

Nervous Twitching

Suspiria and the Ethics of the Real

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Luca Guadagnino's 2018 re-envisioning of Dario Argento's 1977 horror classic *Suspiria* begins in an analyst's practice. The very first scenes of the film present what we might well imagine, stereotypically, as an everyday occurrence in the garden-variety hysteric's treatment: the (young, female) patient turns up without scheduled appointment, demanding the analyst's time despite the fact that another patient is sitting in the waiting room. She's in a rather frazzled state. Her narrative is incoherent, her voice breathless, her hair in disarray, she clings to bookshelves, jumpily withdraws into corners, writhes on the couch, and is gone as suddenly as she appeared.

Taking this scene as my cue, I would like to try and approach the significance of hysteria as a figure of ethical and political agency in contemporary psychoanalytical – more precisely, post-Lacanian – philosophy. Guadagnino's *Suspiria* not only stages hysteria as a form of ethico-political agency¹ but also moves beyond the predominantly discursive conception of such agency in post-Lacanian theory. In relying on and, simultaneously, critically scrutinising psychoanalysis as its frame of reference, *Suspiria* does not at all discard psychoanalysis as the 'subject-obsessed, solipsistic post-Kantian thought' that neomaterialism despises so much. Rather, it confirms the critical potential of post-Lacanian theory and yet challenges us to examine its material(ist) potential more closely.² I will therefore begin with the notion

- 1 Alenka Zupančič makes an important point concerning the problematic conflation of ethics and politics (cp. *Ontology and the Death Drive*. In: Russel Sbriglia/Slavoj Žižek (eds.): *Subject Lessons. Hegel, Lacan, and the Future of Materialism*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020, 142–170, esp. 163). For reasons of space, however, I will allow for some terminological ambiguity throughout this text.
- 2 Arguably, the struggle over matter between psychoanalysis and neomaterialism is in itself something of a hysterical debate, where neomaterialism advances, quite like the "Master" of Lacan's respective discourse, self-assuredly in its claims (to break the spell of correlationism, the self-delusions of modernity, and so on) but without proper knowledge of its own desire, whereas psychoanalysis fills the role of "slave" and hysteric in the scenario who, knowing quite well what the master wants but also knowing that he does not, is put in the position of

of hysteria as insurrection in post-Lacanian theory, and include Guadagnino's film in a second step.

1. "In Praise of Hysteria"

Post-Lacanian theory casts the hysteric which we encounter at the very beginning of *Suspiria* as rebel more than as patient, emphasising the insurgent potential of this malady. Compare here as an initial example Dominik Finkelde's remark, in his text on *Excessive Subjectivity* as the seat of ethical agency, on the four Lacanian discourses:

Of these four discourses, the stability of political doxa can be particularly threatened by the third one, the 'discourse of the hysteric'. [...] In contradistinction to the other three discourses (that is, master, university, and analyst), the discourse of the hysteric is marked for Lacan by the guess or the presumption that the big Other, due to a concealed fundamental lack, is an impostor and that this has become obvious to the hysterical subject.³

Similarly, Slavoj Žižek elaborates "in praise of hysteria" that it "has to be comprehended in the complexity of its strategy, as a radically ambiguous protest against the Master's interpellation which simultaneously bears witness to the fact that the hysterical subject needs a Master, cannot do without a Master, so that there is no simple and direct way out".⁴ From this ambiguity, Žižek develops the potential of hysteria as follows:

on the one hand hysteria is secondary, [...] a rejection of the identity imposed on the subject by the predominant form of interpellation, a questioning of this identity ('Am I really what you're saying I am?'); at another, more fundamental level, however, hysteria is primary, it articulates the radical, constitutive uncertainty as to what, as an object, I am for the other; and the symbolic identity conferred on me via interpellation is a response, a way out of the deadlock of hysteria.⁵

quizzing neomaterialism about the goals it wants to attain, and why. (Compare also Jacques Lacan: *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan XVII. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2007, 31f.)

3 Dominik Finkelde: *Excessive Subjectivity. Kant, Hegel, Lacan, and the Foundations of Ethics*. Translated by Deva Kemmis and Astrid Weigert. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017 [2015], 185.

4 Slavoj Žižek: *The Indivisible Remainder*. London and New York: Verso, 2007 [1996], 161, 163f.

5 Žižek: *Indivisible Remainder*, 164f.

In this scenario, hysteria's ultimate resistance lies in the fact that it refuses, together with any specific, symbolically imposed identity, the very idea of identity as such: the "apparent failure of interpellation" – "the fact that I, the subject, experience the innermost kernel of my being as something which is not 'merely that' (the materiality of rituals and apparatuses)" – is the "ultimate proof of its success, that is to say, of the fact that the 'effect-of-subject' really took place" and "the exemplary form of the imaginary distance towards the symbolic apparatus".⁶ This is an illusion that, of all people, the 'masquerading woman' is said to be best able to let go of – the point being that "this 'less' is 'more': [...] the status of the subject is feminine – that which eludes logical construction, the reef of impossibility at which symbolic construction fails, is precisely the subject *qua* S".⁷ A "woman knows that there is nothing beneath the mask" and "her strategy is precisely to preserve this 'nothing' of her freedom".⁸ In this scenario, the "aim of the psychoanalytic process" is this very renunciation of "phantasmic identity" such that what is left is the pure "void" of subjectivity.⁹

Ed Pluth criticises Žižek for the absoluteness of this negativity and insists that the point of analysis can just as well be a more substantial subject position. In a speculative explication of Lacan's concept of the 'act' – which is not just any action but a form of agency characterised, precisely, by the fact that it traverses established normalities – Ed Pluth defends the notion that "in Lacan's work there is a gesture, a tendency, toward thinking of a subject without an identity".¹⁰ The "end of analysis" appears, in his understanding, as a *creative* end as it can be seen "not as a mere repetition of the subject's origin, but a repetition that recreates, bringing about a new way for the subject to be in relation to signifiers, the Other, and the real".¹¹ Positioning himself against interpretations of the Lacanian act – arguably the properly political subject position immanent to psychoanalysis – that restrict it to instances of refusal, Pluth claims that he conceives of the subject of the act as one which "is not simply saying 'no' to something, but a more nuanced 'no ... but'".¹² This act of saying "no ... but" challenges "the code that organizes a particular, supposedly consistent Other", that is it does relate to an Other (using the signifiers this Other provides), but not in the function of a symbolic authority.¹³ This constitutes an understanding

6 Žižek: *Indivisible Remainder*, 166.

