

That Obscure Object of Ontology

Lacan, La femme, Lathouse and *Her*

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In response to an emergent objectal turn in contemporary philosophy – which encompasses new fields of speculative materialism and realism, and the work of, for example, Quentin Meillassoux and the object-oriented ontologists – Alenka Zupančič has observed that psychoanalysis insists instead upon an “object-*disoriented* ontology”, which is to say, “an ontology as ‘disoriented’ by what [Jacques Lacan] calls the object *a*”.¹ This *petit a* isn’t just an object like any other, however; instead, it is something like the mode of relation to all other objects – a mode characterised by lack – and a marker of the presence of the *subject* within the world. In this chapter, I will take Lacan’s theory of sexuation as a framework to explore the material implications of our encounter with the *objet a*, pursuing a film-philosophical inquiry that involves a parallax shift from its aspect as *object-cause* to *partial object*. The former will take us onto the terrain of ‘masculine’ fantasy: of the lost object and its restoration through the techno-commodity (those things called by Lacan the “lathouses”) as embodied by Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013) in the image of the perfect Woman, which – I claim – finds its philosophical corollary in those object-oriented thinkers. The latter, by contrast, will be understood in terms of the ‘feminine’ logic of contemporary dialectical materialism – of Zupančič, Slavoj Žižek, Mladen Dolar, and co. – and the refutation of the new, objectal philosophies in the recent collection *Subject Lessons* and elsewhere, which, I will suggest, requires a rethinking of the object in terms of the division in the subject that allows it to apprehend the division in things as their mutual (self-)differentiation. In short, I will demonstrate that the theory of the object presented in *Her* lays the (negative) ground for a psychoanalytically informed critique of those philosophers who aim to think things beyond human thinking without first contending with the Thing that is the Lacano-Hegelian subject.

1 Alenka Zupančič: *What IS Sex?*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press 2017, 24.

1. Virtually Perfect in Every Way

Her is the story of a lonely man, Theodore, who falls in love with the artificial intelligence that runs the operating system on his smartphone and personal computer. From the outset, it is clear that Samantha, as this AI names itself, constitutes something like the perfect fantasy woman for Theodore. As Steven Shaviro notes, she is “entirely compliant to his wishes and needs, and yet projects a depth in serving him that an actual human slave/partner would never be able to do”.² This, Shaviro asserts, is a “male fantasy”, offering “the satisfaction of actually connecting, outside our own narcissism with an ‘Other’, without any of the discomforts that contact with any sort of otherness actually brings”.³ Samantha is, therefore, what Žižek calls a *decaffeinated Other*: like a product deprived of its malign quality (coffee without caffeine, cream without fat), she offers “an experience of Other deprived of its Otherness”,⁴ a fundamentally *unthreatening* partner. As Theodore’s ex-wife, Catherine, declares upon learning about Samantha: “You wanted to have a wife without dealing with the challenges of actually dealing with anything real. I’m glad you found someone. It’s perfect”.⁵ Catherine discerns that there is no actual connection with an outside because Theodore is locked within a virtual loop, the narcissistic relay of his own desires as they are embodied in the fantasy object.

Samantha is programmed to respond to Theodore’s every need: her software is marketed as “an intuitive entity that listens to you, understands you, and knows you”. She is designed to serve him – Shaviro’s reference to the “slave” resonating here – like a version of *I Dream of Jeannie* (NBC, 1965–1970) updated for the iPhone generation. *Her* thus places itself on a cultural trajectory that arcs with what could be described in Lacanian terms as the masculine, *a*-sexual libidinal economy, from Pygmalion to *Ex Machina* (Garland, 2014) by way of *Weird Science* (Hughes, 1985): narratives about “ideal” women (synthetic, subservient) conjured up by men for the purposes of what Alexandre Stevens calls “the autistic side of male jouissance” (“autistic” here used in the originary sense of *autós* or turning towards the self), not in union with a partner but in masturbatory fusion with the object, through fantasy, “more or less imaginariised on the feminine side”.⁶ It is no accident that Samantha’s software is sold as “OS ONE”: she is presented as *the One* who would bring Theodore full satisfaction through a final reunion with the lost object.

