

The Sublimated Ideology of The Object

G.V. Loewen
STM College, University of Saskatchewan

Abstract

The idea that ideologies present to us a rationality for making decisions, for getting things done, allows us to avoid the agony of choosing one world or another as a finite being, allows us to forget that it is we ourselves who must do and thus who are also to be done. Due to the work of having to live a human life with others who do not agree with us and will never be our servants, we are all ready to give up responsibilities to the political saviour; already this one presents to ourselves the One and only. By examining our private and picayune dogmatisms, we might gain some insight into why we are ever so often willing to become public fascists. We might well object to being objected to. Along with this, we are also objects in a world of objects. This is routine when compared to the dialectical intersubjectivity of voicing an objection in a throng of objections, of questioning the objectionable in a questionable politics. It is the very mundanity of acquiescence that dulls us to the danger pedestal-dwelling ideologies still represent.

Keywords: rationality, ideology, fascism, Nothing, hermeneutics, Zizek

One of the few ways to counter the origin of fanaticism is to simply be both more subtle and honest about social change. We already know that it is the only constant in modern life. It is this knowledge that produces the anxiety of desiring to ‘stop the world and get off’, as the casual idiom has it. Not that custom or tradition should hold sway just because it has some historical inertia on its side. At the same time, however, the narrative by which we live, including their empirical and even ethical errors must be thoroughly understood, including why rationality has within it both non-rational content and irrational adherences, before committing them to the dustbin:

“Changing basic beliefs tied to powerful customs and familiar institutions, or ‘opening minds’, is a social experiment. It is a dangerous experiment, for opening minds in some respects always means closing them in others. Hence ideas with little support should not be introduced in an aggressive manner.” (Feyerabend 1978, 178) Perhaps it is not so much even ideas that have little support in general, but those that seem to have had a marginal public and official support, but may indeed be held in private, or even at a semi-conscious level emanating from the second ‘nature’ of primary socialization – if one can speak of these aspects of our personhood as being ‘held’ by us in other ways than what has been explored heretofore – that appeals to us as part of the rationality of ideology. We already, at some level, think we know what is being told to us. These people speak our language, finally, after wearying politics which can only make us wary. The one who appeals is kindred with the saviour, for he allows us egress from the routine of self-government, from the labor of decision, and from the always time and energy consuming ‘thinking of others’. We are already, and perhaps always, half-ready to give over power to a few who make their living exercising it: “But there is something in this: domination that is based on force and not on consensus has to be feared, and is effective for exactly that reason. The less a government is based on consensus, the more it has to behave in a totalitarian way – and tolerance then necessarily appears as a weakness.” (Gadamer 1998, 93) Of course, when ideas become the official fashion and history is rewritten by those responsible for the new publicity and dissemination of ‘knowledge’, total rule from above appears to soften. A new mindset is created where citizens might actually support the ruling ideas as they have been introduced; we all might become public fascists, because all of us have our fascist-like foibles that we exercise in private, and continue to do so. Would it not be grand if government acted in the world the same way we might inside our homes? We might even learn something new about ourselves and our own actions through the spread of the new order of knowing and placing things.¹ These kinds of changes, wrought by both subjective desire, including even that mistakenly associated by the child-self with the outer child of

rationalized objection and therefore seeming objectivity – a misrecognition of the mirror for its tain – and ideology ‘in the streets’ and on the billboards, require a new kind of critique to be developed. Because of this, “...political criticism is not solely concerned with ideas, for it must take account of the modes of behavior for which these ideas are more masks than expression.” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 101) The theater of ideology is itself a rational expression of what we are trying to avoid. In playing out the new order, we can begin to believe that not only is disorder, change, and even mortality not part of the scene – for who can imagine that immortality was not the ultimate order of the ‘new man’ that Nazism hoped to create quite biologically, hygienically, and perhaps eventually, genetically as well? – but that none of these things were ever a part of history, at least, our own history. That they might well remain part of both the order and the history of others is quite enough to warrant altering them or wiping them out. Ideology thus never exposes itself as the new clothes of subjectivity projected into the world of forms, for everyone knows that costume is an integral part of any theater: “The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel.” (Zizek 1990, 45) It is perhaps ironic that ideology permits its own rationality to expose social reality as a theater, but to do so in the service of a new production, a new world stage and thus new players, is a *tour de force* worthy of both current social forces and their respective histories. That is, we are content to believe in the pretense of the performance because all we have known has been the pretense of past performances. We are also willing to believe that change alone sets us free by giving us control over what the world would have been had there not been such a change. Of course, this eventually is recognized, by some, as a delusion: “Instead of having the kind of control over things allowed by abilities, which leaves pace for the creative play of self-expression, a new kind of universal slavery has come over mankind.” (Gadamer 1998, 117) Until this time, and perhaps we are entering into an age of rationality where to be rational means to abandon thought entirely, we are enjoying the staged *jouissance* that

features the exposition of the Nothing, *something* that no one has ever seen before. The new show promises to be different, but not in structure, and at once this appeals to both our desire for the comfort of stasis, of stopping the world, as well as, and in similitude with, our impatience about the lack of changes that impede our contentment. Thus fascist ideology appears to have all forms of rationality at its disposal, because it addresses both poles of our sociality, unthinking, unthought, and willing to follow to any extremity of action, simply because action unchained from reflection is a form of freedom that we knew only in passing, as children, and for an all too brief moment. To promise us this is indeed to promise us eternal youth, and thus links us with those who would through us become immortal.