7 Žižek: *Indivisible Remainder*, 165. S being the point from which the hysteric speaks, cp. Jacques Lacan: *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan XVII. New York: W. W. Norton, 2007, e.g. 29.

8 Žižek: *Indivisible Remainder*, 163.

9 Žižek: *Indivisible Remainder*, 166.

10 Ed Pluth: *Signifiers and Acts. Freedom in Lacan's Theory of the Subject*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2007, 129.

11 Pluth: *Signifiers and Acts*, 132.

12 Pluth: *Signifiers and Acts*, 117.

13 Pluth: *Signifiers and Acts*, 136.

of protest (on the part of, for instance, the hysteric) which combines the negativity of refusal with a 'positive' affirmation – or, really, creation – of the protesting individual itself, though this individual in a certain sense isn't a (fully-formed) subject, and definitely doesn't have a recognised identity. Accordingly, Pluth argues ultimately that "the subject associated with Lacan's theory of the act is a subject that is negative yet nevertheless *consists* in some way".¹⁴

This debate points to a disagreement that, arguably, haunts post-Lacanian philosophy, as well as neighbouring fields of theory, in many instances. Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, co-authors of the dialogic *Sex, or the Unbearable*, remain in some opposition about this: Edelman refuses the notion that there could be, in the Lacanian sense, such a thing as a non-phantasmatic subjectivity. "I do invest in the fantasy, both personally and pedagogically, of breaking fantasy down," he clarifies, but

[n]ot because I believe that a life without fantasy is possible or desirable (how could it be desirable, after all, except by way of fantasy?) but rather because the reification of fantasy as reality [...] does violence both to those who reify themselves through attachment to it and to those made to figure the insistence of the Real that would rupture it from within. That rupture, for me, corresponds to [...] the imperative of politics as negativity, as dissent from the world as given.¹⁵

Berlant, in contrast, speculates that besides continuous dismantling and rebuilding, there is a chance of tangible affective reconfiguration:

Once one acknowledges that one has not lost one's grip but never had it firmly or could have it, ever, in love or any structuring relation, then metaphors of holding and hoarding can be affectively reinvested, reconsidered, displaced, distributed, and diluted [...]. Inducing transformative proximities like this is the task of politics and theory, as well as love. In so doing we are shifting our way of occupying negativity's hold on *us*.¹⁶

As one potential way out of this overall conundrum, and a compromise of sorts, post-Lacanian theory presents the notion of what might be called, for simplicity's sake, 'creative speech'. Finkelde explains how Lacan, opposing "the tendency to freeze the relationship between signifier and signified", identifies as the "true potentiality of excessive subjectivity" an "enunciative power", resulting from the very fact that language is 'never enough', and therefore always renewable. "Lacan, just like Heidegger,

14 Pluth: *Signifiers and Acts*, 116 (my emphasis).

15 Lauren Berlant/Lee Edelman: *Sex, or the Unbearable*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014, 87f.

16 Berlant/Edelman: *Sex*, 82.

Agamben, and Badiou, attempts to uncover within language and especially within performative speech acts the paradoxical place of enunciation. He sees a way to tie language back to its enunciative power, which at its core lies in the unconscious, in psychoanalysis as philosophy and in psychoanalysis as therapeutic ethics".¹⁷ Similarly, Pluth meditates on the act of punning as a form of speech that relegates the Other to its function as a mere repository of signifiers. And finally, Zupančič describes how "the placing of the subject at the level of enjoyment in talking enables the production of a new signifier [...]. This new signifier is the event proper, and it triggers a new subjectivization".¹⁸

The subject of such "enjoyment" of language in "polysemic babble"¹⁹ is obviously not the disembodied, correlationist subject which neomaterialism suspects to be the limit of psychoanalytic thinking. Still, corporeality and matter, while on the one hand implicit in such creative speech as ethical agency, receive attention mostly as the "Real of ethics" in contemporary psychoanalytic philosophy. Žižek points out how the infamous 'desire of the Other' with which the hysteric struggles acquires a different quality depending on whether it is encountered as imaginary, symbolic, or real. From these three registers in which one can encounter the desire of the Other, Žižek derives three possible foundations of ethics: an "ethics of the Imaginary" (an ethics of the 'common Good'), an "ethics of the Symbolic" (an ethics of the determinate law, morality), and an "ethics of the Real", which is the ethics of the (Kantian) moral law as impenetrable and enigmatic.²⁰ Zupančič, in her *Ethics of the Real*, and inspired by Lacan's reading of Paul Claudel's early 20th century play *L'Otage*, takes a similar idea to its radical conclusion.²¹ The famous case of Antigone

17 Finkelde: *Excessive Subjectivity*, 211. In more detail, he explains: "Let us draw an initial conclusion: the themes of Lacan's philosophy of language presented earlier, partially epistemological, partially language-philosophical, harbor a salvific dimension for psychoanalysis from which Lacan develops his ethics of excessive subjectivity and his theory of autonomal subjectivity to the law. For just as signifiers can catch up with themselves each time anew, so it is with the unconscious, according to Lacan. Since the unconscious is structured like a language, it also embodies a potentiality from which the subject, the ego, can be caught up from the indeterminacy of the linguistic structure of the unconscious each time anew. This implies that subjectivity is by definition excessive and carries politically dangerous yet also generatively positive consequences" (209f.).

18 Zupančič: *Ontology and the Death Drive*, 166; for further illustration, see the final chapter, "Object-Disoriented Ontology", in her *What IS Sex?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press 2017, in particular p. 138f.). Finkelde, Pluth, and Zupančič all take their cue from the Lacanian concept of a "new signifier" in his third seminar.

19 Zupančič: *Ontology*, 166.

20 Žižek: *Indivisible Remainder*, 168f.

