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The Repetition of the Void and the Materialist Dialectic

The aim of this paper is to outline the core of the question of the continuation of the material dialectics after the structuralist turn, through the specific figure of the repetition of the void, which could serve as the basis of the materialist dialectic thought in three important contemporary theorisations after the structuralist turn in theory, namely, those of Louis Althusser, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek. The core of this question leads us back to the structure without a cause, or the so-called vanishing cause of the structure, with its main impasse: how to think the historical event within the structure or the transformation of the structure as such. The basic frame of this problem appeared in the face of the events of May 1968 in France, more precisely, of the revolts of workers and students, when the divisions among the theorisations of these events, between the Althusserian circle, the Maoist groups, and the circle around Jacques Lacan were deepening. On the one hand, there was Althusser's scepticism about the failed encounter between the workers and students, and Lacan's famous criticism of the student uprising in his famous prediction of their hysterical search for a new Master. On the other hand, there was Alain Badiou, who in his "Red years" defended the importance of this event on the basis of the theory of contradiction of Mao Zedong, firstly in *Le (re)commencement du matérialisme dialectique* (a review of Louis Althusser's *Pour Marx*, and *Lire le Capital* (1967), by Althusser et al.) and later, more consistently, in his famous work *Theory of the Subject* (1982). According to Badiou, Louis Althusser rejected this event since he failed to think of the subject of history within his writings on the overdetermination and contradiction in the materialist dialectic, enclosing the question of subjectivity completely within the realm of ideology. Therefore, he was unable to think the real change or transformation of the structure or the event as such. This caused Badiou to return to the question of the materialist dialectic by thinking about the change in time or history and to the question of how something new arises from the old, Mao Zedong's famous question from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, (which, according to Bruno Bosteels, among others, henceforth became the most persistent question in his work as such), in short, with

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the question of the production of the new truth. In order to avoid the impasses of structuralist rigidity as regards the question of the change or transformation, Badiou determined two important tasks in *Theory of the Subject*: the materialistic reading of Hegel's dialectic as the logic of scission,¹ but also, and this will be important for us here, the materialist reading of the work of Jacques Lacan, done as well in the name of the logic of the scission. Bosteels's interpretation of Badiou's work, contrary to that of Peter Hallward, states that there is no radical break between his *Theory of the Subject* (from 1982) and his monumental work *Being and Event* (from 1988). Namely, the relation between the being and the event in his work is always already dialectical in the way the subjective procedures of fidelity are always already based on the question of how and why the elements within the situation transform and change into the site of the event, which is most apparent in his last work, *Logics of Worlds* (2009).² We can therefore say that Alain Badiou's *Theory of the Subject* embodies the core of the theoretical dispute of May 1968, in its first attempt after the structuralist turn to join dialectical materialism and Lacanian psychoanalysis. And also from the point of view of Lacanian psychoanalysis, what Bosteels reproaches Žižek with is that in his general interpretation and criticism of Badiou he does not pay enough attention to *Theory of the Subject*.³ But it seems that in his most recent work, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, Žižek nevertheless returns straight to the core of the question of the materialist dialectic within Lacanian psychoanalysis. There we can find some further clues to the reopening of the debate on Badiou's assertion about the same question in *Theory of the Subject*, which is summed up in one of the sentences in the book: "From the real as cause to the real as consistency we can read a trajectory of integral materialism."⁴

Generally, we can say that all contemporary dealings with the materialist dialectic revolve around the question of the void of the so-called *clinamen*, the event of the primary and purely contingent swerve of the atom (the encounter) that

¹ For Badiou's extensive work on the materialist reading of the Hegelian dialectic, see his work *Le Noyeau Rationnel de la Dialectique Hegelienne*, La Découverte, Paris 1978. In English translation: *Alain Badiou. The Rational Kernel of the Hegelian Dialectic* (ed. and trans. by Tzuchien Tho), re. press, Melbourne 2011.

² Cf. Bosteels, B., "Alain Badiou's Theory of the Subject" in: *Lacan, the Silent Partners (Wo Es War Series)* (ed. S. Žižek), Verso, London 2006.

³ Cf. Bosteels, B., "Badiou without Žižek" in: *Polygraph 17* (2005).

