Few contemporary critical intellectuals have been able to navigate the currents of both high theory and popular cultural critique with such facility as has Slovenian psychoanalytic theorist Slavoj Žižek. One of the most prolific of today’s theorists, Žižek opines on an impressive range of popular and arcane subjects, from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to popular culture, from analytic philosophy to cyber-culture. Known as the “The Giant of Ljubljana,” Žižek is indisputably one of the world’s most important cultural critics.

Žižek uses the interview below to make several surprising revelations about his current thinking and his critical practice. For example, at one time he believed that we are indeed living in a postmodern age, that we had made a discernible break with modernity. (He once even argued that the much-maligned Jürgen Habermas is in actuality a postmodern thinker.) He has abandoned this position, however, claiming that we are only now entering the final phase of modernity. Postmodernity, according to Žižek, is a myth that we have invented in order to sustain modernization. That is, postmodernism is “simply the ideological self-perception of modernism.” He also takes issue with his former belief that psychoanalytic theory can provide the “missing support” of the Marxist theory of ideology. He now has little faith that psychoanalysis can help social theory resolve its problems. He especially distrusts attempts to directly apply psychoanalysis to large social issues, “where in a cheap way you explain social events through some psychoanalytic concept.” Nonetheless, psychoanalytic theory does provide a conceptual vocabulary that enables us to understand certain individual and mass behaviors, according to Žižek. For example, an analysis of the logic of fetishism can help explain how people function in the face of trauma. And psychoanalytic theory is of use in analyzing the paradoxes of consumer culture and commodity fetishism, so long as the analysis remains “at the surface,” not at some deep level. For Žižek, such
uses of psychoanalytic theory are “crucial”; in fact, given the frenetic pace of today’s capitalism, we need psychoanalysis “more than ever.”

In discussing feminist theory, Žižek argues that the patriarchal logic of courtly love creates a deadlock in contemporary feminism. Much more dangerous than the overt sexist or misogynist is the person who engages in the false elevation of the Other: “This is the most dangerous form of today’s anti-feminism. It’s not saying that women are inferior, or that they’re stupid, or that they should be controlled.” Rather, it is operating as if women have some essential access to “an original intuition of wisdom” by virtue of their sex. And he takes issue with those who attempt to subvert patriarchal logic by considering sex to be “a free field” where we continually renegotiate our identities: “I don’t go along with those who think—and here I may be disagreeing a bit with Judith Butler—that questions of feminine identity or sexual difference can be solved simply by a different positioning or by a restructuring of your identity.” Far from being subversive, such attempts simply describe “how things are today.” Žižek believes that it is time to “reassert” femininity: “We shouldn’t be afraid of claiming that there is something that specifically identifies feminine subjectivity. I’m not afraid here of the term ‘essentialism,’ the idea that then you fix the definition of the feminine.” In discussing his notion of the feminine, Žižek claims that women are capable of a “radical negativity” that men are “too weak” to sustain. That is, a “truly horrifying” dimension of feminine subjectivity is that women are able to “abandon everything for nothing” (as Sethe does in Toni Morrison’s Beloved), whereas men must appeal to some sacrificial logic (abandoning everything for country or ideals).

Žižek is particularly concerned about the increased attention to multiculturalism. While he is of course in favor of the peaceful coexistence of all ethnicities and races, he is disturbed by the recent tendency to contend that the true political struggles are struggles over identity politics. Such a focus serves to depoliticize economic issues and class struggle. He points to the fact that in today’s Europe, the exploitation of workers by the managerial class reemerges as a “problem of culturally exploiting immigrants,” thus deflecting attention away from structural issues of economic injustice. The crucial task of the New Left, says Žižek, is to repoliticize economy itself; otherwise we risk opening space for the New Right to claim to be the champion of worker rights: “I distrust the shift of problematic to multiculturalist topics. For me, the big problem . . . is that the New Left has abandoned the politicization of economics.”

Perhaps most shocking is Žižek’s admission that he has written and
published film criticism on films that he has not seen. He points in particular to a chapter in *Enjoy your Symptom* in which he analyzes Roberto Rossellini’s films: “I haven’t seen the films. I tried to, but they are so boring. They’re so boring!” Similarly, he admits that he has also published critiques of books that he has not read: “Often I don’t have time to read the books about which I write.” Instead, he relies on the British version of *Cliffs Notes*. He even jokes that the “ultimate dream” would be to compose a *Cliffs Notes* synopsis of a non-existent book: “If reactions to the *Cliffs Notes* volume are good, then you write the work.” To be fair, it is impossible to determine to what degree the expansive and loquacious Žižek is being purposely provocative, rhetorically overstating the case in order to illustrate his concept of “interpassivity,” the state in which a subject is active but displaces onto another the fundamental passivity of his or her being. The one thing that even his critics admit to is that Žižek’s brilliance and command of a profusion of diverse discourses is truly impressive, so one could hardly accuse him of laziness or of not reading or grasping the texts he grapples with.

Indeed, what makes Slavoj Žižek so exhilarating to read (and to listen to) is the overwhelming range of subjects—both popular and technical—at his command. Any given discussion will invariably move effortlessly from Hitchcock to Lacan to Kant to *The Matrix* to Marx to the construction of French toilets to the genome project to the construction of identity in cyberspace and on and on. And it is this very free-ranging excursion through a panoramic landscape of intellectual issues that has contributed substantially to his popularity throughout the world. Thus, it is especially appropriate that he ends this interview by thanking his public for sustaining his immense popularity. “I am well understood,” he exclaims. “I have nothing to complain about.”

Q. You have written an impressive number of works, from books on philosophy and psychoanalytic theory to books and articles on popular culture to newspaper articles on current affairs. Do you consider yourself a writer?

A. No. No, in the sense that for me a writer is someone for whom style matters. In an almost old-fashioned, metaphysical sense, I am obsessed with the idea that I have to render, to transmit. I don’t have an aesthetic attitude toward writing, in the sense of caring how I place words and so on; the only thing that matters to me is whether my point comes
through. There is even, I would say, a certain cruelty or ruthlessness in
it, in that I really don’t care how my prose is formulated. I’m never
concerned about whether it would sound better if I’d phrase it in a more
elegant way. The only thing that attracts me at the level of style is that
from time to time I try to introduce some self-ironical inside joke. For
example, all my friends know that I have three or four repetitive turns
of phrase that I use all the time. The one I use most often is “on the
contrary” or “in contrast”; the other one is “in the first approach it seems
to be such and such, but if you look closer you’ll see that it’s actually
something else.” That’s as far as I go.

I feel a certain ruthlessness about writing: I try to identify myself as
a thinking machine. Maybe this is connected with the fact that from my
youth I was never tempted to write literature or, God forbid, poetry.
There is something in my nature that absolutely prohibits it. I found it
obscene, as if for me writing poetry would be masturbating in public,
exposing myself too much. This is why, even with authors like Jacques
Derrida (whom I am in dialogue with all the time and appreciate very
much), I sometimes have this problem: even though I admire a lot of his
essays, I nonetheless tend to skip the first third of them—which, as you
know, is usually the part before he passes on to the argument. Before
finally getting to the point, you have to go through certain ballet
pirouettes, like “Am I writing this article or is this article writing me?”
That’s my attitude: pure, cruel self-instrumentalization. Maybe my
effort to erase traces of myself from my writing is part of my obse-
sional nature. I don’t want to be present in the events that I participate
in. I try to become invisible. For example, when I stay at a hotel and I
must leave the room for a couple of hours, I try to make it as if I hadn’t
been there. This has more to do, maybe, with psychoanalytic questions
such as whether I perceive myself as someone who shouldn’t exist—
but that’s too existential to bring up at this time.

Q. Even though you frequently address very complex issues in your work,
your prose is quite accessible. Would you tell us about your writing
process? Do you revise? Use a computer?

A. Computers were invented for me—by God or whomever. I cannot even
imagine how I functioned before them. You should know two things
about my style of writing. First, I am absolutely horrified of the writing
process, so I have an obsessional strategy: I divide the process in two.
Initially, I just put down my notes. I say to myself, “Let’s formulate this
a little bit, but this is not yet ‘writing proper’; I’m simply putting down
my notes.” Then at some point I say to myself, “Now, everything is
already written; it’s just a matter of composing it.” The writing process is an absolute horror for me; it’s an unimaginable anxiety to say to myself that I am really writing. It has to be either preparation or maybe just what in psychoanalytic dream theory is called “secondary elaboration,” where you just put the finishing touches on—but never “writing.” So that’s one feature of my writing process. The other is that I never write in my head. I don’t begin with an entire line of thought in my head. I write in complex units—let’s call them “abstract units”—in which each unit develops one line of thought, usually in three to four pages, and these units more or less correspond to the subchapter headings in my books. I simply write these units and then it’s a matter of how to combine them into larger units. But, again, I never start in advance with a whole line of thought. So, I have an idea and the main task is to make sure that this idea will get through. This is why I don’t consider my using a lot of examples to be part of a “style.” To me, it’s simply to make completely sure that the idea comes through. And then it’s only a matter of combining these ideas. That’s how I do it. You can imagine how much I had to copy, cut, and paste—using scissors and tape—before personal computers, so PC’s come in very handy. Again, for me the act of writing is an absolute horror. I try to do everything to avoid it.

Q. Given the impressive range of subjects of and forums for your writing, it must be difficult to consider “an audience” when you are writing. Do you imagine a particular audience when you write?