21 Alenka Zupančič: *Ethics of the Real. Kant, Lacan*. London and New York: Verso 2000. Cp. the concluding chapter, "Thus ...".

she frames as “classical ethics”, in which everything but one particular Cause is sacrificed – Antigone would rather die than tolerate the contamination of living with a moral principle that can never be manifested in its purity entirely. Claudel’s heroine Sygne de Coüfontaine’s less widely known story she reads as illustration of “modern ethics” because Sygne is forced to give up even the sacred Cause to which theretofore, she had sacrificed everything else – a process which reduces her to an abject state in the final scenes of the play, mortally wounded, her face contorted by a compulsive twitching.²² Antigone’s Cause remains, ultimately, untouched; her desire, in the psychoanalytical idiom, infinite and intact precisely in its non-fulfilment. Sygne, by contrast, when she is forced to see her principle through to its bitter end in actual practice and finite, corporeal existence, reveals only the latter’s insufficiency: drawn into the finite context, the infinite (desire, moral principle) appears as an “embarrassing” presence, such as Sygne’s nervous twitching, which reveals “a body which is not made in the measure of the infinite (of the jouissance) that inhabits it”. Sygne embodies “the Real of desire” as a “piece of meat”.²³ Thus “the Divine law and its sole support occupy the same level; the (Divine) law finds itself face to face with this convulsing flesh that refuses to disappear from the picture, effectively preventing a sublime splendour from appearing in its place”.²⁴ The opposition between what Zupančič terms “classical” and “modern ethics” comes down, also, to the opposition between a ‘clean death’ – which, precisely because it is ‘clean’, keeps corporeality at bay – and an abject remainder of twitching, mortal flesh.

With reference to this Real, incidentally, and its potential in the context of a psychoanalytic materialism, Zupančič clarifies in her more recent texts that while “the subject exists among objects”, it “exists there as the point that gives access to a possible objectivation of their inner antagonism”. Thus “the fine-sounding thesis about the ‘democracy of objects’ (all objects are ontologically the same, and all are equally worthy of our attention) could be seen as actually (and quite ‘subjectively’) obfuscating reality ‘such as it is’: antagonistic. The subject [...] thus efficiently masks its split” – the split, as may be added in the context at hand, which the hysteric occupies so insistently – “producing reality as neutral and non-problematic in itself (or at least untouchable in its problematic character)”. Against this, Zupančič suggests conceiving “of the subject as an existence/form of a certain difficulty (the Real), and as a ‘response’ to it”. This Real “is not accessible – in itself – in any way but via the

22 Sygne is dying, more precisely, because she shielded the husband she hates from a bullet fired by the man she really loves. The husband she hates blackmailed her into the marriage by threatening the man she loves, so that upon the first, straightforwardly heroic rejection of happiness follows a second rejection of far less sublime quality – protecting her husband simply because he is her husband, but not for any qualities that he or the marriage possesses.

23 Zupančič: *Ethics*, 258f.

24 Zupančič: *Ethics*, 234.

very figure of the subject".²⁵ If "materialism is thinking which advances as thinking of contradictions", then "this is what makes psychoanalysis a materialist theory (and practice)", Zupančič says, and the "gist of Lacan's materialism" is the suspicion that "neutrality itself is not neutral" (there is no such thing as neutrality outside of the subject's fabrication of neutrality; nothing is in the sense of Lacanian materialism except contradiction, but contradiction is material).²⁶ The reason why Zupančič emphasises this notion of subjectivity as the 'primary detour' of reality is that it provides for her an important counterweight to the ontologisation of politics in neomaterialism, the danger of which she sees in abolishing the subject position from which we can demand justice – for objects or anyone else – in the first place: "there is no need for [...] an immediate attack of selflimiting modesty, inciting us to write on banners: 'Down with the privileges of the subject! Down with its exceptional status!' For in doing this we are jeopardizing – among many other things – precisely that political dimension of ontology which inspires this kind of democratic and egalitarian project".²⁷

Thus two figures of the hysteric emerge from post-Lacanian philosophy: there is the hysteria of Antigone, whose death keeps her desire intact and whose hysteria is propositional/discursive in the sense that it takes place in the field of authoritative claims; and there is Sygne's hysteria, whose nervous twitching points to an "ethics of the Real" as it showcases the *material* impossibility, the incapacity of matter, to realise desire. When post-Lacanian theory moves towards the notion of "new signifiers" and creative speech as (however momentary) 'cure', this cure arguably concerns the first vision more than the second; however sophisticated a 'Lacanian materialism' such as it is sketched by Zupančič may be, at the moment of ethical action, the role of matter or of the body beyond its function as obscure repository of "enunciative power" or as stumbling block for symbolic formation remains to some extent unclear. It is here that Guadagnino's film can provide inspiration, as it directs our focus towards the somatic aspect of hysteria as ethical stance, suggesting that there might indeed just be such a thing as a practice of subjectivity beyond negation, and that this practice concerns more than the acts of speech, however "polysemic". How so?

2. *Ach, Lacan!*

The hysteric patient that we encounter right at the very beginning of the film has, as it turns out, escaped from a place called the Markos Dance Academy. This academy,

25 Zupančič: *Ontology*, 161.

26 Zupančič: *Ontology*, 162, 160.

27 Zupančič: *Ontology*, 160f.

set in late 1970s Berlin, is envisioned as a progressive institution with a dark secret: beneath its sophisticated and avantgardistic exterior lurks a demonic presence, referenced as “Mother”, which apparently demands the young dancers’ life force in order to survive. In this basic setting, the 2018 film corresponds exactly to its 1977 predecessor; paying, likewise, obvious homage to Dario Argento’s iconic stylishness.²⁸ Argento’s film has been described as “deeply, powerfully loony, a triumph of execution over narrative, of mesmerizing images and sound”,²⁹ a description that possibly rings even truer for Guadagnino’s re-imagination, in comparison to which Argento’s plot and its affective charge appear, as a matter of fact, rather straightforward: in the 1977 version, a young dancer called Suzy Bannion is caught up in the snares of a “monstrous-feminine”, as Barbara Creed has famously termed it,³⁰ that is, a witches’ coven consisting of the school’s teachers, the head of which – Helena Markos – Suzy stabs in a final coming of age, after which she – now, as it were, ‘a free subject’ – escapes and the school goes up in flames. Matters are far more complicated in Guadagnino’s film. The villains – the so-called “matrons” – are more ambiguous in their intentions; central links in the cause-effect-chain of the film’s plot remain just out of reach; the dialogue often seems to precede or lag behind the events depicted on screen; and quite frequently, while the characters deliver their dialogue with dead seriousness, it is often hard to tell what *exactly* they are talking about. Guadagnino’s *Suspiria* is full of evocative signifiers that never properly reveal their referent; in its metonymical peculiarity, it makes far more ‘sense’ on the level of form and surface than it does on the level of plot and content.