The Birth of Death

Entertaining the exposition of what we cannot know takes us perilously close to the abyss, which was precisely what we were trying to avoid in the first place. The Holocaust and other genocides haunt the edge of an ultimate darkness that casts its shadow far beyond its origin. And indeed, we do not quite know what kind of origin would generate such a living penumbra, ready with a glance to overtake the light of community or compassion. We do in fact become the monsters we attempt to stare down; that kind of abyssal plain is well known and well-marked. But this is not the same place as the abyss of meaning, for inversion, becoming the evil we sought to defeat, is still overfull with meaning. It means to destroy us, on the one hand, as well as being ‘mean’ spirited. We can recognize it, its face is one of banal and sardonic delight, frozen in the process of becoming non-being. But this process never takes its course. Its shadow does not lift and we are forced to live on within it. In doing so, we generate the next set of meanings which will eventually overturn its hegemony. The abyss filled with the interiority of the monstrous self is never at a loss for words, however guttural they may sound to our visage of civil and polite listeners. No, the abyss of meaning does not find recourse in the inversion of norms or in the projection of fears. It does not desire to be understood or acted upon. It is simply

the presence of a specific form of non-presence, which certainly abuts uncanniness but refuses to be taken into consideration by further and post hoc reflection. It does not offer us a *place* where we can be at home in its language. It does not speak the language of place or of truth, but calls to presence the problem of Truth, viz. why should there be a notion of truth, rather than just a desire for it, and indeed, why should desire bend in this direction, perhaps equally as well as others? “‘Truth’ is an empty *place*, and the ‘effect of Truth’ is produced when, quite by chance, some piece of ‘fiction’ (of symbolically structured knowledge) finds itself occupying this place...” (Zizek 1990, 217, italics in the original) This is one reason, right away, as it were, why the place of Truth is so convenient for any instrumental reason or fascist ideology, or yet even religion if it increasingly rationalizes itself and its institutions. It is not so much non-existent as *inexistent* – it never was and therefore cannot be – and further, it pronounces upon living reason a new kind of finitude that wraps around the existential envelope and doubles back on itself. It says to reason, ‘I am the birth of death’, just as life, in its forced and thrown project, was the death of birth.

Since we have killed ourselves to continue living, and we continue to do so, the truthfulness of the abyss of meaning shows us that, at some point, these serial acts of autohagiography will come to a sudden reversal. We cannot understand this. It has no meaning for us. No experience prepares us for such an event, and even its eventuality is no consolation, as it remains non-present – it too, has never yet occurred to us, and thus it repeats its insistence on the inexistence of meaningfulness and the impotence of interpretation – and non-committal. All of this forces upon us the desire to approach the edge and peer into the void, with the reassurance that we cannot, of our own accord and in our own subjectivity, plunge into its depths. For “...the subject is *nothing but* the impossibility of its own signifying representation – the empty place opened up by the big Other by the failure of this representation.” (Zizek 1990, 236) The symbolic order, generalized other, society ‘at large’, the tain of the socius, or what have you, have prevented the imagined purity of subjectivity – the essence of our being as the one in the many,

as opposed to the one of the many – from self-expression. No person can be only what he imagines himself to be within the ken of others. And are we not always also imagining what others think of us, or, at least how we might appear to others in order to represent ourselves more closely to our own ideals? Self-expression as part of culture and symbol is at best incomplete, and remains so. Is this also the case for self-understanding? This question is not quite the same as the one of origins and rediscovery. The problem of foundations, the auto-ontology of the subject in a world of subjects, and correspondingly, the ‘autotopology’ of selfhood as part of the symbolic order in the object realm, a pseudo-object in the world of things and also in the theater of absences – community, Nothings, and reflections on the uncanny, etc. – has been restated thusly: “How can man find himself – or regain himself -seeing that the action to which the search commits him in one way or another is precisely what estranges him from himself?” (Bataille 1988, 131, italics deleted) The forced vocation of wealth, the iron cage of rationalized wage-slavery, the anomic division of labor are no doubt part of the elements of distancing that we have already seen string our subjectivity across an warped and corrugated tapestry of living threads, scarlet with our own blood, both dripping and coagulated, matted together like ‘the uncut hair of graves’. But surely self-understanding comes to the fore at the very point at which we recognize our dilemmas. We are estranged but we are not complete strangers. We have undergone a separation, from both the birth of the life-process, the birth of dying, perhaps as well as that of living, and we have been separated from the myth of union. Why is the Platonic myth of the soul-mate any weaker than that of the myth of selfhood? We hardly believe in the first. It is not even a theme for Hallmark greeting cards, however sentimental they may be in other ways. We know, even if we tell the other that she is this Thing, biggest of all the Others and the overcoming of the symbolic domination of difference, neither really believes it over the long term, and this is a good thing. One cannot grow if one is already everything, to oneself or to the other. We do not desire soul-mates, and why then should we desire ourselves?