A. No. That’s very interesting, but no—except in a very general way, in the sense that maybe some people think that I enjoy all those obscene examples I use, but it’s the other way around. Perhaps it’s a strangely perverse universe, but I really enjoy writing abstract theory, but then I feel a strange pressure to add all those examples as the—how do you call it?—frosting on the wedding cake.

Q. In “Fantasy as a Political Category,” you illustrate Lacan’s thesis that the unconscious is outside, not “hidden in any unfathomable depths.” As an example, you suggest that the differences in how German, French, and U.S. toilets are constructed reveal different cultural relations to bodies and excrement: “A certain ideological perception of how the subject should relate to the unpleasant excrement which comes from within our body is clearly discernible in it.” Would you speak more about how psychoanalytical theory can serve political critique?

A. First, let me return to this example of the toilets. I don’t think it’s just an example, because in the same paragraph I refer to Lacan himself,
who clearly states—ironically, but I think nonetheless truthfully—that one of the possible definitions of "humans," of a principal difference between animals and humans, is related to the problem of what to do with excrement. For animals, this is not a problem. (Okay, there are some mystical theories that some elephants have some problems with excrement, but, generally, this is true.) I went much further in this direction in my new text about Alfred Hitchcock, where I analyze perhaps the most successful scene from *Psycho*. Norman Bates is cleaning the bathroom, and the only trace left there is a small piece of paper in the toilet. This specifically Hitchcockian idea of how you pass into another reality is a much better version than that in *The Matrix*. I claimed that the way we phenomenologically perceive the toilet is that excrement just disappears there; it's really like a kind of everyday-life science fiction. Of course, rationally we know that it goes through canalization and so on, but, nonetheless, it is no longer part of our ordinary environment. The toilet is a kind of a black hole where it disappears. This is how I tried to read my favorite scene from Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*, which I still think is his best movie, apart from *Rumble Fish*. Remember the scene toward the end where Gene Hackman is inspecting an empty hotel room? He presses the flush button on the toilet and then all this blood comes back up. This is in a way the ultimate horror, that what you thought had gone away returns; it's really like some unspeakably horrible objects returning from some alternative reality. So, again, this wasn't a neutral example.

Now, let me return to the question about psychoanalytic theory and political critique. First, I do not trust so-called directly applied psychoanalysis where in a cheap way you explain social events through some psychoanalytic concept. Nonetheless (and now I would like to be very precise), I claim that in order to locate where ideology is today—especially in our postmodern, post-political, post-ideological universe, where ideology no longer matters and where we are just enlightened cynics who can accept everything—psychoanalysis is crucial, not in the sense of looking into some deep trauma, but in order to remain at the surface. For example, consider racism today. Officially we tend to be more or less enlightened, but the crucial way that racism nonetheless survives today is precisely at the level of daily practices, where some details annoy you: "Nothing against the blacks, but they smell bad, and their music disturbs me." I think that phenomena like racism and sexism have to be analyzed at this level of *jouissance*, disgust, or whatever—at this very material, almost physical level. The second
point is that even at the more general level we need recourse to
psychoanalysis in order to really grasp the paradoxes of consumer
culture, commodity fetishism, and so on. Let me elaborate by giving a
brief example. The official line is that we live in a so-called consumer
society. I tend to doubt this. The figure that more and more interests me
is the miser. The miser is a very interesting figure. Why? Because
usually our representation of desire is that it is something that explodes,
goes over the top—like a wild transgressive desire to have sex until you
drop unconscious, or to kill someone, or to eat like a pig, and so on. And
then ethics introduces moderation. Civilization is supposed to say,
“No, you must learn to stop.” But the nice paradox of the miser is that
he makes an excess out of moderation itself. So, as Lacan puts it clearly
in one of his early seminars, if you want to grasp, to figure, what desire
is at its purest, don’t think about a serial killer or about Tristan’s love
for Isolde—this going beyond all limits—but imagine instead the
proverbial figure of the miser who comes home in the evening, looks
around to see if anybody is looking, opens his chest, and just gazes at
the object of his desire, not even touching it. This object is untouchable;
there is always some kind of impotence linked to desire, in the sense of
“I have it, though it is of no use to me.” You maintain a respectful
distance. So, what’s my point? My point is that today in capitalism this
standard logic of the miser is in a way turned around. We all know those
well-known lines from *Romeo and Juliet* where Juliet gives her
definition of love: “The more I give to thee, the more I have.” We do
have consumption, or investing, or spending, but it’s spending as the
mode of appearance of its opposite, of thrift. Think, for example, about
how advertising addresses us today. It’s not, “Spend! Shop till you
drop.” It’s, “You can buy one, but if you buy two, you have a five-
percent discount.” For me, the model of consumption in today’s society
is the typical toothpaste package where the upper thirty percent is
marked, “30% for free.” Of course, my temptation is always to say,
“Okay, cut it off and give me just the free part.” But the idea is that you
are never interpellated to want simply to spend. It’s the proverbial (and
also male chauvinist) story of the wife returning home and saying,
“Honey, I spent two hundred dollars. Instead of buying one jacket, I
bought three in order to get a discount.” It’s the idea that the more you
spend, the more you economize, and I think this is absolutely crucial for
the economy of so-called consumer society. The ultimate proof for me
is the figure of the junkie. The junkie, the drug addict, is the one who
really spends, who goes to the end in spending. The junkie is a figure
that we all fear because with him it is pure expenditure; he is the true subject of consumption. Today, the junkie is the ultimate threat, whereas he wasn’t, let’s say, one hundred years ago. Back then, respectable people were secretly smoking opium, and everybody knew it. So, you see, psychoanalysis is crucial for analyzing how ideology functions—not in big generalities, like “wars express or articulate a death drive,” but at the utmost daily level.

Q. In Mapping Ideology, you suggest that psychoanalytic theory can perhaps provide the “missing support” of the Marxist theory of ideology. Would you outline how psychoanalytic theory can contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of the workings of ideology?

A. First, I must say that more and more I am critical of this thesis of mine because throughout the history of Marxism, or of the Marxist theory of ideology (and here I am following my friend Étienne Balibar, who has already made this point), Marxism was in crisis practically all the time. When social reality didn’t fit revolutionary expectations, the answer was often sought in psychoanalysis, at least with certain Marxists: something went wrong, people were manipulated, their unconscious impulses were manipulated, so let’s look to psychoanalysis for help. This was Wilhelm Reich’s solution: “In a revolutionary situation in Germany, instead of socialism we have fascism; what can we do? Oh, psychoanalysis will help; we can analyze repression, the nuclear family, the Oedipal complex, and so on.” I distrust this. I don’t think that psychoanalysis will help social theory resolve its problems. But how can it contribute? Let me give you an example. In today’s society, in our post-ideological era, it’s practically impossible to understand how ideology functions without the crucial distinction between symptom and fetish. “Symptom” is simply the old notion that we live in a universe of repression, that the very air we are breathing is an ideological generalized lie, and then the repressed truth somehow returns in symptoms. Let’s say that you have a beloved person who has died and that you try to repress it, not to think about it, but unfortunately wherever you turn something reminds you of him or her. Perhaps this person liked a certain drink, and you go to a bar and see someone drinking that same drink and you think, “Oh my God, I cannot escape it.” It returns all the time. In our so-called cynical era, however, even at the everyday level, ideology functions in a way that is much closer to the notion of fetish. “Fetish” is exactly, almost in a mirror-like way, the opposite of symptom. If a symptom is the return of the truth in the universalized lie, a fetish is the little lie that enables you to sustain the
truth. In a way, I even have a certain admiration for the fetishist. What
would be the fetishist’s way of coping with the death of someone close?
The fetishist would stick to some object, something that was close to
that person. Let’s take a pathetic, melodramatic example: your wife or
husband dies of cancer, and he or she had a pet dog or cat. You stick to
it, and this object then embodies the disavowal. The paradox and the
beauty of the fetishist is that you can then approach reality in a totally
realistic way. I’m not dreaming here. I’ve been speaking to a friend of
mine to whom this happened. My God, this was really a tragedy, and
it’s so traumatic (and it’s a proverbial story). My friend’s twenty-three
year old wife was pregnant and was very happy; when she went to the
doctor she learned that she had breast cancer, and in three months she
was finito. It happens that the husband, whom we all admire, functioned
normally after the death of his wife—not only normally, but he was able
to talk about it. It was nothing; he discussed with us how he was, and
everything functioned. Why? Because he had his fetish. The idea is: “I
can accept the truth because I stick to my fetish.” I was myself shocked
at how life followed melodrama when at a certain point the predictable
thing happened: his poor cat, the fetish, was run over by a car. The man
was hospitalized; in a moment everything disintegrated because he was
no longer able to sustain the disavowal. The nicety of the fetishist’s
position is that it is cynically realistic: I can talk about everything;
nothing is repressed, because it’s a little bit of a lie that allows me to
sustain the truth. In our cynical era in which nothing is repressed, we
apparently have very cruelly realistic attitudes, that in order to sustain
ourselves we all have our small fetishes. Look for the fetishes. Look for
the small lies that enable you to confront the universe openly in a
cynically realistic way.

