class is even legitimated in preventing ‘the poor’ from ever *existentially* reoccurring. “Most countries in the developed world introduced legal sanctions to strictly license pregnancies” so that no human would starve, i.e. so that the always-hungry, resource-consumptive poor—unlike robots, who “are never hungry” and “don’t consume resources”—would cease to exist, and more prosperous, developed nations need never again share wealth, because they are the only survivors, the only *humans*. The human reaction to the flood is thus truly a “false act” in psychoanalytic terms—an acting-out of a symptom—in that it can only be fully grasped as a reaction to this other, truer trauma which it disavows, displaces, and represses.

This opening narration treads a fine line, however, between presenting a meaning that we can assume to be humanity’s own, and a making-strange of humanity’s processes of explanation. The narrator doesn’t seem so much to endorse what it voices—the reclamation of the flood of the Real by humanity’s Symbolic order, its putting it into the terms of its own language, law, and community—as to remain ambiguously distanced and estranged from that process. The flood and its chilly retelling prefigure the final freeze at the film’s conclusion, in which all human life and discourse end—it is a portent of the human species’ extinction that is actively negated in the human story that shelters between these paired cosmic

events. As we later discover, an alien entity, a life-form succeeding the human, performs this narrative exegesis in full knowledge of humanity's teleology of extinction, thus perhaps necessitating an interlude of disavowal, or at least withholding, of its knowledge in order to present the human story. In view of this teleology, and of the narrative dimensions of a primary disavowal of mankind's mortality, the film's theme of 'freeze-frame' could be applied to the entirety of the human story—with significant implications for the aesthetic of masochism, of which disavowal and freeze-frame are defining formal features, that is developed in the film as a whole.

The tension between these anthropocentric and anthropological-materialist (or 'alien') perspectives makes for the introduction's rich ambiguity³—but contextualized by the film as a whole, the deeper resonance of its account lies in the language of the phrase "the icecaps had melted," in this middle voice in which agent and action melt together, rather than in the opaque *a posteriori* explanation "because of the greenhouse gasses," with its simultaneous oblique masking and projection of the ghost of an anterior human agency, that attributes man's impotence to his omnipotence. In an act of bad faith, humanity presents itself with an Other that it pretends to believe in, yet 'knows' to be only a reflection of itself. The meaning of this structure of symptom and attribution of Otherness is not that radical otherness is illusory—at the end of the film the flooded oceans freeze wholly in middle voice, for no apparent reason, and without the assistance of the human.

In the scene that follows, we learn that the problem with robots is that, in their current state, they do not allow humanity to disavow its disbelief in them; that is, they don't allow humanity to believe in their subjective autonomy despite 'knowing very well' that they are mere machines. As opposed to the flood, the robot is too transparently man's symptom; the loop of its creator's subjectivity, even as it passes through the robot-symptom, remains too transparently solipsistic. The opening narration transitions to the Cybertronics boardroom scene that follows by a track-out shot from a statue emblematic of the idealized Robot class, pulling backwards through the rain-spotted window through which the statue is

³ The alien narration's materialist perspective makes the opening a sort of Marxist parable, a classic description of dialectical-material shift in which changes in the economic conditions brought on by the flood compel concurrent shifts in social, political, and intellectual culture. This clear view of the material exigencies driving humanity's creation of robots impacts the viewers' subsequent understanding of the two most important, seemingly "naturalized" social institutions that make use of robots: the corporation and the family.

seen, and panning left to focus on the face of Professor Hobby. Hobby's subsequent speech is delivered with his back both to the statue, and in a sense to the frank dialectical-materialism of the narration that has contextualized the robots' role, as well as to the rain-spotted window onto the view of the statue which is marked by the liquid traces of global catastrophe.

What follows is a scene of Romantic-intellectual rhetoric and masculine rage, a corporate boardroom speech modeled visually on a sort of 19th-century academic auditorium lecture, an 'open,' even 'Socratic' dialogue addressing fundamental moral and epistemological questions—which ends, however, in a blunt assertion of sovereign power. Hobby's first words establish his vision as idealistic: "To create an artificial being has been the dream of man since the beginning of Science"—and his positioning with respect to the statue and the screen overlaying it, in addition to his distinct squinting and upward gaze, establish this idealism as myopic with respect to everything we have just learned about his world.

The key feature of Hobby's role as demiurge, however, will be shown to be not this benign romantic-idealist myopia, but rather a subtending sadistic desire that succors it. Sadism figures here specifically in Deleuze's sense of its formal properties, which appear in abundance in Hobby's speech and actions. Hobby's self-election as a primary Father in the film is key to understanding the nature of Monica and David's relationship, and David's 'quest' as a device distinct from the narrative trajectory of 'Oedipal family-romance' typical of most Hollywood films. In criticism of *A.I.*, in fact, the catch-all of the "Oedipal" seems frequently used as a meet substitute for the category of the psychoanalytic generally;⁴ this supposed characteristic of the narrative garners a special degree of disgust from critics who see "Oedipal wish-fulfillment" in the final scene in which Monica and David sleep together, which, I hope to demonstrate, is generated from a distinctly non-Oedipal conception of the symbolic in view of the film as a whole.