2 Steven Shaviro: Spike Jonze’s *HER*, 2014. <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=1186> (21.05.2023).

3 Steven Shaviro: Spike Jonze’s *HER*, 2014. <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=1186> (21.05.2023).

4 Slavoj Žižek, *Passion in the Era of Decaffeinated Belief*, 2004. <http://www.lacan.com/passionf.htm> (21.05.2023).

5 *Her*. Directed by Spike Jonze, USA, 2013. Entertainment in Video Region B Blu-ray. 01:09:04–01:09:11.

6 Alexandre Stevens: *Love and Sex Beyond Identifications*. In: Veronique Voruz/Bogdan Wolf (ed.): *The Later Lacan*. Albany: SUNY Press 2007, 217.

2. The Woman-Object

Jonze's film signals the idea that we are dealing with a *woman-object*, even before it begins, with its pronominal title *Her* (the grammatical direct or indirect *object*) rather than "she" (a grammatical *subject*). The coordinates are thus determined: a perspective on the object – aligned with Theodore – that implies a *masculine* articulation of desire. As Lacan observes in *Encore*, this masculine subject "never deals with anything by way of a partner but object *a* inscribed on the other side of the bar".⁷ His Graph of Sexuation shows a *vector* from the barred-S on the masculine side to *a* on the feminine side, suggesting this as the *direction* of the (masculine) subject's desire.⁸ Man's "sexual orientation" is towards *a*: he is *a*-sexual. It is not that man goes out looking for woman and instead finds *objet a* in her place, but that masculine structure is fundamentally *bound* to this object: "He is unable to attain his sexual partner [...] except inasmuch as his partner is the cause of his desire".⁹ The partner that he finds is a *stand-in* for the object itself and he thus relates to "her" only *as* object. Indeed, Lacan's diagram even suggests, with the directionality of the vector from barred-S to *a*, that man *pushes* the *a* onto the feminine: that masculine logic imposes this position of object onto a feminine Other.

Moreover, Lacan reminds us: "In this respect, as is indicated elsewhere in my graphs by the oriented conjunction of [barred-S] and *a*, this is nothing other than fantasy".¹⁰ It is, then, the vector of fantasy that characterises masculine sexuation. Indeed, Lacan concludes: "What was seen, but only regarding men, is that what they deal with is object *a*, and that the whole realization of the sexual relationship leads to fantasy".¹¹ Fantasy, then, is where the object appears to man, seems to be made available to him, and so woman is implicated in masculine sexuality only insofar as she fits into his *fantasy frame*. But this isn't just any old fantasy; it is the fantasy of *La femme*, Woman "with a capital W indicating the universal",¹² who would guarantee the masculine position. Lacan's logical formulae accompanying this vector suggest that masculine structure depends upon a certain Exception who is not castrated and therefore enjoys fully: *there is one who is not subject to the phallic function*. While this figure is typically associated with Sigmund Freud's mythical father of the primal horde, Žižek insightfully notes that this "masculine fantasy *par excellence*" can also be recognised in the "Woman as Exception".¹³ She would be the One – the ideal Woman, per-

7 Jacques Lacan: *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love & Knowledge* [1972–73]: *Encore*. London: Norton 1998, 80.

8 See Lacan: *On Feminine Sexuality*, 78.

9 Lacan: *On Feminine Sexuality*, 80.

10 Lacan: *On Feminine Sexuality*, 80.

11 Lacan: *On Feminine Sexuality*, 86.

12 Lacan: *On Feminine Sexuality*, 72.

13 Slavoj Žižek: *The Indivisible Remainder*. London: Verso 1996, 155.

fect partner, true embodiment of the object – who could address man's desire and bring him full satisfaction. Of course, this Woman can only ever exist *virtually*, as a fantasmatic projection of masculine desire onto the body of the other (which is one of the reasons why Lacan states, “*La femme n'existe pas*”).¹⁴ *Her* evokes this by making Samantha herself a virtual object, absenting her physical body from the storyworld; but, as I will explore below, this lack is then obfuscated through the fetishisation of the material object (e.g. Theodore's smartphone) that stands in metonymically for her.