This fetishist logic is more and more crucial, even at the religious
level. For example, one of the main fetishes of Western progressives
has been that they were able to disavow real, existing socialism but still
cling to—I’m tempted to call it “Western”—Buddhism. That is,
Buddhism today clearly functions as a fetish. (If Max Weber were alive
today, he would definitely write a book called The Taoist Ethic and the
Spirit of Global Capitalism.) It’s a fetish in the sense that the basic
lesson of New Age Asian wisdom is that you don’t even try to cope with
life: the situation is too complex; just accept it as a game of appearances
but maintain a proper distance; be aware that it’s all a superficial play
of appearances, and so on. This is a perfect attitude to survive the mad,
accelerated, frenetic rhythm of today’s capitalism without going crazy:
you always have a minimum of distance, but you can participate fully in the game. What always amuses me when I read propaganda for these quick nirvana courses is that they don’t only say that you will be able to withdraw to a spiritual island of peace; they are wise enough to add that this will enable you to function even better when you return to the game. So here we have another example of how the fetishist logic functions. I believe that we need psychoanalysis more than ever in order to understand this paradoxical functioning. We should just bear in mind that psychoanalysis is not at its most elementary the old-fashioned logic of hysterical repression: I don’t want to know about it and then it returns in symptoms. Today, we’ve passed from symptom to the functioning of fetish.

Q. In *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, you lament that we are “far from inventing a new ‘formula’ capable of replacing the matrix of courtly love,” creating, therefore, a deadlock in contemporary feminism. You argue that the semblance of a man serving his Lady “provides women with the fantasy-substance of their identity whose effects are real: it provides them with all the features that constitute so-called femininity and define woman.” When women oppose patriarchal domination, they “simultaneously undermine the fantasy-support of their own ‘feminine’ identity.” But even in relationships conceived as reciprocal, the courtly love matrix persists. Can you envision a way to escape this deadlock, a way to set aside the courtly love matrix and to move toward a relationship not dependent on patriarchal ideology?

A. Yes, absolutely. I think, though, that this patriarchal logic of courtly love is more refined than it may appear. Let’s not forget that the man is in the *false* position of serving the lady. It’s a false elevation of the lady. If I were a woman, I would be extremely sensitive not to those points where I am directly attacked in an old-fashioned male chauvinistic way, but where I am falsely praised. This is the most dangerous form of today’s anti-feminism. It’s not saying that women are inferior, or that they’re stupid, or that they should be controlled. Rather, it’s something like, “In our Cartesian civilization, men tend to dominate and exploit, and it’s only women who still have a holistic way of being.” Here’s my standard story, and I like to repeat it. If I were a girl and my boyfriend were to tell me, “Listen, wash my socks, fix my supper, and serve it to me,” I would say, “Okay, maybe I can retrain him, so I’ll stick with him.” If I were a girl, and my boyfriend were to come home and tell me, “You know, I envy you. I’m an alienated, Cartesian subject, but you can still access an original intuition of wisdom,” I would pack my
luggage and drive away as soon as possible. This is the true danger, this false elevation of the Other.

This false elevation of the Other is also what interests me in my contemporary work, which is why I find the notion of Eurocentrism to be problematic. We should always remember that part of Eurocentrism is the belief, the presupposition, that we were somehow deprived of some original jewel of wisdom that is then to be sought elsewhere, either in Tibet, or with women, or somewhere else. It is the idea that true wisdom is elsewhere and that through a difficult and adventurous journey we can rediscover it. This was at work from the very beginning of colonization—from the very beginning of the West, even. As we all know, for Plato Egypt was the place of lost wisdom (as, incidentally, it is today with the airport bestseller *From Atlantis to The Sphinx*). It’s interesting that the very same people who destroyed Tibet idealized it. The first occupation of Tibet was not by the Chinese but by the English in 1904. The same guy who ordered the slaughter of hundreds of Tibetan soldiers, Colonel Francis Younghusband, said, “I no longer will be able to hate a human person. I feel this deepest spiritual exaltation.” So the problem is how to break out of (and this is the lesson of courtly love) this false elevation of the Other. The same is true here in the States with the Native Americans. The book that I think is really the best antidote to racism and that I thoroughly enjoyed is *The Ecological Indian*. It tries to totally destroy the myth (and I think it’s an absolutely racist myth) that Native Americans enjoyed some kind of organic balance with nature. It simply proves that they were as bad as we, that they also caused innumerable ecological catastrophes by killing too many buffaloes, and so on. This is a very non-racist procedure because it renders them normal. Contrary to the slogan that Western racism wants to make the world uniform, I think it thrives on differences. Racism always speaks of an ideal Otherness. For me, the ultimate anti-feminism, again, is not arguing that women are inferior or stupid; it is, rather, this ideal of the feminine secret within woman.

So, to return to the question, that’s the logic of courtly love. Now, what we have more and more of in relationships today is a contractual logic: “Let’s make a contract, an equal exchange.” I don’t think that this contractual logic really breaks out of sexism. What I’m trying to elaborate now is what I see the task of feminism to be. I don’t go along with those who think—and here I may be disagreeing a bit with Judith Butler—that questions of feminine identity or sexual difference can be solved simply by a different positioning or by a restructuring of your
identity. The question of how to formulate feminine identity—I won’t say “identity”; let’s say “femininity” (we’ll use this old-fashioned term in a non-essentialist way)—can be done, again, through psychoanalysis. Here, unexpectedly, I find an alliance in certain radical lesbian attitudes. What fascinates me is that the standard opposition is the male master versus the hysterical woman, “hysterical” in the sense that she says $A$ but really wants $B$; she doesn’t know what she wants, and so on—all these hysterical games. But I claim that there is a certain “feminine” I wouldn’t say “identity” but “subjective position” about this, a certain coldness (and I don’t mean this as a criticism). There’s a certain ruthless coldness historically embodied in certain figures, from Medea (if you want to hear my feminine heroes) up to Toni Morrison’s Sethe in Beloved. For me, this ruthlessness is feminine subjectivity at its purest. There’s something much more cruel and ruthless in the feminine, and I think that I’m even ready to go so far as to say that subjectivity as such in this sense is feminine. There’s a certain violence in establishing yourself through a gesture of abandoning what is closest to you (like Medea or Sethe), of asserting yourself as a subject, that is, I think, specifically feminine (and I’m using the term “violence” in a positive way; it’s not to be rejected). Now, I’m giving you not so much a matrix of how to go beyond patriarchal logic as I am my philosophical vision: my dream is to turn around the standard feminist notion that Cartesian subjectivity is male and that then you try to reassert subjectivity without the dominance; my idea is to read Cartesian subjectivity as fundamentally feminine. The “Medea gesture,” let’s call it, is precisely the Cartesian gesture of abandoning, dropping, letting go what is most substantial to you and then emerging as an empty subject. And for reasons that I cannot go into now because of time, I claim that this is the “feminine” gesture.

Of course, some feminists would say that I am constructing a certain idealized image of woman. All I can say is that I claim that I am not, contrary to how it appears. Let me give you another example from literature. (I’ve always been fascinated with finding echoes in literature, because I’m crazy: I live in literature; I think that real life follows art.) There is a certain feminine “no,” a feminine way of saying “no,” of letting the object go precisely when you could have gotten it. For example, you see this already in early modernity with Madame de La Fayette’s La Princesse de Clèves. At the end, her husband dies and she is now free to marry her great love; nonetheless, she doesn’t do it. Or, for example, the great mystery at the end of Henry James’ The Portrait
of a Lady: why at the end does she stick with him? It would be wrong to read this “I can have it, but I will not have it” gesture as some kind of feminine masochism. It is a certain truly horrifying dimension of subjectivity—one I think men are too weak to sustain. Men are not able to adopt this, what in philosophical terms I would call, “radical negativity.” Men need some sacrificial logic—like, “I’m ready to abandon everything for country, ideals, whatever.” But are you ready to abandon everything for nothing? Only a woman can do this. Okay, you can again accuse me—and I accept the charge—of constructing some idealized figure of the woman. But let me put it another way. We all know Joan Rivière’s classic notion of femininity as masquerade. I love it. I think it’s a very feminist thesis. Why? Because precisely what is behind the mask? Nothing. This nothing is the subject. So again, this is the topic on which I am trying to work.

Returning to the subject of patriarchal ideology, I think that already in medieval times we have an answer. When people speak of courtly love, it’s usually from the male perspective: the male troubadour, the singer elevating the lady. However, there were also women who were writing; I think they were called les trobaritz. It’s interesting to note the differences between the men and women writers. In women’s love writing, the woman also complains about her lover, but there is no idealization there. The male version is that the lady is perfect. The woman’s version is, “I know my lover smells bad and betrays me, but nonetheless I cannot leave him.” It’s a much gentler, nicer attitude in a way. So, to cut a long story short, I think that there is a way to reassert femininity, and I think we should speak to it. We shouldn’t be afraid of claiming that there is something that specifically identifies feminine subjectivity. I’m not afraid here of the term “essentialism,” the idea that then you fix the definition of the feminine. No, I think that it can be done. And I claim that this is more the case than with the purely contractual notion of identity: we just build our identities, renegotiate them, re-invent them. I don’t believe in that. This contractual logic of exchanges—where it doesn’t even matter if you are heterosexual, bisexual, gay, or whatever; you just renegotiate yourself again and again—is no longer the standard patriarchal logic; it’s the predominant logic in sexual exchanges today. My problem with those who advocate abandoning patriarchal logic and considering sex to be a free field where we renegotiate our identities again and again is that they are not saying anything subversive. This is how things are today. And I’m even tempted to say that a little bit of feminine, how
shall I put it, “essentialism” would even help to break out of it.