One such ‘evocative signifier’ can be found in the historical context that is added to the film: the release year of Argento’s original, 1977, becomes a portentous historical signifier for Guadagnino’s homage as the film abounds with fragments of news reports concerning the kidnapping of the Landshut airplane or the death of the Stammheim prisoners and generally references to the activities of the *Rote Armee Fraktion* and the events of the German Autumn of 1977. In another addition, while there is a brief mention of a ‘psychiatrist’ in Argento’s film, this is in no way comparable to the omnipresence of psychoanalysis in the 2018 version, where the analyst Dr. Klemperer is one of the main characters and both the very beginning and the very end of the film are set in his rooms (and the reference is explicitly to Lacanian psychoanalysis: analyst Klemperer in one scene meets a neighbour in his yard who

28 Compare L. Andrew Cooper’s description of Argento’s work: “Even more disturbing than the extremity [of violence in his films] is that Argento makes the combination of carefully arranged details, from the sets’ colors and shadows to the cameras’ angles and movements, so fundamentally pretty” (*Dario Argento*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012, 1).

29 Maitland McDonagh: Back to School. In: *Film Comment*, 54.6, 2018, 20–21, 20.

30 Barbara Creed: *The Monstrous-Feminine. Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007 [1993].

says he is on his way “zur FU” [to the *Freie Universität Berlin*, that is] to hear a lecture by Jacques Lacan – which Klemperer comments with a dismissive “Ach, Lacan!”). And finally, where dance itself functions mostly as ornament in *Argento*, it takes ‘centre stage’ in Guadagnino’s film, which switches from the classical ballet that we only occasionally see the dancers practice in the 1977 version to a form of modern dance whose performance takes up entire scenes of Guadagnino’s film, and which the characters, in particular the Academy’s artistic director, a certain Madame Blanc, explicitly view as progressive political practice.

Guadagnino’s film thus acknowledges the political side of hysteria but also draws from its genealogy, which has been pushed into the background somewhat in the post-Lacanian interpretation of its ethico-political potential: taking the (in)famous ‘theatre of hysteria’ to the extremes of body horror, the 2018 version of *Suspiria* exploits the scenic potential of the hysterically twisted body, making the most of its spectacular appeal and leaning heavily on the cultural history of hysteria as hybrid of gynaecological disease, nervous condition, and unconscious disturbance as well as its ties to theatricality, dance, and figural art. It is interesting to see how the tics, twitches, and contortions that dominate the late 19th century clinical “Invention of Hysteria”³¹ re-emerge for instance in Zupančič’s analysis in the position of the “Real of ethics”, that is – following the ‘Lacanian ontology’ as outlined by Zupančič herself, as an “object-disoriented ontology”³² – as the manifestation of the inherent impossibility, the non-total nature of all ethics. In other instances, the body appears as under-thematised means to an end in Lacanian ethics, as it is ‘only’ considered in its capacity of producing speech. Where hysteria appears as ethical stance in contemporary psychoanalytical philosophy, its somatic component is of secondary relevance. In this regard, Guadagnino’s *Suspiria* presents us with an interesting combination: hysteria’s appeal as theatrical spectacle, on the one hand, and its – predominantly discursively legitimised – appreciation in post-Lacanian theory, on the other.

How is *Suspiria* a film about ethics? Beyond its explicit references to the problem of radical political action, *Suspiria* is a film about ethics precisely in the sense that it stages the problem of form itself, form in its relation to embodied human action. What is particularly vexing about the film’s ethical inflection is that it remains, in a certain sense, a surface phenomenon – a series of insistent, yet unsubstantiated gestures. More often than not, we follow the character’s moral debates without actually being able to tell what they are *about*, even while a strong sense persists that these debates do have a subject. The discussions between director Blanc and her new

31 Georges Didi-Huberman’s *Invention of Hysteria. Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (published in French in 1982) remains an impressive resource on the cultural history of hysteria as visual spectacle (Translated by Alisa Hartz. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 2003).

32 See footnote 18.

principal dancer Suzy are a case in point. Debating the fine points of the choreography, Blanc admonishes Suzy, whose jumps aren't energetic enough: "Are you so happy to be stuck to the earth?" Suzy, opposing her teacher's instruction, explains:

At this point, the jumps are opposing the pull of the structure, but it's too soon for that, don't you think? The floor work is keeping the other dancers pushed down. So this [she demonstrates a new movement consisting, basically, in her writhing on the floor], this could echo that on a slightly higher point of elevation. If I stay close to the ground now, and go straight into the jumps where you have them later, then that's more to the point. The resistance is more emphatic. Right?

Blanc, however, insists on the jumps that Suzy is struggling with: "I don't know how aware you are of what times we lived through here 40 years ago, out of which this piece was made. We learned at great cost through those years the value of the balance of things. Every arrow that flies feels the pull of the earth, but we must aim upwards. We need to get you in the air".³³

There is a decided overhang of signifying gestures in this exchange. While Blanc's provocative question ("are you so happy to be stuck to the earth") does make concrete sense in the context at hand, the metaphorical flourish with which it is delivered points insistently towards a more obscure and deeper meaning that cannot readily be identified. Similarly, Suzy's objection is full of abstract considerations that stand in contrast to her languid movements. Blanc's reply, finally, puts the entire activity in a historical context, evoking the entire habitus of politically conscious art but hardly serving to clarify in any more trivial sense what exactly the atrocities of the Nazi regime have to do with jumping and the trajectory of arrows. There is, thus, an absolute emphasis on the abstract, formal side, which progresses and flourishes almost metonymically as the film proceeds without, however, producing much of a tangible meaning or content in the process.