3. “Manic Pixie Operating System”

This feminine object finds more general cultural expression in the figure of what Nathan Rabin has called the “Manic Pixie Dream Girl” (MPDG): a young woman – ‘bubbly’, ‘quirky’, ‘free-spirited’, appearing in American indie films such as *Elizabethtown* (Crowe, 2005) or *Garden State* (Braff, 2004) – that “exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures”.¹⁵ She serves as an accessory to the male protagonist's narrative, aiding him in his voyage of self-discovery, while remaining herself a paper-thin characterisation. She is defined as a being for the man, while her own interiority is largely neglected (with the lifelike sex doll in *Lars and the Real Girl* [Gillespie, 2007] being the epitome of this logic). And while *Her* does make certain (compromised) attempts to contemplate Samantha's subjectivity,¹⁶ as a narrative of a sensitive guy who learns to live again thanks to the intervention of a lively young (virtual) woman, the film clearly seems congruent with this typology. As Rabin subsequently reflected, MPDG characterisation “makes women seem less like autonomous, independent entities than appealing props to help mopey, sad white men self-actualize”.¹⁷ By the film's end, Theodore has opened up and grown – he is finally able to sign his divorce papers, stop resenting his ex-wife, and reconnect with an old girlfriend, Amy – thanks to Samantha's fleeting time in his life.

14 Jacques Lacan: *Le Séminaire, Livre XX, Encore*. Paris: Seuil 1975, 13.

15 Nathan Rabin: The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: *Elizabethtown*, 2007. <http://www.avclub.com/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1-elizabet-1798210595> (21.05.2023).

16 On this point, see Ben Tyrer: *Under Her Skin*: On Woman without body and body without Woman. In: Agnieszka Piotrowska/Ben Tyrer (eds.): *Femininity and Psychoanalysis: Cinema, Culture, Theory*. London: Routledge 2019, 144–145.

17 Nathan Rabin: I'm sorry for coining the phrase “Manic Pixie Dream Girl”, 2014. https://www.salon.com/2014/07/15/im_sorry_for_coining_the_phrase_manic_pixie_dream_girl/ (21.05.2023).

In his book on *Creepiness*, Adam Kotsko describes Samantha as the “Manic Pixie Operating System”, somewhere between “mail-order bride”, 1950s “housewife” and (echoing Shaviro) “virtual slave”, upon whom Theodore relies for his satisfaction.¹⁸ She is the alluring-elusive object that grants Theodore’s subjectivity its consistency. Further, Kotsko observes that the MPDG “allows the Nice Guy to have it both ways, ‘officially’ embracing his sensitive feminist values while also indulging his misogynist impulses”: because he is not shallow, she is “remarkably attractive in a non-standard way” that suggests his open-mindedness; and because he is such a nice guy, she will *always* recognise his worthiness. Crucially, however, since he is really a misogynist, “the [MPDG] is ultimately disposable, a valuable learning experience on the path to meeting a viable, ‘real’ woman”.¹⁹ Yet Kotsko seems to lose sight of this crucial understanding when his analysis turns to *Her*’s conclusion.

The film meets his criteria rather well – Samantha is a “non-standard” (i.e. *virtual*) girlfriend, she exalts Theodore, she leaves – but because Theodore’s relationship with Amy seems Platonic (even as they watch an excessively symbolic sun rise on their new lives), Kotsko insists that *Her* “refuses to allow the Manic Pixie Operating System to be a transitional indulgence on the way to true adult life”, while also insisting that, “I knew in my heart that this was different from every other [MPDG] movie, because this one could *only* end with her breaking up with him”. In the first instance, I’d suggest that it is less significant that *Her* refuses “to reproduce the monogamous couple in Theodore and Amy”:²⁰ as long as a heterosexual couple is *present* at the conclusion, as they are in *Her*, then Hollywood logic is satisfied.²¹ Moreover, it should be noted that *leaving* is very much a defining feature of the MPDG – *as Kotsko himself observes, she is disposable* – and thus does not make Samantha an exception. Like the eponymous Summer of *500 Days of Summer* (Webb, 2009) – played by MPDG par excellence, Zooey Deschanel – who sweeps in and then out of Tom’s life, leaving him to realise how much he now appreciates the world, Samantha performs her task, then vanishes.

Tacitly evoking a Lacanian framework, Rabin describes the MPDG as: “a particular male fantasy: of being saved from depression and ennui by a fantasy woman who sweeps in like a glittery breeze to save you from yourself, then disappears once her work is done”.²² This once again confirms her *objectal* status: the MPDG can never be attained because her function is to catalyse and fantasmatically maintain the

18 Adam Kotsko: *Creepiness*. Winchester: Zero Books 2015.

19 Kotsko: *Creepiness*.

20 Kotsko: *Creepiness*.

21 As Raymond Bellour affirms, the “formation of the couple” is the regulating norm of Hollywood cinema. See Janet Bergstrom: *Alternation, Segmentation, Hypnosis: Interview with Raymond Bellour*. In: *Camera Obscura* 3/4 (1979), 88.