Q. The tamagochi works by bombarding the caregiver with demands, compelling him or her to engage in frenetic activity to keep it satisfied—that is, silent, asleep. Thus, “the goal of the obsessional’s fulfilling the Other’s demands is to prevent the Other’s desire from emerging.” Would you discuss the mechanism behind this desire to squelch the Other’s desire? Those unfamiliar with psychoanalytical theory may find it counterintuitive that you would want to squelch the Other’s desire rather than to have the Other’s desire come forward.

A. Yes, but I think that in psychoanalytic terms this is easy to understand, in the sense that the ultimate object of anxiety is to encounter a desiring Other. Let’s take old-fashioned male chauvinism. What it really is afraid of is the intense explosion of a woman’s ability to articulate her desire, to enjoy herself, because then you have this logic: if women are left to be free, they will destroy themselves, so they have to be kept in check for their own good. So, the ultimate male devotion to the Other, to the feminine, is precisely a devotion that says, “I’m ready to do everything for you, to serve you all the time, just to prevent this explosion of desire.” In this sense, we should talk a little bit about what the Other’s desire means. When Lacan says that desire is the desire of the Other, this is to be taken much more literally than it’s usually taken. It doesn’t mean simply that; it means also that what I desire is determined by the “big Other” in the sense of symbolic order desire—that is, my desires are structures to the symbolic values, coordinates within which I move: my desires do not directly express my nature. They are determined by the social field within which I dwell. The second meaning is that my desire is to be desired by the Other. But I think that there is a more radical meaning at work in Lacan, which is that my ultimate desire is to identify what kind of object of desire I am for the Other. That’s the ultimate hysterical question. Not, “What do I want?” but “What does the Other see in me?” “What kind of object of desire am I for the Other?” This is the ultimate anxiety-provoking question. The problem for the hysterical subject is usually that what you really fear is to learn what you are for the Other. Here we have the distinction between hysteria and perversion. A pervert subject knows it perfectly; a pervert subject says openly, “I know what I am for the Other. I know how to serve you.” But a hysterical subject rejects it: “I reject this being instrumentalized in this sense.” So the whole paradox beneath it is that we usually conceive activity as making things happen; you do things so that something will change. What I find so productive
in psychoanalysis is the notion of “false activity,” in the sense that you are active so that something will not happen, as in elementary obsession rituals, like when you walk along the street and you have to cross yourself two times. The idea is, why these rituals? It’s always, “If I don’t do this, something horrible will happen.” This something is precisely the explosion of and the confrontation with the Other’s desire.

Q. In *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime*, you talk about “the end of psychology” despite “today’s prevailing ‘psychologization’ of social life.” Would you say more about the end of psychology?

A. With pleasure. I’ll give you a precise example. (It’s a cliché to say that women are not able to think in universal terms, that they need examples. If this is true, then I am a woman, because it’s clear from my books that I need examples, concrete examples.) What I mean by the “end of psychology” is that I claim that today we are back at where we were in ideology. It’s paradoxical how the central constituent of our liberal, late-capitalist society is the belief in the psychological unity of the subject. You have your self, with its propensities, and the main goal of your life is to learn how to express your self, to articulate your true self. But how does it actually function? Let me tell you a story that is extremely interesting; it’s very new stuff. I just read a wonderful book by a French sociologist, Jean-Leon Beauvois: *Traité de la servitude libérale, Treatise on Liberal Servitude*. This book is experimental psychology, not even psychoanalysis, but its lesson is extremely interesting. It tells of the following experiment. Let’s say that you invite two groups of people to participate in an experiment. First, you tell them that the aim of the experiment is to help further something very humanistic (so as to soften up the liberals), like we want to help Third World people to nourish themselves, to fight famine. You explain that we will test some new foods, and you ask if they would like to participate? Of course, all caring liberals would say, “Yes, no problem.” Then after they’ve said yes you inform them that at the first meeting you had forgotten to tell them that this experiment will involve some slightly unpleasant things; for example, they will have to eat live worms because it’s protein, good food, and freely available. You inform one group that they have freedom of choice, that they are free to say no and to go home. To the second group, you simply say, “You will have to eat worms.” The interesting point here is that you would have thought, naively, that among the first group some of them, or at least a larger percentage of them, would say, “Now wait a minute, if I am free to leave, I will leave. Why the hell would I eat worms?”
However, not only is the percentage the same, but even a slightly higher percentage in the first group sticks to their original commitment. And even worse, the second group—that is, those who were not told that they are free to leave—at least remained honest. They say, “Of course, I would like to leave but I will not leave because I am ashamed to leave. They will think I am a coward.” What the first group does is that they try to bridge the gap of so-called cognitive dissonance—that is, why they are freely doing something that obviously is against their interests or inclinations. They change their opinion, their cognitive stance itself. That is, they try to convince themselves, first, that maybe worms are really good, that maybe they’re doing a service to the Third World, or that maybe they will discover a new aspect of themselves: “How do I know that I’m not fascinated a little bit? Why should I have this high-class prejudice against worms?” In other words, often psychology—the notion of free choice, and so on—functions practically as its opposite. Not only do you do the same thing as the group given free choice, but you even internalize reasons for doing what you were ordered to do so that you experience it as if you have freely chosen it. Now, I would like to connect this with new postmodern sociologists like Ulrich Beck in Germany or Anthony Giddens. (They are not so fashionable here in the States, but they are very fashionable in Europe.) What they are ultimately doing is arguing that the postmodern global situation brings new freedoms. Often, I claim, they are doing the crucial ideological work of trying to sell us new anxieties as new forms of freedom. For example, today in Europe we no longer have state-guaranteed, long-term employment; you have only short-term contracts. (You in America may be used to it, but not all of us in Europe are.) Beck’s and Giddens’ lesson is, “Why don’t you perceive this as a new form of freedom? You are not stuck in one job; you are free to leave.” Or take, for example, social security. You no longer have standard health care; you have to make choices. Again, they say, “Why have anxiety? Why don’t you perceive this as a new field of choice?” This is how ideology functions today, how the very new un-freedoms are sold to you as freedoms. This is what I call “false psychology,” where something is really imposed on you by the external symbolic social network but you tend to identify with it, to internalize it as your own free psychological choice.

To make a political point, didn’t something of the same order happen with us in Eastern Europe ten years ago when socialism disintegrated? We were never really given a choice: “Do you want
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liberal capitalism or something else?” We were all of a sudden treated as if we had freely chosen liberal capitalism. We then were really like the subjects in the sociologists’ experiment, in that a little bit later we were reminded of the worms we would have to eat: we no longer had the social security that we had under socialism, and so on, but we were convinced that we should heroically persist in it, that we really had chosen it. The lesson of all this is that to really freely choose is something much more difficult than it may appear. And I claim that the notion of the psychological subject—this psychological entity, the wealth of personality with unique inclinations and so on, this liberal notion—has to be abandoned if we are to aim for true radical freedom. This notion of the psychological subject serves as the powerful instrument of un-freedom today.

Incidentally, when I speak about the end of psychology, this is an old topic in critical theory in the Frankfurt School, beginning with people such as Adorno and Horkheimer in the late 1930s and onward. Adorno’s very insightful thesis was that all this crap about the fanaticism of fascist masses misses the point, that it’s a kind of artificial thing. Let me give you another example that may be even more interesting. There is something in the postmodern theorist’s notion of reflexive society that fascinates me: it’s that global capitalism is not global in the sense that we will all eat hamburgers and become Americans; rather, it’s a kind of rebirth of the proliferation of differences. The really big news is that even features that were once experienced as part of your nature, as simply given by tradition, are today experienced as your choice. For example, look at the two main forms of identity that were once experienced as part of your nature: sexual and ethnic identity. You are born what you are; you cannot choose it. With sex, you discover what you want. But take the Yugoslav war. Bosnians are an artificially created nation, because ethnically, in biological terms, there are only Serbs and Croats. But in order to prevent tension among the Muslims, the Communists did a relatively wise thing some forty years ago: they said, “Why shouldn’t the Muslims also be an ethnic nation?” So the Muslims were acknowledged in all of Yugoslavia as a nation. The tragically funny thing about this is that when you were caught in a conflict in the Yugoslav war and somebody asked you, “Are you a Muslim or a Serb?” this wasn’t a question about what you objectively are; it was about what you choose to be. A lot of people have chosen a certain identity. For example, the movie director Emir Kusturica, who directed the film Underground, has chosen to be Serb. In this sense, we
are also approaching the end of the standard psychological subject: features that were once perceived as part of your nature are now experienced as a matter of choice. For me, global capitalism is not that we all eat hamburgers; rather, it's hamburgers, Thai cuisine, Italian cuisine, Spanish cuisine. (One interesting paradox is that what was originally your own low-class natural cuisine is then resold as the most expensive cuisine. When I was young, in my country, which was at that point undeveloped, whole grain bread was considered the lowest form of bread, and now it's been reinvented as the most expensive. So, there is an irony to it.)

Q. In *Looking Awry*, you state that deconstruction is a "modernist procedure *par excellence*" because "it presents perhaps the most radical version of the logic of 'unmasking,' whereby the very unity of the experience of meaning is conceived as the effect of signifying mechanisms, an effect that can take place only in so far as it ignores the textual movement that produced it." You go on to say that only with Lacan does the "postmodernist break" occur. Would you elaborate on your understanding of the postmodernist break?