So while in one sense, an insistence on "*la vraie chose*"³⁴ is omnipresent in the film, this insistence is coupled with an equally persistent blurriness as to what this "*chose*" might actually be. The 'rightness' is put forward, but the 'thing' remains shrouded. Form is emphasised, but content remains conspicuously out of reach. Form without or rather, apart from content is, of course, an old problem in moral philosophy. Zupančič, in the course of her in-depth discussion of Kantian ethics through the psychoanalytic lense, speaks of "a 'hole beyond the moral law', the absence of a moral exemplar which could guarantee the morality of our acts".³⁵ "The phrase 'So act that...' of the categorical imperative is not the answer to the question 'What should I do?'"

33 *Suspiria*. Directed by Luca Guadagnino. Starring Tilda Swinton, Dakota Johnson, Mia Goth. K Period Media et al., 2018, 01:12:30–15:22.

34 *Suspiria*, 00:20:18.

35 Zupančič: *Ethics*, 234.

but, rather, to the question ‘How do I do it?’ – a question in which the ‘it’ remains an enigma”.³⁶ This constellation is mirrored in the film: the “chose”, the cause or *Sache*, is never given; its rightness is constantly emphasised.

When Zupančič speaks of “a form which is [...] not so much an empty form as a form ‘outside’ content” (17), she describes an excess of form that, coincidentally, we find in the film’s immense and conscious stylishness as well: the Academy full of mirrored rooms, floral silk robes, dramatic staircases, sophisticated interiors; the almost geometric choreographies; the elaborate filmic techniques employed to make the story into a horrible-yet-beautiful *Gesamtkunstwerk*, down to the exaggerated, rhythmic panting sounds which punctuate its soundtrack (which is provided by none other than Radiohead’s Thom Yorke). The production design is executed with an almost fetishistic attention to architectural detail and interior design, from the pleasingly cluttered analyst’s office with its scuffed velvet armchairs to the glamorous art déco decoration of Madame Blanc’s private quarters. Even the matron/witches’ weapon of choice – a kind of meat hook, but stylised into a slender metal object that looks rather like an eccentric piece of jewellery – is beautiful to look at. Overall, the film is, to appropriate a funny little phrase from Lacan, “immensely satisfying from an ornamental point of view”.³⁷ In its curious mix of moral debate, political activism, pagan cult practice, and body horror, *form* starts to appear in all its eccentricity, which of necessity jars with what it frames: the abstract moral overhang with the almost prosaic activity of moving limbs to and fro; the idealistic aspirations with the sour aftertaste of politically motivated suicide.

Where form becomes eccentric, however (“outside content”), is it still formal in the strict sense? Where content is entirely out of the question, one might well argue, we can only approach form in its materiality; that is to say, there is a point of depletion beyond which the matter-form-dualism dissolves and form becomes a material circumstance – a process which we witness precisely with Guadagnino’s remake, where the plot of Argento’s film becomes secondary and instead visual appearance, its ‘aesthetic’,³⁸ becomes the whole point of the film. In one of the film’s key scenes, *Suspiria* zooms in on precisely this tipping point where pure form is matter, is-as-matter, and vice versa; pointing to a close but entirely disharmonious link between the two. After about the first half hour of the film, Suzy is shown to join her first official rehearsal. Another dancer, Olga, is at this point designated to take over

36 Zupančič: *Ethics*, 163.

37 Jacques Lacan: *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960*. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan VII. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Translated by Dennis Porter. New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1997, 114.

38 Quite in the sense that the term is used in popular culture today (compare the telling title, for instance, of Sarah Spellings’ *Vogue* piece, ‘Do I Have an Aesthetic?’: <https://www.vogue.com/article/do-i-have-an-aesthetic> (29.06.2023)).

the lead role; however, she is overwhelmed with Patricia's disappearance and suspicious towards the company's leaders. Olga runs off and Suzy volunteers to step in. While Suzy beings to dance, Olga is lured, presumably by witchcraft, into a smaller rehearsal room and subjected to intense – but apparently kinetic: no one else is visible on screen – physical mutilation. Olga's initial attempt to escape from the building is thwarted because she is blinded by tears which, rather than genuine expression of personal grief, appear ambivalently either as indication of her bewitchment or as hysteric symptom (it's easy enough to imagine a Freudian case study in which a woman is haunted by the onset of 'involuntary crying fits' ...). The scene then consists of two parallel sequences of twisting limbs between which the perspective switches back and forth: on the one hand, Suzy's body twisting in dance, on the other, Olga's body twisted in slaughter. Olga's body is contorted like a puppet's at unnatural angles until she is reduced to a wheezing bundle of extremities lying on the floor, saliva dripping from her mouth. Suzy ends the sequence, not unsimilarly, dizzy and nauseous, crouching down on the floor, as well.

The harshness with which the film juxtaposes scenes of dance and scenes of physical mutilation in this cross-cut sequence is conspicuous. In addition to making a rather obvious point about the demanding regimes of professional dance, it stages a conflicted equivalence of form and matter: where dance is (the same as) torture, the abstract forms of modern dance in a piece with a complicated message that few people really understand appear, in their mirror image, as base and shapeless matter. Where form is removed entirely from content, it takes on all the qualities of matter. Interestingly, Olga's wheezing body corresponds exactly to Sygne de Coûfontaine's in Zupančič's analysis: almost-dead-but-still-twitching, it indicates the "Real of ethics" precisely in the sense that what is shown to result from somebody being a brave Lacanian subject and 'not giving up on their desire' (Mme. Blanc keeps pushing Suzy to jump higher and higher) is "the Real of desire" as a "piece of meat" so that "the (Divine) law finds itself face to face with this convulsing flesh that refuses to disappear from the picture, effectively preventing a sublime splendour from appearing in its place".