⁴ Badiou, A., *Theory of the Subject*, Continuum, London and New York, pp. 227, 228.

creates the world (the structure) and the question of the repetition or iteration. We can find the main question of the pre-Socratic materialists in Althusser's latest work, in some of Lacan's seminars, and as well in Badiou's *Theory of the Subject*. Regarding this, we shall try to show how the works of Lacan, Althusser, and Badiou, each in their own particular way, display a certain kind of materialist dialectic of the internal scission in the form of the movement of a certain repetition of the void. This repetition has a consequence, the production of the supplementary element: *objet a* as a new knowledge/truth in the Real (in Lacan), a new truth (in Badiou), and a new kind of epistemological knowledge of the science of historical materialism (in Althusser), which could perhaps be considered as a kind of "consistency of the real" in Badiou's sense.

According to Badiou, the materialist dialectic is divided into two sides, two parts of the scission, the idealist and the materialist. The materialist character of the dialectic resides in the process of the division between the logic of places, which is the characteristic of the structure of places, on one hand, and the dynamic of the forces, on the other. There are two possible backlashes that are to be avoided in order to maintain the materialist character of dialectic. They are the idealist (rightist) deviation and the materialist (leftist) deviation. The rightist would simply accept the structuralist causality with the logic of places, with the void as its concept of the vanishing cause, "nothing will take place but the place," as Mallarmé put it and typical of the Althusserian circle, according to Badiou. On the other hand, there is the leftist deviation of seeing only the materiality of not not dialectically determined pure forces, typical of the so-called anarcho-desirers of the Deleuzian circle (materialism without any concept of the void). Badiou's basic idea in *Theory of the Subject* is that the structuralist dialectic implies the structural combinatory of places within a closed totality, but it doesn't incorporate the dynamics of force, which consequently blocks the possibility of thinking the change or the transformation of the structure. On the other hand, the force, if it is to be thought of dialectically, must be determined by the logic of places. We have the logic of the dialectic between the "*horlieu*" on one side, and the "*splace*" on the other. Badiou aims at the division of this complex whole in the algebraic side of the combinatory of places and the topological side of the working of the force back on to its own place within the structure: "Every force stands in a relation of an internal exclusion to its determining place," but, "if determination describes the dialectical placement of a force and its resulting division, then the whole purpose of the theory of the subject is to aim for the

rare possibility that such a force, though always placed, at times may come to determine the determination by reapplying itself to the very place that marks its split identity.”⁵ So what we basically have here are the two voids, the void of the so-called “*splace*” and the void of the so-called “*horlieu*,” which overlap in a certain form of twist or torsion, which is another name for the subject. The crucial moment in Badiou’s *Theory of the Subject* is therefore this symptomatic twist, or torsion of the subject back upon the impasses of its structural placement: “It is a process of torsion, by which a force reapplies itself to that from which it conflictingly emerges [...] Everything that is of a place comes back to that part of itself that is determined by it in order to displace the place, to determine the determination, and to cross the limit.”⁶ So, the terms of the historical life in the material dialectic are the determination and the limit, which are the terms by which the whole affirms itself without closure, and the element includes itself therein without abolishing itself. According to Bosteels, the first part of the dialectical movement in Badiou can basically be subsumed in the following sentence of Lacan: “The subject stands, as it were, in external inclusion to its object.”⁷ Badiou’s main task was, first, to figure out how to understand the subject’s and object’s dialectical relation of the external inclusion.⁸ Nevertheless, Badiou’s theory of the subject

consists entirely in confronting these two orientations of dialectical materialism: one, for which the act of subjectivization remains irredeemably anchored in the structural causality of lack, and the other, which seeks to map a subjective process onto the rare emergence – that is, onto the appearance of a new structure in which a subject not only occupies but exceeds the empty place in the old structure, which as a result becomes obsolete.⁹

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According to the idea of the structural dialectic of the void as the vanishing cause, which Badiou believed had to be overcome in order to think the materialist dialectic between the divided poles of the structure and the subject, we must abandon the idea of the binary relation between the One of the structure and the

⁵ Bosteels, B., *Badiou and Politics*, Duke University Press, London and Durham 2009, p. 81.

⁶ Badiou, A., *Theory of the Subject*, p. 12.

⁷ Bosteels, B., *Badiou and Politics*, p. 83. Cf. Lacan, J., “*La Science et la Vérité*” in: *Cahiers pour l’analyse*, Vol. 1, Paris 1966.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