A. Sure. You know, the Stalinists' motto was that in socialism there is no longer class struggle because the people are united, and what drives progress is self-criticism; well, as an old Stalinist and in a self-critical mood, I'm tempted to say that I no longer agree with that point. What I still agree with is the idea that Habermas somehow got it wrong in his polemics against postmodernism. I claimed that it's Habermas who is truly a postmodernist, because Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is the ultimate of radical *modern* unmasking; it's where reason destroys itself. I claimed that what Habermas does with different spheres and so on—his move away from Adorno and Horkheimer—is really a move toward the postmodern. I have since abandoned that position because I am convinced that it's only today with our digitalized global society that we are entering the last stage of modernity full speed. I develop this point in a new book about totalitarianism that will be out soon. (I'm crazy, I know: I have three books now in press. I was told that there's a guy in Chicago called Sander Gilman who is the only one who beats me, who writes faster than me.) More and more I think that postmodernism is simply the inherent myth of modernism; when modernism goes too fast and you can no longer cope with it, you invent a postmodern myth. Postmodernism is a kind of myth that we invent in order to be able to sustain modernization. And I think this describes perfectly what goes on today. So, the true trauma, the true
problem is modernism itself, the way it is exploding today—virtual reality, the genome project, and so on. It’s moving so fast that you need some kind of postmodern myth that allows this return through the postmodern. In this sense, it began with T.S. Eliot’s very perceptive criticism of Stravinsky’s Le Sacre du Printemps. Eliot (I quote him in a new book of mine; I’ve always liked intelligent conservatives) says that what Stravinsky does there is to uncover the mythical potential of modernity itself; that the topic of this work is not really the old rituals, but the mythological aspect of modern industry itself. If you go back and read Adorno’s Philosophy of the New Music, you find that he draws a big opposition between Schoenberg and Stravinsky: if Schoenberg is the modernist par excellence, Stravinsky is the first postmodern composer. You have not a return of the mythical, but a reassertion of the mythical potentials of modernity. This is what’s going on today with, for example, this gnosticism as the way we experience cyberspace. I’m more and more convinced that postmodernism is simply the ideological self-perception of modernism.

Q. In “Is it Possible to Traverse the Fantasy in Cyberspace?” you discuss the obverse of “interactivity,” the phenomenon called “interpassivity.” The distinguishing feature of interpassivity is that “in it, the subject is incessantly—frenetically even—active, while displacing on to another the fundamental passivity of his or her being.” To avoid the clichéd example of interpassivity—the canned laughter on a sound track, where the television in effect laughs for you—you point to the popular Japanese toy, the tamagochi, a “virtual pet” that constantly places “demands” on its caretaker. Would you say that interpassivity is a characteristic specifically of the postmodern condition, or of the human condition in general? Is it something to be countered, or fostered?

A. As with fetish, at a certain level it is constitutive of the human condition as such. I claim that a certain interpassivity is involved in the very Freudian notion of fundamental fantasy (I try to develop this in The Plague of Fantasies). My Slovene friends did inquiries into what extent a certain caricatural image is true—namely, now that we are in Slovenian capitalism, all the nouveau businessmen like to go to prostitutes (and there is a tremendous market for them) to be beaten. These hyperactive businessmen need to fantasize about being reduced to total passivity. I am just trying to generalize this phenomenon: in order to be active, you have to fantasize about another scene where you are reduced to the utmost passivity. This is why in a new text of mine (which I worked on like crazy last year and almost collapsed doing it)
I talk about the movie *The Matrix*. I was not as charmed as some people were with *The Matrix*, but the one scene that I admired involves how you think you are active, but then you awaken and see that you are in a fetal, baby-like position. It's the only scene that I like in the movie; it's when Keanu Reeves awakens and sees thousands of fetuses. The movie is very close to the truth; the only thing you have to do is to turn the terms around: it's not that we imagine ourselves to be active in virtual manipulated reality but really we are; the true problem is that while we are active we fantasize that we actually occupy a passive position. What you ideally achieve in psychoanalytic treatment is precisely that you no longer need that passive support. But what interests me most are the recent political uses of it. Why does interpassivity play a more crucial role today? Precisely because of the hyper-frenetic rhythm of today's society where this interpassive dream is needed more than ever. It can even have rather comical forms. For example, one of the shocking experiences of my political experience in Slovenia was to discover that it's not we pure intellectuals who believe in our ideals versus corrupted politicians. The more politicians were corrupt, the more they needed us as the Other, as the naive believer. They needed an Other: "We are corrupt but at least you believe." They needed the Other, the one who sincerely believes. Or there's the example that I mention all the time: the typical Western progressive academic who needs the dream that there is another place where they have the "authentic" revolution so that they can be authentic through an Other. But, I don't think we can limit this to something specific only to our Western society.

There are other, even more interesting examples that I haven't used. For example, have you noticed what strange things are going on in today's art? I hate art. Visual art and I just do not agree. It's even worse than cinema. You know how it is with cinema and me. I'm going to say this officially, so you can use it. I don't care. After that article in *Lingua Franca* where I was unmasked, I don't care! Did you know that I have not seen a lot of the films that I write about? For example, in *Enjoy your Symptom* there is a long chapter on Rossellini. I haven't seen the films. I tried to, but they are so boring. They're so boring! So this is, you see, interpassivity. I said, "I will write about them, but I don't care to see them." But seriously, I think that what is crucial in art today is the new role of curators—a role that is totally different from before. Curators play a double role. On the one hand, artists themselves are aware that today art needs a theoretical background. It's no longer a direct
relationship: I paint something nice so that you will enjoy it. The more the artists despise the theorists, the more they need them. I experienced this innumerable times. An artist attacked me—"You produce theory, so you don't know what art is"—and then in the end asked, "but would you nonetheless write something for my catalog?" There is a terrible need of legitimization, and the curators serve this role. The curator is supposed to be someone who understands theory and who then makes an exhibit; it's a much more active role. Today, more and more curators directly order artists to create specific things, or they even directly create objects of art, like in an exhibition, apart from the works of art which are created as such, they will place some objects. For example, think of someone like Joseph Beuys; it's difficult to say where he stopped being an artist and where he started being a curator with all his ready-made stuff. On the other hand (now we enter interpassivity), how does the typical corrupted visitor of New York galleries act? Today, there are so many exhibitions, you don't really have the time to see all the pictures. Nonetheless, people, intellectuals, discuss them. It's as if the curator were the one who really had the time to see all of it (and possibly to enjoy it) for you so that you are allowed to discuss it: "No, that's crap," or "I like that artist." It's a little bit like dealing with Claude Lanzmann's Shoah. I know that Shoah is almost untouchable; you are not allowed to criticize it because it's the "ultimate movie." To me, this iconoclastic prohibition is a little bit ironic. It's like, "Thou shalt place no other movie beside me." It's a very strange film. It's so long—nine hours—that it tries to make you feel guilty by its very form. I will not name names, but I can guarantee that a lot of people who wrote eulogies praising the movie haven't seen all of it. Not only do you feel guilty about the Holocaust, but you also feel guilty for not seeing the entire film, which makes you feel even more guilty for the Holocaust. It's kind of a super-ego structure built into the very film itself. So here is another element of interpassivity, where an ideal passive position is constructed and simply presupposed. You don't see a film like Shoah; you discuss it. You presuppose another ideal passive viewer, though I doubt if there are many of them.

Unfortunately, this is more and more the phenomenon today. For example, in philosophy there are books that are big hits but that are not read. In Germany, the author of Critique of Cynical Reason (which was his first big hit), Peter Sloterdijk, has now published a book that is a big bestseller. It will be in a couple of volumes (he's published only the first two), and each volume is between eight hundred and one thousand
pages. People talk about this book, but there is a big discussion in Germany about whether anyone has really read the book. (There is a theory that there is an old retired lady in Karlsruhe that really read the book.) What we have more and more of is this logic of how you presuppose the experience of the whole. And I also play this game. Now, I will reveal something to you (My God! Let’s go to the end in this Lingua Franca territory!): often I don’t have time to read the books about which I write. I will not tell you which ones. More and more (My God! This is a horrible thing to say!) I rely on summaries like Cliffs Notes. One English version of Cliffs Notes (it has a different name over there) is for me the ultimate sublime; it’s a Cliffs Notes version of the Bible. At the end of the book, you get a description of the characters, and it says, “God, an old, omnipotent but jealous gentleman; Christ, a young gentleman.” It’s wonderful! So my idea is that the ultimate dream would be to write a Cliffs Notes summary of a non-existent story. You go directly to the Cliffs Notes, and if reactions to the Cliffs Notes volume are good, then you write the work. This would be interpassivity. I played an interpassive game in one of my lectures, for example, when I started with, “Let’s recapitulate,” and then I recapitulated something. Unfortunately, again, far from being a joke, this is part of our rhythm. There are already books that are written as if they are their own Cliffs Notes. For example, aren’t a lot of the psychological self-help manuals often written precisely as their own recapitulation? So, again, I think that there is something crucial in this about how today’s society functions.

Q. You criticize both Kantian and postmodern notions of self, stating that in their own ways both posit a “more real” universe or self. You say that “there effectively is no Self. The Self (Subject) is not the ‘inner kernel’ of an organism, but a surface effect: that is, a ‘true’ human Self in a sense functions like a computer screen. What is ‘behind’ it is nothing but a network of ‘selfless’ neuronal machinery.” You say that so too are the other selves with whom we communicate. Would you discuss the implications of this notion of the subject, especially as it relates to the process of human communication?