But what is not explicitly addressed by Zupančič in this kind of scenario is its affective quality, the impression it transmits – and, in the case of *Suspiria*, arguably evokes in many a viewer – of utter unbearability. The equation-without-identification – of dance with torture, of pure form with mere matter – has the effect of ascribing to the forms of dance in *Suspiria* an absolutely intolerable quality. One of the (many, and deliberately varied) characterisations for the "unbearable" that Berlant and Edelman give is that of an "otherness that permits no relation despite our best efforts to construct one".³⁹ Unbearability can arise from an encounter in which one element meets another which it can, under no circumstances, integrate and which

39 Berlant/Edelman: *Sex*, 98.

it cannot confront without pain, discomfort, or damage. In Berlant and Edelman's text, "unbearability" receives an unashamedly subjective interpretation, in the sense that the concept of unbearability is never removed from the domain of personal feeling; throughout, it retains the meaning of 'what I cannot stand' (though 'I', obviously, hardly refers to the subject as a stable unit, or even a unit at all: "the unbearable names what cannot be borne by the subjects *we think we are*"⁴⁰). Importantly though, in Berlant and Edelman's account, this negativity – this non-relation or non-integration – is a source of non-sovereignty, as it troubles "any totality or fixity of identity"⁴¹ and thus disturbs "the hold on our affects of the metaphors of holding and hoarding".⁴² It allows no subsumption, thus "holding" or bearing of disparate elements under one and the same term, even while these elements may find themselves in the same place – as do the forms and the matter of dance in *Suspiria*. Through this *unreconciled coexistence*, a negative space emerges which none of the parties involved can claim for their own.

This suggests another way to, as it were, 'get behind' identity which requires no such thing as a 'flat ontology' or material-semiotic entanglement or, for that matter, micropolitical becoming. Indeed, the latter are idea(l)s that are contradicted in *Suspiria*'s dance/torture-equation, which addresses both matter and form ('material' and 'semiotic') urgently and simultaneously, but never imagines them as in any way harmoniously or organically connected; there is, to put it in new materialist terms, no such thing as an intra-action⁴³ of form, or thought, and matter – quite the opposite, in fact. The negativity of Berlant and Edelman's notion of unbearability avoids the short-circuit that Zupančič warns against, due to which, in getting rid of an idiosyncratic and asymmetric subject position, we lose the position from which change appears as a necessity, in the first place.

The question remains at this point, however, whether this negative, non-sovereign space of unbearability can at all be, if not occupied then in some sense *inhabited*, or whether it can't. As indicated above, Berlant and Edelman are, for the most part, of two minds on the matter. Inheriting the Lacanian link between ethics and impossibility (which Lacan, in turn, frames as the Kantian inheritance of psychoanalysis), post-Lacanian theory for the most part hesitates, regarding an affirmative take on subjectivity, to advance beyond the idea of creative speech – and the "enjoyment" ascribed to this speech remains conspicuously secondary. *Suspiria*, however, combines the physical aspect of hysteria with the idea of conceptual protest and thus anchors the insurgent potential that psychoanalysis sees in the

40 Berlant/Edelman: *Sex*, 121 (my emphasis).

41 Berlant/Edelman: *Sex*, viif.

42 Berlant/Edelman: *Sex*, 83.

43 Cp. Karen Barad: *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007.

hysteric's *discourse* in her *somatic existence*, which thus is raised from the status of facilitator to the status of, at the least, co-conspirator.⁴⁴

3. Keep dancing – it's beautiful...

The psychoanalytic critique takes offence at the circumstance that the political horizon of new materialism remains one of recognition and thus, ultimately, phantasmatic. The reverse issue that can be taken, however, with the psychoanalytic emphasis on Lacan's "new signifier" is not only that it remains discursive, but that it puts this new signifier so far out of reach. Finkelde, for instance, conceives of ethics as dependent on individual acts of "excessive subjectivity", that is, un-normalisable acts which break with the currently instigated system of "explicable and justifiable actions"⁴⁵ but later on reveal themselves as the puzzle pieces of a new normative order. They have an inherent futurity – demanding me to act now as a subject that I not yet am, nor do yet know – and have the paradoxical (or should we say, monstrous?) quality of pushing ethics in the direction of what ethics cannot be: personal, un-reasonable, partial and thus radically un-objective ("Excessive subjectivity, being predicated upon a noncoincidence of prevailing norms with the unintelligible certainty of personal morality, cannot be negotiated through any power of judgment"⁴⁶). Such ethical acts of excessive subjectivity draw into the domain of the as-yet-existing what this as-yet-existing cannot yet sustain or process or know a correlative for ("it is precisely because of this, its impenetrability by reason, that excessive subjectivity is capable of realizing a utopian potentiality that lies *outside both reality and possibility*"⁴⁷). Here, Finkelde tries to conceive of a form of agency that, as it were, breaks open the Subject position (with a capital S) through, paradoxically, its own subjectivity. Precisely because of this, however, there is a miraculous quality that arguably surrounds ethical agency in Finkelde's account, where "excessive subjectivity" more or less appears as something (to put it in the words of a famously morally troubled person) 'devoutly to be wished' which inside the domain of personal, somatic existence can only figure as something external, random, and event-like (or, possibly, divine). Finkelde, explaining in the Kantian idiom why the ethical subject must exceed herself, says:

44 Didi-Huberman's point on the partial complicity and partial agency of hysteric patients in Charcot's clinic promises an interesting line of inquiry in this regard.

45 Finkelde: *Excessive Subjectivity*, 5.

46 Finkelde: *Excessive Subjectivity*, 12.

47 Finkelde: *Excessive Subjectivity*, 12 (my emphasis).

one could describe the difficulty, or, better, impossibility, of this step as follows: For man to strip himself of pathologies of his essence and his character requires of him a superhuman effort [...], since these pathologies – his interests, his inclinations, his understanding of neurotic happiness *dependent on his life-world anchored in the big Other* – are precisely that which the subject is.⁴⁸

Can such excessiveness possibly be given an, as it were, more ‘quotidian’ and practical expression – one less dependent on miracle, exceptionality, ‘greatness’ or even plain chance? The Lacanian act, as Pluth argues, reveals the Other of the act precisely as the hysteric’s Other, that is, an Other that the subject has stopped placing her trust in, and whose legitimacy she has begun to doubt: “something of the Other is used in them [in acts, that is], without that Other being posited as a subject-supposed-to-know”.⁴⁹ The finale of *Suspiria* can be read in precisely the terms of such agency. But while in one sense it retains the miraculous quality that surrounds the subject of the act in Finkelde’s account – the film’s protagonist acquires, in the final scenes, the qualities of a female messiah – it grounds this miraculous quality – at its other end, as it were – quite firmly in somatic existence. In that sense, the fact that the hysteric occupies the position of the subject as split is manifested more provocatively in Guadagnino’s film than it is in post-Lacanian philosophy – not ‘only’ as a discursive demand, but as a literal incorporation and embodiment.