No, the search for the self is also part of the historically laden quest of agrarian mythos. Here, rather, we can turn to the pre-agrarians for aid. It is vision we seek, and not selfhood. What is the *next* thing that I must know about self-understanding, about being in the world, and not the only thing or the final thing. What do the embers of the dying fire tell me, and is this a different thing that what the flames of the eruption of first love state? (cf. Bachelard 1964, 55) What am I willing to give to possess such knowledge, or better, what can I give of myself to have a new experience? For "A sacrifice can only posit a sacred thing. The *sacred thing* externalizes intimacy: It makes visible on the outside that which is really within. That is why *self-consciousness* demands finally that, in connection with intimacy, nothing further can occur." (Bataille, 1964, 189, italics in the original) What we have given then, is enough to ensure that we can experience what is necessarily the other which has already found a home in the interiority of our knowing language. It is we who have been mistaken about its import, and even about the timing of its device. It is already at rest and we must bring it forth, return it to the world from whence it came, and thus experience it for ourselves, rather than have it experience us for itself, which has already occurred. We could not know it' at the time', as the idiom relates, but we have come to a self-understanding regarding its presence. This takes time, quite literally, as it possess the time it needs to be digested. The presence of time is what is necessary, and not merely its passage. We supply the libation of life-blood to know these things, and the corpus of our aging body is its oblation, for, once again "The victim of the sacrifice cannot be consumed in the same way as a motor uses fuel. What the ritual has the virtue of rediscovering is the intimate participation of the sacrificer and the victim, to which a servile use had put an end." (Bataille 1964, 56) We occupy both existential fates. We cannot be both in terms of social role, and this is why the greater symbolic order from which we take our cue precisely disallows the auto-da-fe of vision. It can provide enlightenment and knowledge, but never knowing and possessing. Recall that 'nothing further can occur'. No thing can follow our lead, but *Nothing can* occur, and it is this occurrence,

necessary and radical, that commits us to be the self-sacrifice that is without a hint of altruism: “The subject of the signifier is precisely this lack, this impossibility of finding a signifier which would be ‘its own’: the failure of its representation is its positive condition.” (Žižek 1990, 198, italics in the original) We are already gone the moment we realize what we now are. What we have been is the victim, what we are is the *aufheben* of the thesis of the perpetrator. We have been the willing scape for he willful one who must experience what it is like to lose the selfhood cordoned and conditioned by both ethos and mythos. We have immolated ourselves and rescued ourselves anew. No external savior can do as much, and it is to our peril that we imagine either the rationality of knowledge or the non-rationality of belief as providing for us a messianic egress from the world as it is, and ongoing selves who, with sparks and flickers, as shadows and errant spotlights, inhabit its viscous manifold.

It is not as if we have not attempted to discover the truth of absence in the form of a new Truthfulness, a language which can only speak of the place that we have been working hard to avoid. When we do so, however, we encounter the time “When one finds it necessary to turn *reason* into a tyrant, as Socrates did, [and] the danger cannot be slight that something else will play the tyrant. *Rationality* was then hit upon as the savior; neither Socrates nor his ‘patients’ had any choice about being rational.” (Nietzsche 1982, 478, italics in the original) We wish to keep ourselves, if not exactly as we had been, then in as much as we have grown accustomed to our own presence, vanity, self-denigration, collusion and projection alike, the kith and kindred of being an ‘individual’. Memory and conscience confront one another and thence decide to attempt to win over our pride. This sometimes succeeds, and it is at this point that we are closest to the kind of truth that emanates from the void of non-Being and intrudes upon our human language. More often, as Nietzsche famously quipped, pride carries the day and we live onward without taking the ultimate risk of self-sacrifice for the new life to begin, for self-understanding to overtake self-expression and expose it to be the dance of avoidance it is. *Sine* we have already shown ourselves able to transgress the

autonomous self concept and commit it to the flames, we know, in the recesses of consciousness perhaps, that “...some fundamental non-knowledge insists – it brings about the terrifying experience that if we come to know too much, we may lose our very being.” (Zizek 1990, 73) The most important trope in transformational fantasy literature, perhaps beginning with Lovecraft, the ability to disable one’s being by venturing into the other dimensions of what Being there may be is also the only way to find out what has actually been going on. The mystery is solved by the dissolution of the detective. It is the very obverse of the classic formula of detection, for the uncanniness of crime is there only an appearance, as in the famous ‘hound’ in Conan-Doyle. But in Cthulhu and numerous other beings or consciousnesses, the uncanniness is only the first clue. It leads to self-sacrifice and the transformation of humanity into something Other, as big as the symbolic Otherness of Lacan, and larger than all life as we had known it, the ‘thing that should not be’ is actually only ourselves finally ‘in the know’, as it were.