A. First, I wouldn’t say that the conclusion that I draw from this is that the self is an illusion. The mystery is that although the self is without substance—if you go deep behind you discover nothing, just neuronized circuits or whatever—it nonetheless, precisely because it’s a pure surface, is essential, in a way. This is the ultimate example of the psychoanalytic dialectic, where appearances matter. Something can be
only an appearance, but if you take the appearance away, you lose also what is behind the appearance. So, this would be one aspect of it. In order to avoid misunderstanding, let me say that my first point is that there is a limit to all these artificial intelligence games, and so on. If you substantialize the self, if you are looking for some kind of hard self identity, you will of course discover that there is nothing. Self is nothing. David Hume already knew that there is no self. But this empty form of self relating, this empty form that is the self, is absolutely crucial. My second point is that the true aspect of the so-called Copernican turn that is the Freudian revolution is not so much to decenter the self in the sense that you are not what you think you are, but it’s precisely to assert the self as the empty subject (as Lacan would have put it, “barred”). When Freud refers to psychoanalysis as accomplishing a Copernican turn, people usually perceive it in this way: in the same way that Copernicus asserted that the earth is not the center of the universe but, rather, turns around the sun, Freud asserted that our conscious self is not the center of our psychic life but turns around the id, which is the true center. But I think it’s not so much this; it’s something else. Kant also claimed that he accomplished a Copernican turn. Now, what Kant did may appear to be the very opposite of Copernicus. Before Kant we thought that the mind perceives, follows, tries to imitate, to approach reality, while the Kantian revolution is in the notion that the subject itself constitutes reality. So what did Kant mean? Isn’t this even an anti-Copernican turn? No. If you read Kant closely, his point is that Ptolemy was taught that the earth is firm in the center, while the big achievement of the Copernican revolution was that the earth itself is turning; it’s moving. In the Aristotelian universe, we are here on the firm earth and everything around us is moving. The idea of Copernicus was that we ourselves are moving, and Kant says that this is what he tried to do: to show that there is no firm self, that the self itself is moving around itself. And this opens up a gap for the Freudian notion of the desiring subject and so on. This is why Lacan insists that the subject of psychoanalysis is the Cartesian, Kantian subject, because it’s not a full subject, a subject of psychological drives; it’s an empty subject, which, precisely because of this, needs identifications or fantasies in order to fill in its own gap.

As to communication, that’s a big question. The claim that I develop in The Abyss of Freedom is that the crucial thing to avoid apropos of communication is the multiculturalist notion that you must contextualize, that you must know the context, that when you enter
another culture, for example, you must know and be respectful of all its rules, and so on. But what if this other culture in itself is not fully contextualized? I claim that successful communication does not occur when we both simply mean the same thing, because if we define successful communication in this sense, how do I know that I really understood what you meant? Then we can always play the game: "What if I don’t really know what you mean? What if you really thought another thing?" But I think something different can happen. What if I don’t understand something in you, but when I get to the point where what I thought was only my own misunderstanding I find that this is the point where you too are perplexed. When we suddenly find this solidarity in our shared perplexity, that we both share the same obstacle, that's the moment of authentic understanding, I claim. One way to phrase it is that understanding is always the overlapping of two misunderstandings. This is how we can solve the problem of communication. To put it in very simplistic terms, communication is for me always the communication of a deadlock, that we've established that we have the same problem—not the same solution but the same problem.

When discussing cyberspace, what I find fascinating is that two opposite phenomena are occurring. On the one hand, the dream of virtual reality, the ultimate promise of cyberspace, which is the gnostic dream, is that we will get rid of the inertia of our material body, that we will turn into gnostic spiritual entities, freely floating, surfing from one reality to another. The dream is even that with the development of virtual reality (we will no longer have to put on those large, clumsy apparatuses, but somehow it will be directly implanted in us) you will be able to behave like God: by simply mentally clicking you will be able to shift from one reality to another. The obverse of this radical subjectivization is radical objectivization: the genome project; now we know what you objectively are. But I think that it's not so simple. When the genome was first formulated a year ago, someone said that it's now clear that the old formula, "everything except the unexpected trauma is in your genes," is turning out to be true. But the basic lesson of psychoanalysis is that this exception is not an exception, that human subjectivity emerges only through some primordial traumatic encounters, which are precisely these encounters of the abyss of the Other's desire. The fundamental trauma, if you will, is when the small child discovers, stumbles upon the parental Other as the desiring entity. My point is that despite whatever is in our genes, we humans need this kind
of intersubjective traumatic encounter, which is why at the level of religion (I’m an old-fashioned materialist; I’m not becoming Christian fundamentalist) I buy the story that there is a deeper solidarity between the Judeo-Christian universe and psychoanalysis. What they have in common is the idea that a traumatic encounter is the fundamental dimension of human beings. For example, the Jewish faith is not a religion of inner self-enlightenment. It’s not some gnostic notion that if you look deep into yourself you will discover your true self; rather, it’s that Jews were wandering around and all of a sudden God bombarded them. It’s an external shock. Or it’s the eternally repeated story of Abraham and Isaac. This is an external shock. When Abraham got the order, “Kill your son,” this is not an inner journey, or something deeper. No. This dimension of external traumatic encounter is what unites psychoanalysis with the Jewish tradition, and I think that more than ever we should stick to it as the dimension of human freedom. And I don’t think that cyberspace or the genome project are able to cope with this dimension. Rather, all this cyberspace ideology and the genome project are only different ways to avoid the fact that some kind of traumatic encounter is needed for us to emerge as subjects.

Q. It’s interesting that you say that because in “Of Cells and Selves” you attempt to allay the fears of those who are terrified of biogenetics, especially cloning. You try to separate genetic manipulation from issues of human dignity and freedom. Do you see the genome project playing a role in altering conceptions of “the human” and “self”?

A. Of course it does, but I think it’s open. It’s open in the sense that first we are dealing with a lot of ideology—ideology in the sense that if you speak (as I have) with some serious scientists, you’ll find that they are much more cautious. They are aware that it’s much more complex; it’s not simply that you now have the formula for humanity. One of the horrors of it will be the horror of knowing that you, let’s say, have only three years to live because of a certain kind of cancer. This kind of knowledge, I think, will deeply affect our identity. At a certain point, we will have to choose whether we want to know when we will die, or whether we will have cancer, and so on. Will we be able to sustain this knowledge? This is the basic anxiety-provoking dimension that I see. At a certain point, people will not be able to endure it; it’s better not to know. They will simply withdraw from it. On the other hand, what I find interesting is the ambiguous response of the religious community to the genome project. If they really think that the human is a spiritual entity not predetermined by genetics, why then prohibit exploring the
genome? If you have an eternal soul, what does it matter? It’s the same paradox that I address in my first book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, where ideology prohibits something that it already claims is itself impossible. If the human being is a spiritual being that cannot be objectivized, reduced just to a genetic machine, what are they afraid of? Are they afraid that nonetheless it is true what the geneticists claim? To put it in slightly cynical terms, the result of the genome project will be, if nothing else, that philosophical questions—In what does our freedom consist? Are we free beings? Are we determined?—will no longer be discussed only by philosophers, but will and already are becoming terms of the debate of our daily lives. Are we free beings? What are we? In what does our dignity consist? All these questions will become everybody’s problem, in a way. Already, lawyers, politicians, and others have to make decisions based on certain philosophical presuppositions, so I think that it definitely will change our self-perception. But I think that we should avoid both obvious solutions. One is that it will simply turn us into machines, clones reproducing each other. The other is that we will discover a new spirituality. No. We will discover precisely the abyss of our freedom, which is maybe something more horrible than both of these obvious options.

Q. In “Against the Double Blackmail,” you discuss the West’s role in policing the international community, and you assert that the best way to oppose the New World Order is to create transnational institutions and political movements that will serve to constrain the unlimited rule of capital. Do you have any specific recommendations for how the Left can begin to build such institutions and movements, especially given the Left’s perennial disorganization?