Hyperbolising the spectacle of nervous convulsions and the trope of hysteria as ‘disease of the womb’, the finale of *Suspiria*, taking place in a secret crypt- or chapel-like room at the Academy, is a lengthy sequence of naked bodies writhing in synchronicity in blood-drenched twilight. This scene of Suzy’s (the final girl’s) sudden arrival – which receives its quality of miraculous deliverance not least because the causality of her appearing in the doorway can’t quite be established, hovering between witchcraft, intuition, and sheer randomness – is a half Sadean, half Wagnerian tableau of naked women performing a choreographic arrangement and a choral chant before a wheezing half-human figure whose skin is hanging in oily, greyish folds – Mother Markos, as it appears. Katatonic dancers are being disemboweled and a sobbing Dr. Klemperer is lying nearby, crying: “*Ich bin nicht schuldig. Ich bin unschuldig. Ich kann mich an alles erinnern. Ich bin unschuldig!*” As the violent, bewildering sequence unfolds, it rather acquires the quality of performance art; with naked and bloodied bodies moving around in a rhythmic, but rather senseless fashion. Suzy, who looks on for a while, then addresses Mother Markos: “I’m ready, Madame,” and adds, towards Madame Blanc: “You look afraid” – indicating, clearly, that she herself is not. “There will be nothing of you left inside,” Mother Markos warns Suzy. “Only

48 Finkelde: *Excessive Subjectivity*, 215.

49 Pluth: *Signifiers and Acts*, 128.

space for me". But Suzy, it is suggested, knows what she's doing, and is doing it voluntarily: "I came here for this. You've all waited long enough".

Then, however, she apparently – though it remains entirely unclear how – changes the direction in which the ritual is going. To the evident horror of those present, but to Suzy's evident delight, a slim and shrouded dark figure, blurry in the red twilight – possibly an incarnation of death in a long modernist dancer's gown –, walks up a staircase at the other end of the room and apparently chokes several of the women present with a kiss, including Mother Markos. Suzy reveals herself as being the "Mother Suspiriorum" to which, as it turns out, Markos herself has been "anointed" ("I am she") and contemplates the shrouded dark figure's killing spree with an ecstatic expression, laying both hands on her heart, then drawing open the flesh of her chest, whispering: "I am the Mother". The further the scene progresses, the more the action recedes into twilight and the more hallucinatory and dream-like the sequence becomes; individuals seem to be in several places at once, speech is uttered not in dialogue but breathy voice-over addressed to no one in particular. "What do you ask?" Suzy says softly, and several dancers say, "To die. Mother, we're so tired", a wish which Suzy appears to grant. "Keep dancing," she tells the remaining group, "it's beautiful. It's beautiful. It's beautiful". The scene ends in a dark red fog, with naked dancers spinning around Suzy standing in the middle, raising her arms towards the ceiling.⁵⁰ The next thing we see, in an abrupt cut, is a dishevelled Dr. Klemperer being led out of the building into a grey winter night by an attentive matron who tells him to be careful with the steps, puts his glasses back on his face and accompanies him to the street, singing a lullaby.

Suzy's enraptured sigh ("keep dancing, it's beautiful") directly contradicts Blanc's earlier directorial credo (which echoes a common sentiment of post-holocaust cultural critique) that "there's two things that dance can't be anymore – beautiful and cheerful"; indicating a programmatic change or the reversal of a maxim of action. This reversal, however, contains no identifiable discursive demand, and the jouissance that it evidently implies is not one of speaking (but of dancing). Suzy naming herself Mother Suspiriorum is a sudden cut, something that we cannot see coming and that has no organic or even causal connections to the rest of events. She doesn't transform so much as, while in some sense remaining herself (symbolised by the fact that nothing about her appearance changes), converting, as it seems decisionistically, into somebody else entirely and suddenly. Her behaviour thus, rather than downplaying intentional subjectivity, exaggerates it to the point of dissolution and takes the subjective to the point where it becomes impersonal, where to act intentionally is equivalent to acting *as somebody else*.

In Pluth's reading of the Lacanian act, rather than dis-acknowledging the symbolic entirely, the relation between individual and symbolic order is in the act re-

50 *Suspiria*, 02:03:00–02:15:47.

formulated from one of appellation and dependence into one of use and creativity. Suzy's conversion, in the finale of the film, certainly fulfils the criteria for such a separative, emancipatory act: her declaration, "I am she" – though evidently effective – is, in terms of plot, neither wholly explicable nor explanatory (there has only been a brief mention of "Mother Suspiriorum" earlier in the film). In that sense, Suzy's act in *Suspiria*'s final act confirms Finkelde's trust that "[n]ew performances of creative autonomy allow for something heretical to happen at the back the universal".⁵¹

In spite of all the emphasis he puts on parasitic acts of speech, Ed Pluth also claims: "I am inclined to portray Lacan's subject in terms of a positive or *incarnate* negativity, or as a negativity with a positive insistence. This is precisely what the notion of the act calls our attention to".⁵² Likewise, Finkelde's "excessive subjectivity" is necessarily – under-acknowledged as this circumstance may remain – somatic: when Rosa Parks, who Finkelde keeps referring to as sample case, refuses to give up her seat on the bus for a white person, she inevitably does so as living, breathing individual; and the future normative claim implicit in her act – what, *in the present*, has the quality that it *will be* seen as justice – is inextricable from her physical agency, from the fact that her body does not lose contact with the seat. In correspondence with this subliminal acknowledgment of somatic potential, the bodies that remain and "keep dancing" in *Supiria*'s finale, wounded as they are, are no "pieces of meat" (Zupančič) beyond all sublimation. Neither does Suzy's "act" substitute the unbearable identification/contradiction in the rehearsal scene with something like the 'clean death' of Antigone – or, alternatively, with a harmonious metabolism of symbolic and somatic existence. These bodies, wounded as they are – most strikingly, in Suzy's self-inflicted chest wound – are marked by the very realisation of desire; and yet they are able to contain, in Finkelde's words, "a new choice of phantasm".⁵³