22 Rabin: I’m sorry for coining the phrase.

metonymy of masculine desire. The MPDG as accessory, liberated yet disposable, thus embodies the conflicting trends – as Kotsko puts it, feminist and misogynist at the same time – that characterise not only *Her*, but also, I'd suggest, the impasses of contemporary “postfeminism”, wherein regressive gender notions (e.g. *femininity equals domesticity*) are repackaged through the language of neoliberalism as liberating “choices”, which nonetheless belie a profound nostalgia for a time when men and women were far less equal.²³ Samantha, then, is free to serve Theodore. Her primary role is to be subservient, to make him “feel like a man” (i.e. grant him phallic status): such as when she edits his letters and has them published, providing Theodore with a degree of success that he himself was unable to achieve.

4. La femme, lathouse, and *Her*

Samantha is made to please. Her software installation set-up asks Theodore a series of questions (most tellingly, the vulgar Freudianism of, “How would you describe your relationship with your mother?”), then tailors the virtual assistant accordingly. Theodore chooses “her” as *her* by selecting a female voice for his OS, and she then trawls through his data (work, email, social media, calendar) at the speed of light, drawing far-reaching conclusions about his most intimate wishes. Beyond the transferential fantasy of the analyst *qua* Subject Supposed to Know, Samantha is presented as the posthuman embodiment of the *Object Who Really Does Know*: the technician fantasy of an instant psychoanalysis machine that sees straight through the analysand, touching directly upon their desire and algorithmically speaking it back to them. Like Narcissus in a black mirror, then, Theodore falls in love with nothing more than his own self-image, his own satisfaction reflected back to him in the fantasmatic figure of the Woman.

This construction of the ideal woman through technology could then be related to Lacan's notion of the “lathouse” that he introduces in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. They are, he explains, “these tiny objects little *a* that you will encounter when you leave, there on the footpath at the corner of every street, behind every window, in this abundance of these objects designed to be the cause of your desire, insofar as it is now science that governs it”.²⁴ Speaking in 1970, Lacan thus seemingly predicted the

23 See, for example, Melanie Walters/Rebecca Munford, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique*. London: IB Tauris, 2013. Given the emphasis on contradiction below, this might be seen as something like a ‘dialectic of woman’. However, postfeminism thus defined constitutes only a *hypocrisy* that serves to obfuscate the truly dialectical import of the logic of the feminine.

24 Jacques Lacan: *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* [1969–70]. London: Norton 2007, 162.

dawn of wearable tech, the Internet of Things, etc. as the *objets a* created by science in order to cause desire.

Žižek further elaborates that the *lathouses* condense scientific surplus-knowledge (embodied in new objects), capitalist surplus-value (in the commodification of gadgets) and Lacanian surplus-enjoyment (the gadgets as *objet a*), which “accounts for the libidinal economy of the hold of *lathouses* over us”.²⁵ Samantha is just such a coincidence of enjoyment, object and tech: she constitutes a new form of knowledge with her posthuman processing power operating beyond Theodore’s comprehension; her diegetic presence is evoked by earpieces, smartphones and personal computers – commodities picked up, no doubt, from Jonze’s near-future equivalent of the Apple store; and she holds Theodore in her thrall, captivating him with what Žižek elsewhere calls “the [lathouse’s] promise of delivering excessive pleasure, but which actually reproduce[s] only the lack itself”²⁶ – perpetuating his desire in an infinite metonymy, in the assurance of a fuller satisfaction to come.

Moreover, Lacan also makes the curious suggestion that, “[i]f man had less often played the spokesman of God in order to believe that he forms a union with a woman, this word ‘lathouse’ would have perhaps been found a long time ago”.²⁷ And apropos of this, Žižek speculates that the “mythic Woman” and the “lathouse” are “merely two ways of avoiding the woman question”.²⁸ As the idealised feminine and the fascinating gadget, Samantha is presented in *Her* therefore as *both* the fantasy Woman and the precious *lathouse* at the same time: their conjunction in the object allowing Theodore to avoid women as *other subjects*, locking him into the narcissistic circuit of a Lacanian object relation(ship).