A. Now I will give you the surprise of your lifetime. I will give you a very short answer (but then I will nonetheless elaborate on it a little bit). The answer is No. I don’t bluff. I unfortunately don’t have a big thick rabbit in my magician’s hat. The only thing I am sure of is that I distrust the shift of problematic to multiculturalist topics. For me, the big problem—and I repeat this in all my recent books—is that the New Left has abandoned the politicization of economics. The idea is that economics is to be played following its own rules and that you don’t have to mix into it; it’s depoliticized. So then the political battles are about cultural identity, religious identity, freedoms, ethnicity, and so on—but not economics. In this, I see great danger. Why? Because if we formulate the problem in this way then we are opening up space for the New Right. I don’t know if this is evident in the States (because, of course
Buchanan is not to be taken very seriously), but in Europe the New Right, the new populist right, is paradoxically the only remaining political force that still uses a certain anti-capitalist rhetoric. In France, Le Pen presents himself as the advocate of workers’ interests against cosmopolitic, non-nationalized capital. So, my first point is that it’s not so much about how to create institutions, in the naive sense of a world parliament; the crucial point is how to create an international political movement that would politicize economy itself. Of course, my dream was that maybe what started in Seattle a year ago would amount to something. I’m still skeptical about this, but as a naive Old Leftist, I still believe—and I’ll stick with it to my death—that the old Marxist logic of capitalism generating its own contradictions is still relevant. I claim that what goes on today, for example, in digital technology is getting a little bit irrational. For example, I have nothing against Bill Gates, but when some person can get so rich, so fast then you see that at a certain point the game is totally irrational. In a way, I would define myself as a cyber-communist, in the sense that I claim that the big problem with today’s media is that companies often spend almost more money on preventing the free circulation of a product than on the product itself, like with DVD. For example, with video cassettes, the industry spent an enormous amount of money to solve the problem of how to prevent copying so that people would continue to buy taped videos. As you probably know, the way they cracked the problem in America, at least with certain videos, is that if you play it on TV you can see it, but if you copy it, then the picture gets dark and light and dark. It’s a miracle how they achieved it, no? You would think that the signal doesn’t know if it goes to a TV set or to another recorder, but I don’t know how they did solve the problem. In Europe, there’s a slightly different technology. My point is that phenomena like the irrational movement of this new technology or of stocks on the stock market, or all these problems of how to control circulation do point in the direction of how a certain dimension is emerging from this new global economy, and I don’t think that it will be able to control it within the confines of the standard market economy. Let’s keep in mind this fundamental paradox: we are no longer dealing with the State versus the market. We need stronger and stronger State intervention in order to sustain the so-called “free” market. Isn’t it a nice paradox that in order to maintain market competition, the State has had to intervene to split Microsoft? So, I still believe in an old-fashioned Marxist way that although people think that now capitalism is triumphing—and it is—it is generating a dynamic of
its own that it will no longer be able to control. On the other hand, all I am able to say today is that we will have to repoliticize economy, that this postmodern game of saying that the true political struggles are struggles over different identities and so on is not enough. We should be honest enough to admit that this is not enough. Other than that, I am quite honest in saying I don’t have a solution.

Q. Well, perhaps we can pursue this theme further. In “A Leftist Plea for ‘Eurocentrism’” and in “Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism,” you engage in a devastating critique of multiculturalism, saying that it represents the flip side of “excessive ethnic or religious fundamentalist violence.” For those who are accustomed to linking multiculturalism with progressive politics, would you discuss how multiculturalism is a destructive force in contemporary politics?

A. Of course. Let me be absolutely clear here. If by “multiculturalism” we mean simply tolerating or co-existing with different ethnicities, I’m a thousand percent for it. (I’m not crazy.) But unfortunately, we are not dealing with abstract multiculturalism. What we are dealing with is what multiculturalism means today, how it functions. What I am opposed to is the way the reference to multiculturalism serves to obliterate, to render invisible, what for me are the more fundamental capitalist economic struggles. For example, I don’t know if it’s the same in the States, but at least in Europe the problem of exploiting workers usually reappears as the problem of culturally exploiting immigrants. For example, in France or in Germany, nobody speaks of “workers,” but they speak of “the immigrants.” Things become problematic for me the moment you start to claim—implicitly, at least—that the true problem with, for example, the way the Turks are treated in Germany is not economic but that it’s our inability to come to terms with Otherness. So, it’s as if we exploit Turks, or Algerians in France, because we are not able to come to terms with the stranger among ourselves, as if the fundamental problem is that of tolerance. This is one aspect of multiculturalism that I am opposed to. The second aspect that I find problematic is the extent to which often the standard multiculturalism and preaching of tolerance is part of what I attack all the time as the logic of universalized victimization, the extent to which the Other is good insofar as he or she or they are victims. The moment the Other no longer behaves properly as a victim, he or she becomes a bad fundamentalist, or a bad whatever. My background is that of Yugoslavia. There, for example, I see the catastrophe of multiculturalism.
I was one of the few left-wingers who didn’t oppose the West’s intervention there, and a lot of people still think that I am a right-wing traitor because of this. I saw reasons for Western intervention in Yugoslavia; I wasn’t horrified with the bombing there. The reason things went wrong was precisely the way in which this intervention was sustained by a certain multiculturalist ideology. I’ll explain that immediately. In Bosnia, the West was wise enough to accept the fact that people hate each other there so much that the only way to normalize relations between different ethnic groups was to accept a temporary division. So you now have Muslim Bosnia, Croat Bosnia, and Serb Bosnia. (And incidentally, things are slowly getting better. Croats and Muslims even risk crossing the Serb part in their cars, and Serbs often go to Sarajevo, so it works.) In Kosovo, the West didn’t operate in the same way. Although Albanians and Serbs hate each other incredibly more than the three groups in Bosnia hate one another, the West wanted to stick to the dream that Kosovo should be a united multiculturalist paradise. So now you have a scene of total madness, where you have, for example, in an Albanian enclave one Serb family of three people and fifty soldiers guarding them. It’s madness. Why? Because the West wants to stick to this multiculturalist dream. What bothers me about a focus on multiculturalism is that there is a failure to focus on the political dynamics. This is my basic argument against multiculturalism: that insofar as it translates problems of economic and political struggle into problems of fundamentalism and tolerance, it obliterates the actual roots of intolerance—that is, it’s not radical enough. The basic lesson that the West attempts to teach the people in the Balkans is almost the lesson of a severe parent to children: don’t beat each other, try to cope with each other, be tolerant. This is my problem with multiculturalism, this patronizing, naive attitude of “learn to cope, learn to tolerate each other.” That is, if we translate this problem into a problem of cultural tolerance, we miss the crucial dimension; this is my only problem with multiculturalism.

Apropos of Eurocentrism, the irony is, as I’ve already mentioned, the extent to which Eurocentrism is for me the only excess. I like to annoy my friends, to provoke them, by claiming that multiculturalism in the positive sense of the term itself is in a way a modern Cartesian Eurocentrist notion. In what sense? (We are back to the Cartesian subject.) Other cultures can be very tolerant, and I’m always the first to admit that they are. For example, look at the treatment of the Jews when a lot of the former Yugoslavia was for hundreds of years under
Turk occupation. The Turks were much more tolerant toward other religions than the Christians were. It’s deeply significant where in old Yugoslavia the highest concentration of Jews was: in Sarajevo and Bosnia. Why? Because the Muslims were the only ones who were ready to tolerate them. So I’m well aware of this. However, it is only against the background of Cartesian subjectivity that you can experience your own culture as something that is contingent. This I think is a typical European perspective. I’m tempted to return to a point that I’ve already made: I’m always afraid of the false elevation of the Other. It’s much more honest to say that European civilization has brought a certain global modernization and that everyone has the right to participate fully in it. People like to claim that we should nonetheless maintain our particular ethnic roots, and so on. Yes, but this already happens within the space of European global modernization. What interests me at this level is how the economic victory of Europe, the worldwide triumph of European technology, is in a way paid for by the stronger, let’s call it “Western,” Buddhism—an Asiatic victory. In a sense, we exported to them technology and we are importing from them Buddhism, Taoism, or whatever. This is the paradox that interests me. And in this situation, where we exported our technology but imported their wisdom—a false wisdom that perfectly fits our global capitalism—I am tempted to say that we should insist on the Judeo-Christian tradition. Of course, I say this as a materialist. I’m not saying that we should “believe.” But again, all these topics of being against Eurocentrism, multiculturalism, and so on are not too easily to be identified with “progressive” politics. Things are more complicated here.

Q. In The Ticklish Subject, you refer to the destructive force of global capital, especially when it is linked to the exploitation of nature. You say that capital “ruthlessly disregards and destroys particular lifeworlds, threatening the very survival of humanity.” Given the increasing power of global capital and the rapid degradation of the world ecology, what practical steps can the Left take to protect the environment? Are NGOs a possible answer? Eco-terrorism?

A. Okay, now I will really disappoint you, because I will repeat my previous answer. I will be absolutely honest here. I don’t have a rabbit in my hat. What I don’t accept is a return to a “small is beautiful” ecological fundamentalism; that doesn’t work. My only modernist creed is that any return to more traditional modes doesn’t help. We are already within technology. The only way to beat technology is through
technology itself. When I said that capital ruthlessly disregards and destroys particular life-worlds and so on, even this is perhaps too simplistic. It’s more complex in the sense that isn’t capital at the same time, at least at the level of ethnic identities, generating these life-worlds? This proliferation of new ethnic identities today is for me the very form of global capitalism. This is my basic message in *A Ticklish Subject*: it’s wrong to formulate the problem in the terms of the opposition between global capitalism and particular roots that are threatened. The problem is not how our precious particular identity should be kept safe from global capitalism. The problem is how to oppose global capitalism at an even more radical level; the problem is to oppose it universally, not on a particularist level. This whole problematic is a false one.