Finkelde's wording is interesting here: in proclaiming a "new choice of phantasm", he implicitly allows for an 'ethics of the Imaginary' quite different from what

51 Finkelde: *Excessive Subjectivity*, 199 (my emphasis).

52 Pluth: *Signifiers and Acts*, 137 (my emphasis).

53 Finkelde: *Excessive Subjectivity*, 17. Silvia Federici has put forward the argument that dance, as corporeal practice, can provide a counterweight against the neoliberally conditioned self-alienation of bodies, where bodies imagined as "disaggregated [...] conglomerate[s] of cells and genes" are "unconcerned with [...] the good of the body as a whole". "Inevitably, if we internalize this view, we do not taste good to ourselves". In Federici's understanding, bodies function as the outward-oriented grounds of socio-ecological connection but likewise as the circumference of interiority and personal existence and therefore as "limit on exploitation" and means of resistance (*Beyond the Periphery of the Skin. Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism*. Oakland: PM Press, 2020, 122f., 119).

Žižek imagines under the term (as an ‘ethics of the common Good’). If the act of autonomy that stands at the end of analysis takes, as Pluth’s “no ... but” suggests, the form of a parasitical political practice that is, at the same time, affirmative or realising, then the subject of this act does not just expose the (in)famous lack in the Other but *creates* (whether in its stead, or in another place entirely) at least the *image* of another order of things.⁵⁴ Crucially, of course, this ‘other Other’ cannot be of the same kind as the Other that is lacking, but neither must it turn into the fullness of a new ideology. It demands, possibly, a kind of ‘subject with a lower-case s’ that is as much a living creature as a thinking being – it thus demands precisely the “rethinking of subjectivity *in nature*” new materialism says should “start immediately”,⁵⁵ though possibly not quite in the sense that mainstream new materialism has in mind. Potentially, rather, this ‘lower-case subject’ is the creature of a “second nature” such as Thomas Khurana sketches in his re-examination of the nature-freedom-relation in idealist philosophy, an individual whose “*praktisches Selbstverständnis*”⁵⁶ is one that takes its being stretched, possibly even torn, between nature and law (matter and form, natural life and moral freedom) as its energetic foundation. Viable political existence is thus based on the transfer of natural life into a practical life that *real-ises* this nature in an evolving, changeable fashion. Any “new phantasm” that is “chosen” in this scenario demands its practical liveability and is thus informed by – though it will never be the same as – somatic existence.⁵⁷ A speculative ‘ethics of the Imaginary’ in this senseneither – as only a vulgar form of idealism would, as Khurana’s book argues at length – disregards nor disciplines ‘natural life’; but neither is it about the recognition and liberation of ‘natural life’ to the purpose of disciplining ‘the ego’ (as one might take from the rhetorics of new materialism). Rather, it is about the paradoxical act of seizing what cannot be mastered – which amounts to a creative practice, or, possibly, more precisely: a creative labour.

54 In another instance, Berlant has remarked – “*Pace Žižek*” – that “the energy that generates this sustaining commitment to the work of undoing a world while making one *requires* fantasy to motor programs of action [...]. It requires a surrealist affectsphere to counter the one that already exists” (*Cruel Optimism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011, 263).

55 Rick Dolphijn: Doing Justice to that which Matters: Subjectivity and the Politics of New Materialism. In: Hartmut Rosa/Christoph Henning/Arthur Bueno: *Critical Theory and New Materialisms*. London and New York: Routledge, 2021, 143–153, 151f.

56 Thomas Khurana: *Das Leben der Freiheit. Form und Wirklichkeit der Autonomie*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2017, 15.

57 Note the correspondences between Khurana’s and Finkelde’s account: “Die Bestimmung einer sittlichen Lebensform ist nicht aus einer Perspektive der dritten Person möglich, sondern nur vom Standpunkt der ersten Person: vom Standpunkt eines Ich, das nicht einfach in Absehung von seiner Besonderheit, sondern im Ausgang von ihr beanspruchen kann, zu sagen, was wir tun” (Khurana: *Leben*, 522). From this perspective, the idealist notion of a ‘second nature’ shows its usefulness for a convincing, and properly new, materialist ethics.

4. Epilogue

Guadagnino's *Suspiria* is framed, at both its ends, by the clinical practice of psychoanalysis: it begins in an analyst's practice, and it ends (more or less) in his bedroom where Suzy, in her new capacity, delivers him from a traumatic past that has left him wrecked with guilt. In *Suspiria*, psychoanalysis is, ironically, limping: the ageing Dr. Klemperer shuffles forward with the careful steps of an elderly man, and likewise his analysis appears to always lag one step behind the dramatic events that he is confronted with. In the crypt, where Suzy achieves what is understood to be the "ends" of analysis – breaking free from the desire of the Other, positing herself as what she is *not* expected to be – Klemperer doesn't even quite achieve the position of witness (a plausible enough position for an analyst, we might argue), but more that of distraught onlooker. In thus presenting a twist on how the end of analysis might come about, *Suspiria* is endorsement and critique of (the ethics of) psychoanalysis alike. If we accept Suzy as quintessence for what is collectively represented, in the Markos Academy's troupe of dancers, as 'the hysteric patient', then it seems that if we witness an analysis over the course of the film, it is one in which not only the patient, but likewise the analyst is cured. More than that, the hierarchies are almost directly reversed: it's not the analyst leading the patient to her (pre-existent, yet unrecognised) truth, it is the process of the patient creating a new truth for and of herself that cures the analyst – for it is after her transformation that Suzy can reveal to Klemperer the fate that befell his Jewish wife Anke during World War II, and finally grant him some closure. It is thus as if the limps and the insufficiencies of *analysis itself* create – to speak in Berlant and Edelman's idiom – an unbearableability that demands an agentive subject ('with a lower-case s') to mend them. At least in the case of the story of Suzy Bannion, it's not analysis that cures the disturbed self of the hysteric patient; it is the dynamic self-realizations of hysteria that cure analysis. In that sense, what is exceeded in *Suspiria*'s somatic spectacle is not just – or not at all, even – the analysand's fantasy, but possibly the fantasy of analysis itself: not because it is discarded, but because it now claims its symbolically conditioned existence for itself and in its own way.