Samantha is therefore his *object-cause*, that which provokes Theodore’s desire. Her voice is the *impetus* or “shine on the nose”, as Freud put it, that attracts his attention; the virtual body that her fascinating voice notionally indexes is the *obstacle*, that which renders her unattainable and thus allows her to remain infinitely desirable.²⁹ In his masculine organisation, Theodore can relate to her only in terms of that feature which *turns him on* – this is what, Bruce Fink says, it means to “enjoy

25 Slavoj Žižek: *Incontinence of the Void*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press 2017, 144.

26 Slavoj Žižek: *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. London: Verso 2012, 52.

27 Lacan: *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 162. I have elsewhere explored how “God” plays a role in the sexual relation and in obscuring the structure of the feminine: see Ben Tyrer: An Atheist’s Guide to Feminine Jouissance: On *Black Swan* and the Other Satisfaction. In: Agnieszka Piotrowska (ed.): *Embodied Encounters: New Approaches to Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. London: Routledge 2014, 131–146.

28 Žižek: *Incontinence of the Void*, 144.

29 Žižek identifies the Fichtean *Anstoß* – meaning both obstacle and impetus – as a conceptual precursor to Lacan’s *objet a*: Deleuze and the Lacanian Real. <https://www.lacan.com/zizrealac.htm> (21.05.2023).

like a man”³⁰ – while Samantha is constituted as *une vraie femme*, nothing short of *La femme idéale*, in the fully Lacanian sense. Crucially, she offers a fantasy of contact with the outside by making the object seem available to the subject, while nonetheless remaining, herself, beyond.

5. A Subjectless Object?

This vision of Samantha presented in Jonze’s film has profound implications for objectal philosophies. Building on the insights of the Slovenian School into the relationship between Lacanian psychoanalysis and German Idealism, my first contention is that the logic of masculine sexuation presented in *Her* is also, *more or less*, the logic of a Kantian paradigm: in the sense that both systems rely on a fundamental reference to something that is outside of itself. For Lacan, this ‘something’ that must be external to the system, and in so being grants that system consistency, is of course expressed as the “father function”: the exception to the masculine that creates the set of All men. And for Theodore, this ‘something’ is “her”: the *lathouse* as posthuman woman-object that supports his identity. While for Immanuel Kant, famously in the First Critique, this is the thing in itself: the reality beyond phenomenal experience that gives shape to appearances, which might be *thinkable* but is itself unknowable.³¹

Here we could also note that it is a common move to associate the Kantian *thing in itself* beyond the world of appearances with a version of the Lacanian Real – and there is some textual basis for this in the early Lacan where the Real is associated with the brute materiality of the world prior to the Symbolic: “the domain of that which subsists outside of symbolization”,³² or – as Žižek puts it – “the rock upon which every attempt at symbolization stumbles”.³³ It is, moreover, this realm of the *Beyond* that preoccupies Meillassoux’s “speculative materialism” in *After Finitude*. Meillassoux’s argument regarding what he calls “correlationism” is by now well known: that since Kant’s division between phenomena and things in themselves, in philosophy “we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other”.³⁴ This means that “we never grasp an object ‘in itself’, in isolation from its relation to the subject”. As a result, for Meillassoux, contemporary philosophy has lost touch with what he calls “the great outdoors”, which exists “in itself regardless of whether we are thinking

30 Bruce Fink: *Lacan to the Letter*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2004, 159.

31 See Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: CUP 1998.

32 Jacques Lacan: *Écrits*. New York: Norton 2007, 324.

33 Slavoj Žižek: *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso 1989, 169.

34 Quentin Meillassoux: *After Finitude*. London: Continuum 2008, 5.

of it or not".³⁵ For Meillassoux, the philosophical tradition stumbles over the hard rock of the Real when it encounters a material thing that pre-dates not just human existence, but terrestrial life as such – his so-called “*arche-fossil*” – because it forces us to contend with something really existing yet utterly beyond us.³⁶