Shifting Sides

What we have digested in order to become this new thing which before, in the security of our socius, was a nothingness that might be given the name of Nothing, is our selfhood and its attendant concept of singularity. This is why “...authentic consumption ought to be solitary, but then it would not have the completion that the action it has on the others confers on it. And this action that is brought to bear on others is precisely what constitutes the gift’s power, which one acquires from the fact of *losing*.” (Bataille 1988, 70, italics in the original) The completion of the sacrifice, loss of self, cannot be entirely condoned by the social apparatus, especially the state. It is one thing to lose the self, but to lose selfhood is tantamount to subjective treason. There are plenty of ‘lost souls’ in the social welfare system, but this does not matter as long as their are warmed-over bodies to be consumed as fuel in the ‘human resource’ sector. This phrase has thus a double meaning, where the second and more literal sense of raw materials is within

mimicking distance of the void. The state anticipates the waxing and waning of the use of its resources, and the categories of humans that use them need to be reproduced at some level, as with the unemployment rates, and full employment is somewhat of a threat to capital within the modern nation, as would be the loss of the marginal. If not, such classes of persons might have been vanquished long ago, along with certain classes of diseases. Ill health is a tremendous drain on the productive system, while at the same time being one the chief results of the system of consumption, especially in North America. It is one thing to concentrate on the elite and exotic developments which, often well funded by the state, have results that can be immediately used to its advantage (cf. Blackburn 1990, 105). A consistent underfunding of those aspects of society which have themselves only marginal utility keeps the fires of material and psychological desire burning throughout the entire social strata. This is always more convenient than attempting to extinguish the remnants of older flames, now mostly ashes in the mouths of those who could not make the transition to the new world order. Once again, it is from these margins that the most fanatical adherents of fascism often originate, and for obvious reasons. Unlike those near the centers, these persons have nothing to lose: “To the less stringent, more Establishment-friendly mainstream notion of order, it seemed excessive to upset production and property rights, and long-settled ways, to such an extent, for such a reason.” (Taylor 2007, 311) Of course, the centers get to define what reason is, and thus aspirants in politics and in philosophy, for that matter, must attempt to harness the reason of unreason as an ally in their affairs. As Nietzsche warned, however, this kind of dynamic often gets away from us, and some other form of life or even form of death, takes hold. Almost every radical revolution in history bears witness to this problem, from 1789 through to 1917 and 1979. What remains of radicality is the edge of the new tyrant’s sword as it severs reason from its once human vehicle. Politicians are hardly the only perpetrators of such a *volte face*: “And let us not forget that many modern rationalists try to increase their power of Reason by increasing the power of the institutions that support it.”

(Feyerabend 1987, 252) As long as rationality is imagined as vacant of human interest, as merely a tool in the ideal sense of something utterly external to subjectivity, and unutterably non-linguistic with regard to human communication, we will always be at risk for the technocratic fascism built out of the social mobility of *techne*, where its love for mastery has overshot its mark and become obsessive.

We can then only note what is symptomatic of such an obsession, the act of stalking, for instance, following the movements of the relationship between the subject and its cognitive means and ends, recording how many times, and in what manner, the tools of reason were used, and committing ourselves to the dour diaries of the asylum. Avoiding a void at all costs is simply not worth it, for in effect what is reproduced in the heart of the hearth – the self-abuse or the abuse of others that takes place within the ironic insularity of middle-class dwellings, the ‘disciplining’ of children or of oneself, and the like – is that very void become monstrous because become kindred with a humanity we have lost in possessing it. We may diagnose ourselves, but the cure eludes us. Indeed, we cannot afford to cure this self-absorption, because we must *have* something rather than *be* someone, for it is the authentic public life practicing the dialogue of the polis that robs us of our egos: “In other words, symptom is the way we – the subjects – ‘avoid madness’, the way we ‘choose something [...] instead of nothing [...] through the binding of our enjoyment to a certain signifying, symbolic formation which assures a minimum of consistency to our being-in-the-world.” (Žižek 1990, 81) This ‘symptomatosis’ invokes the repetitive loop of both production – the ‘rational limitations of desire – and projection – ‘the creation of new needs’ and the ‘irrational indulgence of desire’ (cf. Sontag 1978, 62). Since we cannot avail ourselves of a cure, an end to the cycle of both the self-interested confrontation with the other and the chorus of participation in the productive-consumptive medley, we forestall its deleterious effects by simply being entertained by them. We can have sex with ourselves through media, with other adults through dating, or even with our children through physical coercion which always is on the very edge of the erotic-neurotic source of the very

reproductive system, that is, taking pleasure from ‘discipline’, both of oneself and of others, where general legal and social sanction is held up, at least in public, against such rationalized evils. We are able to enjoy the bodies of others, their corpus of works and perhaps indisciplined behaviors due to the sense that production can remain theoretical, ‘ideational’, as Blackburn (1990, 143) claims even of Marx. The rationalization of our petty desires involving both the subjectitude of the adult self and its half-witted objections to rationality at large, makes our sensibilities regarding our control over others appear to be themselves objective. We must have this control, not merely in the sense of stopping the world, as we have seen, but in the sense that this control is the very something that encircles the nothing that haunts the inner hinterlands of consciousness. We become rather amateur theorists of our own social foundations, child-raising, what sexuality can subsist in marriage, our conflicts with the schools or with government, etc. But we cannot shed our own skins, either subjectively as a life-process or in the discourse of rationality as a social structure: “For although objectivists have discovered, delineated and presented situations and facts that exist and develop independently of the act of discovery, they cannot guarantee that the situations and facts are also independent of the entire tradition that led to their discovery.” (Feyerabend 1987, 60) The most honest way of confronting the obsessive dynamic of the ‘having of something’ is not merely to admit to it in the senses of ‘I want’ and ‘I enjoy’, but to say to ourselves that these possessions can perhaps be used to further more profound aims, in the way that in our economy, one would wish to own a house so that one could retire from wage-labor. The stability of life might be an argument in favor of reflection upon it, rather than a field upon which mere leisure takes place. Mature being need not only to recognize its own finitude in both relation to world and to beings, but its very maturity must accede to having in order to be, of possessing so that one can be dispossessed, at least in part, and of recalling the self to action by demolishing its pretentious duplicity on the very social stage where such melodramas are enacted.