Let’s return to Tibet for a brief moment to make another point about it. What multiculturalists and Moral Majority fundamentalists—who I think are not even true fundamentalists; I always admire true fundamentalists—share is an obsession, a fascination with the Other. We all know that when those in the Moral Majority condemn sinful ways of life there is always a secret fascination with those very same ways of life. But isn’t it the same with multiculturalists? It’s the Other, a sense of fascination with other exotic cultures, and so on. What I admire in contrast to this is true fundamentalists, like the Tibetans or the Amish. (Okay, perhaps I idealize the Amish, but I’ve read books about them, and these books don’t idealize them. They claim to have madness, to have incidents of rape, to have child abuse; all the normal things that we all admire and love in our society also happen there.) What fascinates me about them is that they are the true fundamentalists. In what sense? They think their way is the right way, and they don’t envy; they don’t have the problem of being fascinated by the horrible things that go on “out there.” They think they are the center of the world, and so they are not bothered by this logic of envy, what goes on out there. This is why, paradoxically, they are at the same time radically fundamentalist (my God, if there ever were fundamentalists it’s the Amish) but at the same time very tolerant multiculturalists. They don’t try to convert anyone. Isn’t this a nice example of how the simple opposition between multiculturalism and fundamentalism doesn’t work? So, the Amish are radically fundamentalist but at the same time very tolerant, and I’m not idealizing them. The same, incidentally, with the Tibetans. They are extremely arrogant, and they think they are the center of the world, which is why they are tolerant toward the Other—they just don’t
bother. If you read interesting books about Tibet, you will learn that what Tibetans don’t understand is why the West admires them. To state it simplistically, the Western attitude is that we should go across the mountains to look for the hidden secret jewel of wisdom, while the Tibetan attitude is that the true wisdom is to discover that what you are looking for you already have—which is why Tibetans are intelligent to point out that the very idea of looking for wisdom elsewhere is the most anti-Tibetan thing imaginable. This is what they cannot understand. So, my point about fundamentalism is that it is crucial that we not accept the terms of the debate the way they are formulated by the ruling ideology. It’s not fundamentalism versus multiculturalism; the true choices are elsewhere. This is what I think we should fight. It’s not so much to find the ready solutions, but to reject the way problems are formulated.

Q. You make the point that how cyberspace will affect us—psychologically and epistemologically—is “not directly inscribed into its technological properties; rather, it hinges on the network of socio-symbolic relations (of power and domination, etc.) which always-already overdetermine the way cyberspace affects us.” And you criticize the New Age techno-ideology that we are on the threshold of transforming human intelligence into something more than human, calling this notion a “psychotic fantasy.” Nevertheless, do you see our immersion in cyberspace as serving to alter human consciousness in any general way—perhaps in a similar way to how print culture is said to have altered human consciousness by moving us out of “orality?”

A. Yes, definitely, but I would still stick to this ambiguous formulation that you quoted; that is, what I claim is that it will but that it’s not predetermined in the form of technology itself. Something is missing. We can’t ask the question in this direct way, “How will cyberspace . . . ?” because the reply is to do a historicist move and ask, “Which cyberspace? How will it be structured?” What I tried to present in that essay is the different ways that we engage with cyberspace. For example, there is a naive sexual opposition: a more “masculine” mode of cyberspace as a screen for an aggressive sexual acting out, virtual sex; and a more “feminine” form (allegedly, although I distrust these oppositions) in which cyberspace is a virtual community for exchanging ideas. Cyberspace is open; these things are not written in it. We should stick to the notion that such things are not inscribed in cyberspace. Not only should we realize that they are not determined in the technology itself, but we should also analyze—and it’s not done enough—the
extent to which technology itself is not ideologically neutral. We shouldn’t only ask, “How will cyberspace affect our ideological self-perception?” The problem is the extent to which the way cyberspace technology as it is developing is already predetermined by certain ideological presuppositions. For example, there’s an obsession with a certain version of virtual reality that is obviously part of an old, neo-Platonic, gnostic tradition: getting rid of the inertia of our body; our bodies are freely floating, and so on. So I argue in a traditional Marxist way that something is missing in between: the social relations that structure cyberspace. In this sense, perhaps I agree with you that cyberspace will probably affect our self-perception even more radically than did the Gutenberg revolution. Let’s just take the paradox of the body, the status of the body. Usually the progress of humanity is measured by the gradual increase in the process of abstraction: first the concrete body, then language, then print language, and so on. But isn’t cyberspace the site where this abstraction is brought to its ultimate? That is, it’s not even language, except on a basic level. What is cyberspace? It’s just a series of zeroes and ones. It’s ultimate abstraction, but at the same time, if you were to ask ordinary persons what cyberspace is for them, a lot of people would say it’s hardcore pornography. That is, the dream of cyberspace is this gnostic dream in which a body returns; an artificial ethereal body returns there. So what I am claiming is that perhaps the crucial battle will be precisely the battle for how cyberspace will actually affect us. I agree with you that it affects our perception. In what sense? In the sense that you no longer can simply say, “Okay, you shouldn’t totally immerse yourself in virtual reality; from time to time you should return to real reality.” Recently, I listened to some great European cyberspace guru who said, “But let’s not forget, we still live in the real world.” I then asked him, “How do you return to this Real World?” He replied that after surfing in cyberspace the whole day, in the evening he usually listens to a tape while jogging on the exercise machine—so this is his return to reality.

But there are also other phenomena. What interests me is that the way we structure cyberspace mirrors, reflects, a certain perception of life that is already part of our daily experience. From cinema to modern art and even to science, the typical contemporary insight is that we do not live in one fixed reality. What “happens” is only one of the possible outcomes from multiple realities, multiple universes, multiple interpretations; what happened could have been different. That’s the paradox of quantum physics. What does it say? It’s not only that it’s not
determined what will happen; it's that in a way what happens is only one of more things that happen in a parallel way—even in biology. What's the basic trick of Stephen Jay Gould? It is to point out again and again how contingent evolution was; it could have been totally different. I enjoy reading his and similar books, these half-serious, half-science fiction, historiographical, what-if books. I read one in which the authors claim that in the American War of Independence there was the possibility of a compromise and that if that had happened we would have today a nice English kingdom called America. It is the idea that in order to understand what actually happened, you have also to include all the other, failed possibilities that still accompany, as a shadow, what did happen. Now we have all these various movies depicting different versions of alternative realities—from Kieslowski's films to more commercial versions. Here we can see how cyberspace is only materializing, giving the technological form to a certain life experience that was in the air well before cyberspace. So, I believe it is crucial that we never underestimate the material efficiency of ideology. Ideology is literally a material force, in the sense that it's not up in the air. It structures our reality itself.

Q. Much of your work is provocative and even controversial. Are there any criticisms or misunderstandings of your work that you'd like to take issue with at this time?

A. Ah, that's a nice question! Let me try to answer this one in a very precise way. Maybe I am partially responsible for one misperception, so this is a self-criticism. My fundamental interest is and always has been a philosophical one: to re-actualize a certain philosophy of subjectivity as also the strongest emancipatory potential for feminism and for everything. What hurts me is that much of my so-called popularity depends much more on dirty jokes, popular culture, and a little bit of politics, and the philosophical aspect is overlooked. For example, take *The Ticklish Subject*. If you were to ask me which chapters I favor, I'd say the first two. These are the only two chapters that I really enjoyed writing. The one about how to save Kantian subjectivity from Heideggerian criticism, and the Hegel chapter. These are the ones I really enjoyed writing. There is another aspect in which I'm dissatisfied with myself, and this may surprise you. There is a certain cliché about intellectuals who pretend to read high culture but who privately read pornography, comics, detective novels; with me it's the opposite. I cannot survive without music; I always work with music, with loud music. I cannot survive without five or six hours of chamber music per
day. What really frustrates me is (and I acknowledge my limits; I realize that I already write about too many topics) that I simply don’t know enough to write about music. So, I’m traumatized: Why can’t I write a nice essay on chamber music? I tried, but it’s half success, half failure, but it’s the closest I’ve come to it. It’s not about Wagner; Wagner is more about ideologies. It’s what I was doing in *The Plague of Fantasies* about Schumann. You can see my limits there. I can go to a certain point and cannot go further. My big dream is to take something like, say, Bach’s violin sonatas, or the usual fashionable pieces like Beethoven’s late string quartets, and to write a nice analysis of them, but I’m unable to do it. This is what really frustrates me.

Nevertheless, instead of complaining, let me end on a positive note. I’m not the kind of guy who says, “I have the ideas of a genius but I’m totally misunderstood.” Let me admit to something, partially in contrast to what I just said: the nice surprise that I’ve experienced again and again is the extent to which there is out there an intelligent public who knows when my work is good and when it’s not. What do I mean by this? The simple, most superficial criteria. Let’s take *The Ticklish Subject*. It’s a pretty difficult book—fewer jokes than usual, a thick book. At Verso, they were very skeptical about it. Let’s take another book of mine that is much more into this toilet stuff and obscenities: *The Plague of Fantasies*. To put it in old-fashioned, almost reactionary terms, doesn’t it restore your faith in the spiritual potential of humanity that *The Ticklish Subject* is selling much better than *The Plague of Fantasies* with all its obscenities, the German toilets, and so on? I’m pleasantly surprised that there is a public that knows how to appreciate it and that doesn’t fall for the cheap, obscene tricks I use now and then. So the books that I consider really good, like *Tarrying with the Negative* and *The Ticklish Subject*, are also the books that are selling the best. It’s a surprise, because publishers are idiots; they always ask me to write another cheap, obscene book. I try to tell them that people are not such idiots. So, this is a good surprise. Now, I was surprised and skeptical about *The Ticklish Subject*. I had to blackmail, to threaten the editors at Verso. They really didn’t want to publish it. They said, “Who will buy a 400-page book? Why don’t you add a little bit more obscenity and make it shorter.” Yet, it’s my best-selling book. My God! It’s incredible how stupid publishers are. Again and again I discover this. In spite of all this commercialization, I have an old-fashioned, naive, trust—an Enlightenment trust, almost—in people. No! Most people are not idiots. They do know when you are bluffing. You know the saying:
"You can deceive some people all the time, but you cannot deceive all people all the time." You can have short-lived successes, but in the long term people do guess. So instead of playing the game of complaining that I'm totally misunderstood, I would rather conclude by thanking the public. I am well understood. I have nothing to complain about.

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