However, both of these moves – Meillassoux’s “great outdoors” and the notion of a pre-Symbolic *thing in itself* – constitute missteps, even the *same* misstep, in their interpretation of the Real. As Borna Radnik wryly observes, “Much to his chagrin, Meillassoux’s philosophy relies on conceptual determinations that find their intelligibility in the activity of thought”.³⁷ The attempt to ‘go beyond’ or ‘get outside’ of the subject is a process that necessarily involves the thinking subject: we cannot, in short, simply think our way out of human thinking in this way.³⁸ (Equally, for the later Lacan, we cannot articulate a pre-symbolic Real from our position as always-already within the Symbolic order: it’s only *in* stumbling that we constitute the “rock” as such.) Meillassoux does not break out of this Kantian epistemic circle, he simply inverts the polarity: where Kant said, *No, we can’t*, Meillassoux seems to insist, *Yes, we can*, that realist knowledge is in fact possible. The noumenal is transformed by speculative materialism from inaccessible to accessible but it is, in a sense, no less noumenal, no less out there, beyond us. Mladen Dolar notes that the “great outdoors” constitutes “pure fantasy, which is the fantasy of a ‘world without us’” that nonetheless finds its support “in something which is its supposed Outside”,³⁹ and the materialist project of Meillassoux thus remains ineluctably grounded in the subject.

Meillassoux is, then, like Jonze’s Theodore: in thrall to an *object-oriented fantasy*, a mirage of the Beyond that locks the subject into a loop returning only the self-same. This would seem to suggest that the notion of an *objet-a*-oriented ontology might be equally mis-guided. We could be tempted to conclude that *any* reference to the object

35 Meillassoux: *After Finitude*, 7.

36 Meillassoux: *After Finitude*, 10. In a similar vein, Graham Harman – the key proponent of what he calls Object-Oriented Ontology – states directly: “Reality is the rock against which our various ships always founder” (*Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*. London: Penguin 2017, 6).

37 Borna Radnik: Subjectivity in Times of (New) Materialisms: Hegel and Conceptualization. In: Russell Sbriglia/Slavoj Žižek (eds.): *Subject Lessons*. Evanston: Northwestern UP 2020, 51.

38 Peter Hallward notes that Meillassoux “also accepts that you cannot refute correlationism simply by positing [...] a mind-independent reality. [...] [I]n order to know mind-independent reality as non-contradictory and non-necessary, Meillassoux thus needs to show that the correlationist critique of metaphysical necessity itself enables if not requires the speculative affirmation of non-necessity” (Anything is Possible: A Reading of Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*. In: Levi Bryant/Nick Srnicek/Graham Harman (eds.): *The Speculative Turn*. Melbourne: re.press 2011, 136). However, dialectical materialism insists that the only way to know reality is through *contradiction*.

39 Mladen Dolar: What’s the Matter? On Matter and Related Matters. In: Sbriglia/Žižek: *Subject Lessons*, 31–49, 45.

is irredeemable because it would be bound to a logic of exceptional externality. If we were to understand the *objet a* on the terms found in *Her*, then the project proposed by Zupančič would seem simply to present another attempted cartography of the Beyond.

6. The Way Out is Through

But this is where we would stub our toe, philosophically speaking: if we were to remain bound to a paradigm, such as Theodore's/Meillassoux's, that represents a masculine perspective on the object. The alternative here pertains to a properly feminine logic – defined by Lacan not in terms of a transcendent Exception but as a Real immanent to the Symbolic – which I would align with the perspective of contemporary dialectical materialism. If, in my contention, the left-hand (masculine) side of the Graph of Sexuation represents a Kantian system, then – and this is a point not explicitly acknowledged in Russell Sbriglia and Žižek's *Subject Lessons*, even while surely being one of the lessons of the collection – the right-hand (feminine) side of the Graph stands for the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (as read through psychoanalysis).⁴⁰ The passage from left to right then represents what we might, in a Žižekian way, call the Hegelian reversal of Kant, which entails the shift from an epistemological question to an ontological one: to a perspective where that which seemed like an “obstacle, [...] a hindrance preventing us from grasping [the] Thing-in-itself [...] is already in-itself a solution”.⁴¹ The epistemological gap (between phenomena and things in themselves) becomes the *ontological* gap of material reality, which – in Žižek's Lacano-Hegelian reckoning – is rendered not-all (*pas-tout*) as depicted in the formulae of feminine sexuation: an open set formed by internal contradiction rather than reference to something external. Žižek famously refers to this as the “ontological incompleteness of reality”,⁴² which has the virtue of rendering his thesis clearly but, for fine-grained theoretical reasons I have explored elsewhere, I would prefer to stick with the more overtly Lacanian “reality as not-all” to capture the specificity of the idea.⁴³

40 Žižek similarly aligns Meillassoux's logic of contingency and necessity with the masculine, and further asserts, “desire is Kantian, the drive is Hegelian” (*Less Than Nothing*. London: Verso 2012, 636, 638).