One can destroy oneself without acquiring the force of destruction itself, but transformation need not be transfigurations². We no longer need to become spirits or animals, energies or other beings unknown in order to understand the current human condition. These mythopoetic tropes cover different aspects, even phases, of what humanity has meant to itself in taking the void of non-Being into its presence. They certainly may still serve the phantasmagoric as allegories, but their latter day reincarnation as elements of the pure and perhaps puerile fantasy of plain amusement belies and even sabotages their sacred intentionality: “The crucial point that must be made here on a theoretical level is that fantasy functions as a construction, as an imaginary scenario filling out the void, the opening of the *desire of the Other*: by giving us a definite answer to the question ‘What does the Other want?’, it enables us to evade the unbearable deadlock in which the Other wants something from us...” (Zizek 1990, 128), yet we cannot but listen to the voice which carries nothing but a self-misrecognition in its immediate wake, where we are at once awake to the ‘desire of the Other’, as Zizek continues, but have also at once become attendees at the wake of the Other, simply because we can only translate their needs into versions of our own.

The Reality of The Unreal

Listening as well must the also be thought of as a sacred event of self-immolation, the positive risk of being and the world as it has been. To hear the other is to join him and close off the closure of distance between beings. Like all sacrificial outcomes, this act constitutes a new world: “The world of intimacy is as antithetical to the *real* world as immoderation is to moderation, madness to reason, drunkenness to lucidity. There is moderation only in the object, reason only in the identity of the object with itself, lucidity only in the distinct knowledge of objects.” (Bataille 1988, 58, italics in the original) The attempted purity of the subject, this time *without* the conceptualization of one’s self-projection into the world of objects as a form of subjectivity, ranged over against objects

and their ‘reality’, like a ghost in the machine, a ‘spirit in the material world’ and so on, suddenly allows the unreal to attain its own reality. All further reflection on such a world would bear the stamp of a rationalization, an excuse or a ‘reason’, in the casual sense of the word, for whatever occurred while one was within the altered order of sacrifice and risk. The narrative that is reconstructed from the space of experience which alters our being to the extent that we become unrecognizable as an object – the subject becomes the radical object of the consumer and the consumed, the fire of sacrifice making him both at once – is one in which the goal is to communicate such an experience as believable in the mundane world of free objects, that is, those that are either produced or consumed but not both in simultaneity. Rationalization itself preserves the subject-object distinction, “...so that the tale appears as being half-rational, half dream, as partly subjective experience and partly objective perception, at once plausible in its cause and unreal in its effect.” (Bachelard 1964, 86) One can close off access to the uncanniness of the irreal subject-object union, where creation and destruction save themselves for each other, and where what is produced is consumption while the producer is herself consumed by simply stating that such experiences were ‘dream-like’, or that one was inebriated, as in Bachelard’s literary example. The listener, who is always only half-listening, lest she also fall into the apparent stupor of lost selfhood, can then nod her head sagely and say at once ‘I’ve been there’ and had the same experience, and also in a dismissive manner, in that ‘Such events are really quite juvenile and have little lasting merit’.³ But we must then recall that whatever the effects of such irreal participation in the very processes of life and death as they come together may be, they work upon us as an addition to our self-understanding. Yes, we must do the work of interpretation, for the action of the irreal and its unreality cannot be reflective in the same way that dreams alone cannot help us: “At bottom, dreams are nothing other than a particular form of thinking, made possible by the conditions of the state of sleep. It is the dream-work which creates that form, and it alone is the essence of dreaming – the explanation of its peculiar nature.” (Zizek 1990, 7) The *Traumdeutung* is not an

outcome of rationalization, even though it can be made to make sense to us in the same way as the kerygmatic kernel that emanates through the gibberish of an oracle is made to do so. We do not say, however, that such an interpretation, the meaning of the experience, has little merit. Even the 'public service announcement' style of dreams, where a bodily function is nagging at us to wake up and fulfill it, cannot be sloughed off as mere dross. This most 'material' form of the unreal has a material function. It creates a tension, not unlike the deeper and more dangerous tension that may lead to neurosis and is held within the dreams that attempt to demonstrate the connections of anxiety and life. This tension is as necessary as the one where things have not yet been 'worked through'. It is even found at the level of the politics of the 'wide-awake everyday world of contemporaries', and cannot be becalmed: "If this tension were to fail, a feeling of calm would be completely unwarranted; there would be more reason than ever to be afraid." (Bataille 1988, 188) So what is produced by the work of interpretation, whether or not this takes place after the fact, as it must do, but also if it receives some ground-work, some working effort within the experience, as is the case with dreaming and the projection of action that is the hallmark of daydreams or phantasms is in fact a kind of alertness, something which reiterates to us the need to be aware. It is, in fact one of the sources of concerned being.