The rhetorical choreography of Hobby's speech, its dynamic of surprise violence and revelation, of eliciting audience interaction or cueing their signs of approval only to deny or thwart them seconds later, creates the impression of a masterfully precise manipulation of his—diegetic and

⁴ Cf. (in an otherwise admirable article) James Naremore, "Love and Death in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*," *Michigan Quarterly Review* (Spring 2005): 258, 259, 269, 274, 275, 281.

non-diegetic⁵—spectators’ attention and response. Affecting audience response, however, is ultimately shown not to aim at changing its mind, and the appearance of the speech as something of a pseudo-academic ‘lecture’⁶ brilliantly underscores the complete foreignness of pedagogy or persuasion to Hobby’s desire. Deleuze’s description of a Sadean use of language fits Hobby’s speech perfectly. As Deleuze writes, the argumentative Sadean protagonist “is not even attempting to prove anything to anyone, but to perform a demonstration related essentially to the solitude and omnipotence of its author.”⁷ An analysis of the affective techniques of Hobby’s speech as a whole becomes almost superfluous in view of its ending, which nullifies the substantial appearance of pedagogy, persuasion, intellectual openness, and dialogic equality of *responsiveness* in the argument’s power dynamics, all of which Hobby superficially evinces.

In reply to the question of what obligation a human holds in return to a robot who can love, Hobby’s final rhetorical gesture, his ‘counter-argument’ to the question of the morality of creating a robot who can love, and of the ethical obligations of its creator or master, is the statement “Didn’t God create man to love *him*?” This ultimate rhetorical question not only doesn’t require a response, but constitutes precisely a denial of the *possibility* of answer—of the very idea of open dialogue or of a process of questioning power through the dialectics of argument. By both the question’s self-answering form, and by its reference to unquestionable divine power, Hobby likens himself to an omnipotent authority and annihilates the possibility of debate—as his audience seems to understand, since the discussion immediately dissolves into babble following it. Both with respect to his robot scions and to his authoritative role in the argument, Hobby places himself beyond the obligation to have any accountability, responsibility, or true *response* to potential interlocutors (which response, however, is precisely what he requires of his robots, and, he insists, not merely as simulation). Like Sade’s philosophizing libertines, Hobby, perhaps unwittingly, reveals that “the point of the

⁵ As I discuss more extensively later, the film spectator’s awareness of this division is created by the camera itself, which at the scene’s end becomes perceptible as transitioning from being a diegetic viewer, to being almost a non-diegetic viewer, by foregrounding the role-playing aspect of its status as an audience.

⁶ Cf. not only the academically-styled auditorium replete with anatomical robot-skeletons, but also the dowdy (or matronly) vestments sported by Professor Hobby.

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone, 1991), 19.

exercise is to show that the demonstration is identical to violence.”⁸ His final statement evinces that his “reasoning does not have to be shared by the person to whom it is addressed any more than pleasure is meant to be shared by the object from which it is derived”⁹—or, as it might be more appropriate to say—any more than pain is meant to be shared by the subject that inflicts it.

The final camera movement of the scene attests to this violence and unilateralism—to the audience’s own pre-existing understanding that they are there just to *attend*, to *audit*, to *obey*, that their apparent intellectual interaction stems from a subtending compelled obeisance, and that when released from attention, the ‘debate’ becomes irrelevant to them. Similarly, the robot-secretary character, Sheila, when released from labor, attends to her surface, overtly and disquietingly displaying her programming to be-there-to-be-looked-at, being-for-the-other, to *serve* (as surface). The mobile camera had previously seemed invested in attending to the dynamics of Hobby’s speech, as did his audience. It follows the speaker, swivels to acknowledge respondents and questions, or focuses on Hobby when his inner dynamics are most important, echoing the marked ‘attentive’ quality of the diegetic spectators, who follow Hobby’s rhetorical cues—for example, in distinctly canned outbursts of laughter and applause. The disintegration into babble following Hobby’s final reference to God, and the camera’s wandering, absent-minded pan of the room, which seems to land on Sheila’s face by chance, creates an abrupt *dépaysement* from the scene even before it ends, a non-purposiveness of the camera that points up its previous over-obeisance, almost making it seem that it had been ‘feigning’ interest.¹⁰ In its abrupt non-responsiveness, the camera seems to

⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ This camera movement might be considered highly resonant with two strategies of the psychoanalyst advocated by Lacan: the “short session” and the “analyst’s abstinence.” Both aim to thwart the subject’s tendency to identify with the analyst as an ideal ego, and to attribute an independent objectivity to the “reality” perceived through that identification. The analyst must undercut these imaginary relations (“empty” speech), which sustain the illusion of coherent ego modeled on the imaginary other to which speech is addressed; abruptly terminating the session at unpredictable moments upsets the patient’s attempt to sustain an illusion in which he is already alienated, and discloses a “full” speech that more accurately reflects the subject’s position in the symbolic order, his relation to the (capital *O*) Other, the symbolic order, whose genuine alterity thus becomes manifest. According to Lacan, the analyst’s abstinence from the role of imaginary other or ideal ego, in resistance to the patient’s attempt to address him as such, makes the patient differentiate between the “I” who speaks and the idealized ego projected