41 Žižek: *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 177.

42 Žižek: *Less Than Nothing*, 264.

43 In short, “incomplete” still suggests the possibility that a missing piece *could* be added that *would* complete reality (i.e. the fantasy of *objet a* as lost object). Elsewhere Joan Copjec refers to woman as “decompleted” by the object (*Imagine There's No Woman*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press 2002, 102); however, even if this is something extra, a surplus *added to* the subject, it could still be read as suggesting a reality that *was* once complete but has now been disturbed

This is, moreover, not at all the same as what Levi Bryant calls the “feminine” structure of his object-oriented philosophy, where a “not-all” ontology renders the subject as just one object among many on a flat plane of being without exception, rather than allotting it a transcendental position.⁴⁴ This is because Bryant’s position fails to account for the way in which the subject is this not-all, in the sense that, as Zupančič puts it, “reality’s own inherent negativity [...] appears as part of this reality precisely in the form of the subject”.⁴⁵

The dialectical materialist position must entail a different understanding of the object in Lacan’s theory of sexuation from the one demonstrated by *Her*. We should not be too hasty to throw out the objectal baby with the phallic bathwater, we might say: because the *petit a* is *right there*, immanent to the right hand side of the Graph.⁴⁶ And while we can see how a masculine logic *pushes* the feminine into an object-position by putting the *a* in the transcendent elsewhere of Woman, we can also recognise, parallaxically, that the *petit a* has a role to play in the feminine logic too: not as the lost object of masculine fantasy but as the partial object of the drive. The latter is what Žižek identifies as “the objectal correlative of the subject”,⁴⁷ in that it both embodies the lack constitutive of subjectivity while also marking our inscription into reality (as not-all) – as in the stain of the gaze.

Here, we might turn to Jacques-Alain Miller’s famous Suture essay where he distinguishes the subject as that which is not self-identical (or does not coincide with itself), in contrast with what he identifies, after Leibniz, as the self-coincidence of the object wherein “Each thing is identical to itself”.⁴⁸ The *objet a* as partial object is also not self-identical and would, then, mark the coincidence of a non-self-coincidence of both subject and object. But we must also go further than this, to recognise the import of Hegel’s famous “not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*”.⁴⁹ As Todd McGowan interprets it, this means that there is “no such thing as a substance that is a purely self-identical being”.⁵⁰ It is not just the special case of the subject and its objectal correlative that are not self-identical; in this ontology, there is no exception,

(and could perhaps be restored). The indefinite judgement rendered by “not-all” sidesteps such problems by asserting the priority of the negative rather than offering simply a negation of an already existing, positive term. See Ben Tyrer: *Out of the Past: Lacan and Film Noir*. London: Palgrave Macmillan 2016, 115–117.

44 Levi Bryant: *The Democracy of Objects*. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press 2011, 255.

45 Zupančič: *What IS Sex?*, 121.

46 See Lacan: *Encore*, 78.

47 Slavoj Žižek: *The Parallax View*. London: Verso 2006, 120.

48 Jacques-Alain Miller: Suture (Elements of the Logic of the Signifier). In: *Screen* 18.4 (1977), 29.

49 G. W. F. Hegel: *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford: OUP 1977, 10.

50 Todd McGowan: *Emancipation After Hegel*. New York: Columbia UP 2019, 90.

no thing that entirely coincides with itself, because, in a dialectical way it must also coincide with what it is not.⁵¹

The difference from a position such as Bryant's, however, would be that while the subject and (other) objects are *all* non-self-identical, it is only the thinking subject's non-self-coincidence that allows us to appreciate this. As McGowan explains, being and thought are not directly identical, but the thinking subject could not emerge in the world if its self-alienation were not an ontological possibility: "If [as Kant demonstrates with the antinomies] contradiction is necessary in thought, then being must be structured in a way that gives rise to it".⁵² There must be some disruption in the world which allows for, and is thus marked by, the subject. Not unlike Meillassoux, then, dialectical materialism addresses itself to the Absolute but here *the way out is through*: as Žižek puts it, "[t]he path to the In-itself leads through the subjective gap, since the gap between For-us and In-itself is immanent to the In-itself".⁵³ A Lacanian realism here means that, if we want to think reality, we must think *with* the Real of the subject rather than without it.