This *souci de soi*, the ethically correct negotiation of the absence of narcissism yet the care that is directed towards the self, only commits its error when it imagines its task to be one of reclamation rather than of aiding the vital transformation of subjectivity along the torus of ongoingness. We cannot, in other words, take a step back and pretend that we "...are seeking a kind of unity and wholeness of the self, a reclaiming of the place of feeling, against the one-sided pre-eminence of reason, and a reclaiming of the body and its pleasures from the inferior and often guilt-ridden place it has been allowed in the disciplined, instrumental identity." (Taylor 2007, 507) This may be the first effect of whatever insight comes from interpretation – the unreality of the unreal producing a sense of a new self from the sacrificial event, or a holism of the 'team effort' through the

realization that dreams are ‘our friends’, for instance – but we must come to the further realization that alertness and interpretation do not end. The tension between the worlds of experience and the subject must continue, even though to resolve specific issues one must overcome their original impetus, which often has taken the form of an anxiety that is at least recognizable even though ultimately, all anxiety actually does is *mask* its own sources: “To solve political problems becomes difficult for those who allow anxiety alone to pose them. It is necessary for anxiety to pose them. But their solution demands at a certain point the removal of this anxiety.” (Bataille 1988, 14) This is a touch and go, a delicate set of exercises, because it must always enact a specific frame of reference, and not be led into the vision of belief alone that will then attempt to carry all before it. Hope comes before vision, just as community overtakes either the singular love of self or the other, the notorious ‘love of the one’ that Nietzsche displaces, and just as faith supplants the rituals and traditions of mere religion. One lives on to some finite goal in the light of an absolute value, but there is an ever-present potential to reverse these forms of rationality and make the absolute take on the task of absolution, to resolve the tensions of the day and thence call for the resolution of tension. To do so is to entirely miss the point of the unreal, the dream, or the uncanny of the arational subjectivity that now must face its own ongoing demise in the very place where it had imagined was safe from any hint of finitude: “...the paradox of being which can reproduce itself only in so far as it is misrecognized and overlooked: the moment we see it ‘as it really is’, this being dissolves itself into nothingness or, more precisely, it changes into another kind of reality.” (Žižek 1990, 25) This new reality is that of the visionary, where the ethical error is made to generalize one’s experiences. As James noted, it is enough for those who have experienced a vision, interpreting it in a religious manner or not, to take it into themselves as part of the process of self-understanding. It has no portable ability and can make absolutely no claims on anyone else: “That is why we must avoid the simple metaphors of *demasking*, of throwing away the veils which are supposed to hide the naked reality.”⁴

(Zizek 1990, 25, italics added) For the trick, if you will, of the void's very absence of being is that it does not end in a reality. It is the lay of masks inverted, where each screen is as real as the next. It is no hall of mirrors, it is the mirror which walks through a corridor of frames containing only the reflection of our own reflections, the thoughts of are thinking, which then returns to us again as the presentiment of the unthought, questioning us along the edge of the abyss of meaning and perhaps appearing to mock our interpretive efforts with the guttural interrogatives only its voice can produce.

The Whole Untruth

And questioning our 'innermost' thoughts? Yet intimacy alone, much vaunted and highly sought after, whether indiscriminately or no, is hardly enough to brook the shared publicity of hyper-rationality and objectivity that dominates the day to day routines of life, including those in spaces imagined to be wholly private. For what is unique and unshared about the routines of the middle-class domus? Our homes are full of advertising, for instance, it persist and insists upon its presence wherever we turn. Billboards and hoardings are not enough for its insatiable appetite, and we must the be reminded of what manufacturer is responsible for everything from our faucets to our refrigerators to our underwear. At least as of yet there are no logos or slogans on our toilet paper, once unwrapped and ready to fulfill its well-bred function. Privacy, if not intimacy, is a secular and highly individuated playing out of the ancient agrarian soteriology of world-denial. Its sources tend to be Eastern, but nevertheless, its pull, in its ability to temporarily pull us away from the world at large and thus our rather forced larger than life presences within such a world, has been glossed a number of times in Western history. None of these guises of saving oneself through the turning away from the world as it is, is without internal contradiction. For example, "...while monasticism is a pure expenditure it is also a renunciation of expenditure; in a sense it is the perfect solution obtained only by completely turning one's back to the solution. But one should not underestimate the significance of this bold solution; recent

history has accentuated its paradoxical value.” (Bataille 1988, 110) The cliquish quality of concentrating social groups in obscure locations lends itself to a variety of abuses, the regular examples in American media regarding religious sectarians are just one example of this, wherein such ‘compounds’ a diversity of abnormative behaviors develop and reproduce themselves. Not that these ideas themselves that have the chance to be enacted in such social spaces are abnormative – one proverbial example is a few males having sexual access to many more females, including those judged by the laws of specific nation states to be underage and thus legally unavailable, whatever one might say of the ethics of such liaisons – but there are other reasons for curtailing such activities on the larger front. The ‘boldness’ of a world-denying soteriology, however secular or sectarian, rests not in its ability to turn the world off in any actual manner, but in its provocative theater of pretending or imaging that certain human beings are exempt from its condition and dynamic. Yet if these groups themselves attempt to construct worlds anew, they find themselves fraught with the same situation from which they had originally sought egress: “The institutionalization of matters previously in the hands of individuals and small groups also encourages opportunism and cowardice.” (Feyerabend 1987, 260) The cult-like atmosphere of sectarian world denial is matched only by the profoundly inegalitarian and elitist tenor of the corporate boardroom or the think-tank. In these kinds of contrived human contexts, the extremity of privacy and intimacy is forced upon the incantatory acolytes as if they were to be inducted into the Eleusinian mysteries or some such other classical cult. Early Christianity was likely hardly different from these other scenes, which were indeed its first competition. That latter day versions of, or reversions to, these earlier models are often found to be piloted by those the wider society would consider insane is not surprising, for “A madman’s actions may be intelligible, but this does not mean that they are necessarily rational.” (Blackburn 1990, 160) There is even a metaphysical pedigree to the calculation of Jonestown and Waco amongst others, that was well known in ancient literature: “...history, for Sophocles, was too irrational to have been created by rational

gods.” (Feyerabend 1987, 117) History is, rather, the quintessential human act, as it acts upon ourselves as no other agent. We have always and already the potential to enact historicity, transforming our own age and its culture memory through experiencing the ongoingness of the living inertia of history while at the same time being committed to the rewriting of history by our very presence and decision-making, rational or no. ‘Effective historical consciousness’ includes the rationality of understanding the objective suasion of structure, but it also must include the subjective self-understanding of the agency of human beings as they are shaped in the present day by contemporary forces and suggestions. We do not know, in fact, how these encounters will play themselves out, and world-denial as well as the radical subjectivity of the fully ‘private citizen’ who joins no groups but also shuns his individuated public role, are unlikely to provide any reasonable conclusions: “Any admission of ideas and ideals to the rank of prominent historical agents must confront the problem of the ruses of which history has shown itself perennially capable, deflecting ideological and other movements to fates that they never anticipated or might have scorned or feared.” (Blackburn 1990, 158) This is one of the reasons, at a wide structural level, why we must admit to not knowing ‘what’s what’ in any ultimate sense. Even though our present age is one of accelerated motion – some of it contrived by the planned obsolescence that aids the means of over-production and keeps the shill of advertising desperately current – it is clear that no historically known human epoch was without this self-same motion, however painstaking it may seem to us, ensconced in our whirlwind of social change: “Indeed, we cannot speak of a world of the phenomenon, of a world of appearances, except in the presence of a world that *changes* it appearances.” (Bachelard, op. cit. 57, italics in the original) This is generally considered to be one of the elements of the character of appearances, for the Ancient Greeks and their followers, an element that not only exposed its less than genuine nature, where adaptation and motion are only the tools of a disingenuous ingenuity, but suggested to them that there was another world forever untouched by such a dynamic. The task of humanity became more clear for this

sensibility, one which we still largely share: to found oneself once again in the unity of spirit, of the species, of consciousness, of cosmos, of nature or of the divine. Only through this kind of rational action directed at an absolute value would subjectivity liberate itself from its self. The very presence of the should self, the adult self, the outer child and the socius will always be divisive when it comes to working together toward the communion of self-consciousness. The self-understanding associated with this grand task of unification, reflected as well in the sciences that desire a theory of grand unification, an elemental cosmic image which is no longer a mere image: “Spirit is struggling to achieve an understanding of itself as spirit, that is, as free subjectivity, and to see this as the absolute. But with the pre-Greek peoples – except for the Jews – the absolute is still less than subject, it is still bound up with external, hence impersonal reality, nature or the total abstraction of the void.” (Taylor 1975, 394) The sense that one imparts the source of consciousness to a higher being that has, in spite of its superiority or even omniscience, retained within itself an intimate human interest cannot be summarily dismissed as an hypostasized human egotism. It is we ourselves who have divine interest, and this is what, perhaps paradoxically, makes us what we are as human beings. We do not yet know of other forms of consciousness that hold these aspirations, and naturalizing them or rationalizing them does not alter their essential qualities. The gods abandon those who do not believe in them, they are wrested from the tapestry of history and become archaeological monuments, mutely beseeching us to recall them to mind and to presence. We are apparently about to find out that nature as well has this character. The dialectic of human life within history, its task and its gift, continue to present to our contemporary consciousness the rationality of creating for ourselves a reason to continue, to live on within the shadows of doubt and the focused light of a considered self-skepticism. If the rationality of science and philosophy are currently our cultural mainsprings, the authorities we desire to tell us the whole untruth about our existence, we need to leap into them as does the sacrificial risk-taker into the fire. Because of this dialectic, “...the knowledge

we need to understand and to advance the sciences does not come from theories, it comes from participation. The examples, accordingly, are not details that can and should be omitted once the 'real account' is given – they *are* the real account.” (Feyerabend 1987, 284, italics in the original) Telling 'the whole truth and nothing but the truth' is a manes of avoiding the truth of such a telling. Rather, we should be honest about our situation and tell instead the entire untruth, using the reason of unreason, confronting the mocking grimace of sudden and radical death, to gain a more authentic self-understanding. It is not mere self-satire that subsists within such a voice, or is represented on such a visage. This is only half the story, a half-story, as it were, the half that remains sardonic in the face of ongoing life: “I always speak the truth. Not the whole truth, because there's no way to say it all. Saying the whole truth is materially impossible: words fail. Yet it's through this very impossibility that the truth holds onto the real.” (Lacan, cited in Copjec 1989, 53)