7. Topology of the Absolute

McGowan observes that "[t]he antinomies mark a point at which thought reaches outside itself and reveals a fundamental truth about the nature of being".⁵⁴ However, rather than the necessity of *contingency* (as in Meillassoux, where things could always be otherwise), it reveals instead the necessity of *contradiction*: of the necessity of both subject and substance at odds with themselves.⁵⁵ This is why dialectical

51 Rephrasing Hegel in Lacanese, we might say that the lack in the Other coincides with the lack in the Subject, with the *objet a* marking the umbilicus that joins them. Such coincidence is not total, however. As Žižek notes, "Hegelian dialectical movement" means that contradiction is both necessary and impossible: "a finite thing precisely cannot be simultaneously A and non-A, which is why the process through which it is compelled to assume contradiction equals its annihilation" (*Less Than Nothing*, 628).

52 McGowan: *Emancipation After Hegel*, 97.

53 Žižek: *Less Than Nothing*, 906. Žižek effectively argues that Meillassoux uses a similarly Hegelian method, but reaches anti-Hegelian conclusions (*ibid.*, 638).

54 McGowan: *Emancipation After Hegel*, 95.

55 As Hallward observes, for Meillassoux as for Hegel, "philosophy's chief concern is with the nature of absolute reality" (Anything is Possible, 130); but where, for Meillassoux (as, in fact, for Kant too) the thing in itself exists as non-contradictory, for dialectical materialism absolute reality is the absolute reality of contradiction. Meillassoux flees from contradiction – attempting to use mathematical formalisation to derive the non-contradictory nature of things – while Žižek's ontology restores it: finding in mathematics precisely the formalisation of contradiction (e.g. Klein bottle, cross-cap). See *Sex and the Failed Absolute*. London: Bloomsbury 2019).

materialism is not object-oriented but an object-*disoriented* ontology, marking the inner torsion of the Real within reality. It is an understanding of the object not as something simply out there (like Samantha the unobtainable object of desire, or the speculative subjectless object), but as the little piece of the Real *in here*: the impossible *within* the Symbolic. It is also an understanding of the subject that is defined by its recognition of contradiction, in itself and in the material world. As Žižek observes, “[w]e do not reach the In-itself by way of tearing away subjective appearances and trying to isolate ‘objective reality’ as it is ‘out there’, independently of the subject; the In-itself inscribes itself precisely into the subjective excess, gap, inconsistency that opens up a hole in reality”.⁵⁶

Reconciling oneself to this topology of the Absolute entails reconciling oneself to lack, as it is marked by that obscure object of ontology we call the *petit a*. It means apprehending the object not as lost, one day to be restored, but as a constitutively absent presence. We must come to terms with the lack of object, the object of lack, rather than cling to the promise of return to a pre-Critical or prelapsarian state of mythical harmony – and we must orient ourselves (or, rather, *disorient* ourselves) around this impossibility.

For the material implications of the Lacano-Hegelian objectal philosophy, then, we should turn once again to cinema – but this time looking beyond *Her*. Films that accord with such an understanding would be films that repeat the object’s failure as immanent to the storyworld. *Her* does conclude with object loss – Samantha departing the material realm in a posthuman Singularity – but this is not the determining factor of the film, which otherwise promotes a nakedly capitalistic, fantasmatic materialism wherein the object can be known, and fully restored to the subject. Instead, we might turn to films such as *In the Mood for Love* (Wong, 2000), *Lost in Translation* (Coppola, 2003) or *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Sciamma, 2019) that are founded on the dialectical materialism of a constitutive lack, foregrounding the uncanny intimacy of the impossible object (or what Lacan calls its *extimacy* to the subject) rather than attempting to overcome it. In centring lack, rather than depending on the fantasy of restoration, they force us to contend with the radical potential of the object: shifting away from the promise of ‘more, more, more’ and towards an embrace of something like self-limitation that might give us purchase on the ongoing social and ecological disasters that the object-oriented philosophies otherwise situate themselves as uniquely suited to address. For here, only a subject can save us.

56 Slavoj Žižek: *Disparities*. London: Bloomsbury 2016, 85.