Human knowledge does not need the truthfulness of a distended and rationalized objectivity to fulfill either its ethical or existential obligation to its creators. No known history wears only the sardonic mask – or is this the way we know history? – no known rationality sports only the guise of the object – or is this the way we rationalize having to live with objects, is this our way of objecting to them and to our presence as the would-be object? – and, finally, no knowable reality is grasped only through the desire for the unknown. In knowing these aporia, we do not have to cast them into an abyss of meaning. It is more reasonable to follow the contours of the presence of unreason in our consciousness, to attempt to comprehend their fuller significance with a view to understanding the history and culture that found them to be of such magnitude that it both suppressed their influence and yet ignited their passions in unprecedented ways: “That civilization is perhaps detestable; it sometimes seems to be only a bad dream; and there is no question that it generates the boredom and irritation that favor a slide toward catastrophe. But no one can reasonably consider something that only has the attraction of unreason in its favor.” (Bataille 1988, 170) The admittance of the self stating with the

truth of untruth built into it that “I don’t know what’s what’ is always the first step in learning. The untruth of only truth will not help us here. The rationality of reason alone cannot aid us. We need rather to include, without attempting to envelope, the manifold conflicts and diffusely mutable interpretations that coruscate across the surface of the human existentiality. No less so can we ignore the limits of the narrative that only attests to our shadows, fears, and confrontations. We do ‘contain multitudes’, but in this we can find a home in the language of the other. We do not supersede others, but we can find them recognizable in a way that that brings us closer to self-recognition: “A more complete definition of what is called existentialism than we get from talking about anxiety and the contradictions of the human condition might be found in the idea of their being and at the very moment of their opposition to each other, in the idea of a reason immanent in unreason...” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 70) That we have been the unknowing and unreasoning witnesses to an exposition of consciousness at once biographical and historical can only lead to the visions of rationality a humanity it can no longer afford to ignore.

NOTES

¹ This is hardly new. The symbiosis amongst social movements, technology, and the ideas that are to be spread is of historical moment, if cyclical: “...absolute authority was no longer necessary to convey religious knowledge that could be imparted to an ignorant and isolated population. Printing and the vast dissemination of knowledge that had followed in its wake, had changed not only the quantity of information people possessed, but their ways of thinking as well.” (Von Arx 1985, 74) Today, media transforms both what is thought about and perhaps also what constitutes thought ‘itself’, but we can no longer tell from where the change has come nor where it is going.

² For an historical example, see Bataille (1988, 102).

³ As Žižek suggests, “When we awaken into reality after a dream, we usually say to ourselves ‘it was just a dream’, thereby blinding ourselves to the fact that in our everyday, waking reality we are *nothing but a consciousness of this dream*.” (Žižek 1990, 48, italics in the original)

⁴ Even if anxiety masks its origins, it is itself no mere mask. It does not import to us a theater of its intent, but is an effect of the problematic relationship we have with a theater that absurdly denotes the social reality of all too real expectations. We mistake our performances in the everyday or in the political sphere with a form of life which is equal to the reality of the

irreal. We expect, in other words, to gain as valuable insight from this stage, and thus also think that our interpretations of it – when they occur at all – will be as meritorious as those the difficult work of self-analysis collects on its way to self-understanding. So, rather than an expectation of demasking, we must recall the void *as* it presents itself to us – this is in fact all there is to nothingness, and there is no ‘Nothing’ at which we arrive as a terminus, its Stygian visage looming up as a slightly more dense mass of darkness in a world of shadows – and then we will realize that “It is a question of arriving at the moment when consciousness will cease to be a consciousness of *something*; in other words, of becoming conscious of the decisive meaning of an instant in which increase (the acquisition of *something*) will resolve into expenditure; and this will be precisely self-consciousness that is, a consciousness that henceforth as *nothing as its object*.” (Bataille 1988, italics in the original).

REFERENCES

- Bachelard, Gaston. 1964. *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*. Boston: Beacon Press. [1938].
- Bataille, Georges. 1988. *The Accursed Share*, Volume 1. New York: Zone Books. [1967].
- Blackburn, Richard James. 1990. *The Vampire of Reason: an essay in the philosophy of history*. New York: Verso.
- Copjec, Joan. 1989. „The Orthopsychic Subject: Film and the Reception of Lacan”. *October* 49: 53-72.
- Feyerabend, Paul K. 1987. *Farewell to Reason*. New York: Verso
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1998. *Praise of Theory: speeches and essays*. New Haven: Yale University Press. [1983].
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1964. *Sense and Non-Sense*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. [1948].
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1982. Twilight of the Idols. In *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann. London: Penguin Books. [1888].
- Sontag, Susan. 1978. *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

---- 1975. *Hegel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Von Arx, Jeffrey Paul. 1985. *Progress and Pessimism: religion, politics and history in late nineteenth century Britain*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Zizek, Slavoj. 1990. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. New York: Verso. [1989].

G.V. Loewen received his Ph.D. from the University of British Columbia in 1997, and is an hermeneutics specialist who has taught in universities in the United States and Canada for 19 years. The author of 17 books, he is currently chair of the sociology department in STM College, the liberal arts college of the University of Saskatchewan.

Address:

Dr. Gregory Victor Loewen
Tenured Professor and Chair
Department of Sociology
STM College, University of Saskatchewan
1437 College Drive
Saskatoon, SK, Canada S7N 0W6
Tel: (+1) 306-652-6524
Email: gloewen@stmcollege.ca