Real, which according to him was still present in Lacan's early teaching. In order to achieve the proper materialist dialectic, we would, according to Badiou, have to split Lacan's oeuvre as such into Two, namely, the split between the structuralist teaching (the idealist pole) and his later topological teaching (the materialist pole). In line with Badiou's aims in *Theory of the Subject*, let us recall the two different elaborations of the Real as the void in Lacan's early and late period. Namely, the question of the void as the structuralising part in early Lacan, the Lacan of "the unconscious is structured as language" amounts to the "lack of being," the Real as the structuring element in the structure. However, the later Lacan of the topology, of the Real as enjoyment-*jouissance* (as *objet a*), is about the question of the ontology of the drive as the "the being of lack." The difference between the two kinds of void is best presented in the following two passages by Slavoj Žižek: "Therein lies the difference between desire and drive: desire is grounded in its constitutive lack, while the drive circulates around a hole, a gap in the order of being.¹⁰ And further: "Following Jacques-Alain Miller, a distinction has to be introduced here between a lack and a hole: a lack is spatial, designating a void within a space, while a hole is more radical, it designates the point at which this spatial order itself breaks down (as in the 'black hole' in physics)."¹¹

If we look at Lacan's oeuvre as such through the lens of Badiou's materialistic scission between the early logic of desire and the later logic of the drive, we have to presuppose a certain torsion of the latter upon the former. What we get there is a materialist dialectic at work in the passage, in the movement of the void from the lack to the hole, as a consequence of the repetition and the minimal difference between the two voids, between the void as the vanishing cause of the structure and the identity of the structure with the hole. Besides the kind of overlapping of the void of the Subject and the void in the Other, as the two stages of the subject of the unconscious, the stage of alienation and the separation of the subject of the unconscious, we could say that there is another kind of scission of the void as the object of the Real on a second level at work in Lacan's oeuvre. Returning to Badiou's theory of the destruction of the subject in his *Theory of the Subject*, this means that the action of the Lacanian Real as the *objet a* back upon the void as the Real as its place holder in the structure, which topologically curves the space of the structure, given that the destruction is

¹⁰ Žižek, S., *Less than Nothing. Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, p. 489.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 496. See the entire chapter "From Repetition to Drive".

the attempt to think the movement of the gap (the minimal difference) between the failure of the aim of the structure to structuralise into the goal as the failure to structuralise as a structure, is a movement from the lack to the hole, from nothing to nothing, however, nothing with a surplus element. As Badiou writes: “And yet it is precisely this split between repetition and what is within repetition that is not yet actualized which defines the locus of the work of destruction in *Theory of the Subject*.”¹² However, here the working of the void as the Lacanian hole back on to the void as the lack ending up in a kind of a repetition does not amount to complete destruction, but produces a remainder. In another lengthier passage Žižek explains in detail the crucial difference in the relation between desire and the drive as regards the question of the void:

While, as Lacan emphasizes, the *objet a* is also the object of the drive, the relationship is here thoroughly different: although in both cases the link between object and loss is crucial, in the case of the *objet a* as the object-cause of desire, we have an object which is originally lost, which coincides with its own loss, which emerges as lost, while, in the case of the *objet a* as the object of the drive, the ‘object’ is directly the loss itself – in the shift from desire to drive, we pass from the lost object to loss itself as an object. That is to say, the weird movement called ‘drive’ is not driven by the ‘impossible’ quest for the lost object; it is a drive to directly enact the ‘loss’ – the gap, cut, distance-itself. There is thus a double distinction to be drawn here: not only between the *objet a* in its fantasmatic and post-fantasmatic status, but also, within this post-fantasmatic domain itself, between the lost object-cause of desire and the object-loss of the drive. This is what Lacan means by the ‘satisfaction of the drives’: a drive does not bring satisfaction because its object is a stand-in for the Thing, but because a drive, as it were, turns failure into triumph – in it, the very failure to reach its goal, the repetition of this failure, the endless circulation around the object, generates a satisfaction of its own. To put it even more pointedly, the object of the drive is not related to the Thing as a filler of its void: the drive is literally a counter-movement to desire, it does not strive towards impossible fullness and then, being forced to renounce it, gets stuck onto a partial object as its remainder – the drive is quite literally the very ‘drive’ to break the All of continuity in which we are embedded, to introduce a radical imbalance into it, and the difference between drive and desire is

¹² Bosteels, B., *Badiou and Politics*, p. 98.

precisely that, in desire, this cut, this fixation onto a partial object, is as it were 'transcendentalized', transposed into a stand in for the void of the Thing.¹³

What happens in this repetition of the void of desire and the void of *jouissance*, in this movement from desire to the drive, is thus the minimal difference between the lack and the hole, which entails the splitting of the void, the specific scission (split) of the Real as the Void on the second level. The repetition of the void as the passage from the lack to the hole leaves us with a specific materialist remainder, something that Democritus as the first materialist called the *den*. In terms of the question of the Lacanian subject, which is the central question of *Theory of the Subject*, its torsion produces a double split of the subject, which, according to Žižek, in Lacanese translates into:

This constitutive split of the subject (which precedes the split between subject and object) is the split between the void that 'is' the subject (\$) and the impossible-Real objectal counterpart of the subject, the purely virtual *objet a*. What we call 'external reality' (as a consistent field of positively existing objects) arises through subtraction, that is, when something is subtracted from it – and this something is the *objet a*. The correlation between subject and object (objective reality) is thus sustained by the correlation between this same subject and its objectal correlate, the impossible-Real *objet a*, and this second correlation is of a totally different kind: it is a kind of negative correlation, an impossible link, a non-relationship, between two moments which can never meet within the same space (like subject and object), not because they are too far away, but because they are one and the same entity on the two sides of a Möbius band. This impossible-Real virtual object is not external to the symbolic, but its immanent impediment, what makes the symbolic space curved; more precisely, it 'is' nothing but this curvature of the symbolic space.¹⁴

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This non-relation, this second split, is something which could be called the *den* and it is actually also the *clinamen* that interests all the contemporary theories of the materialist dialectic from Althusser, Badiou, and Lacan (and lately Žižek). This kind of split on the second level, the repetition of the void as the overlapping of the two, or the passage from one to another, produces an uncanny element.

¹³ Žižek, S., *Less than Nothing*, p. 639.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 958 and 599.

This uncanny element is, according to Žižek, the *objet a* as the Demokritian *den* as “more than something and less than nothing” and “more than one but less than two.”¹⁵ This establishes new criteria of the dialectic between the Symbolic and the Real in Lacan. And this also sheds new light on the question of the alleged anti-dialectical nature of the Lacanian death drive. Žižek’s important move was to pose the question of the inconsistent ontology and the Lacanian take on the sexual difference. The repetition of the object cause of desire and the *objet a* as the surplus enjoyment of the drive in Lacan’s work infers simultaneity, coincidence, or overlapping, and actually prevents the filling in of the lack with the lack as the object. In the mode of Badiou’s materialist dialectic as scission and his reading of Lacan’s oeuvre as the split between the algebraic and topological period, the period of desire and language and the period of the topology of the drive, we can thus say that Lacan’s problem in the passage from the alienation of the subject to the separation of the subject lies precisely in the understanding of the parallax view of one and the same object, the gap or the minimal difference between the object of lack and the lack as object, desire and the drive, and the structure and its collapse. This gap can be understood similarly as the minimal definition of materialism in quantum physics by Žižek: “the irreducible distance between the two vacuums.”¹⁶ Regarding this gap as actually the minimal difference, the understanding of which is allegedly the object of dispute between Badiou and Žižek, we claim that the question of Bosteels’s criticism of Žižek in his “*Badiou without Žižek*”, regarding the anteriority of the negativity of the death drive as the minimal difference is redundant, because the minimal difference as *den* in Žižek can as well be understood as the simultaneous product of subtraction, a by product materialistic torsion between the *objet a* as drive and the object cause of desire, and not its anterior condition. And it therefore forms a new consistency. Bosteels sees the problem with Žižek’s so-called “ultra-dialectic” in the following:

Ultimately, the problem with this logic is its complete inability to conceive of the transformative power of an event other than as the effect of a structural reiteration, even though the indefinite repetition of mark and place generates a semblance of dialectical movement that claims to be more radical than anything: ‘One could speak of a kind of ‘ultra-dialectic’, a theory of movement such that it

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

becomes impossible not only to grasp but more radically to *determine* the movement itself.’ At best, the passage from one term to another, when they are identical, only leads to a ‘serial logic’, that is to say, ‘one and then the other as minimal difference.’ Any attempt to turn the play of minimal difference into the greatest insight of Badiou’s philosophy at the very least would have to come to terms with this profound criticism of the Hegelian or Lacano-Millerian logic, which Žižek for obvious reasons is only too happy to privilege in Badiou’s *Le Siècle*.¹⁷

The contingent event of *clinamen* as the core of the materialist dialectic is therefore a double cut, an exponential cut. Or, the Figure of the irreducible Two, the minimal difference in Badiou’s ontology, which in terms of the dialectics of One and the multiple represents the split into One and *den*. What is engendered in that pure dialectical repetition is therefore the Demokritian *den*, which has its own autonomous ontological status. Or in other words, in this lies the truth of a historical change in something called “the incomplete ontology.” Žižek describes the parallax view of one and the same object, the division into waves and particles in quantum physics, which amounts to the materialist ontology of the *den*, in the following manner:

This brings us on to another consequence of this weird ontology of the thwarted (or barred) One: the two aspects of a parallax gap (wave and particle, say) are never symmetrical, for the primordial gap is between (curtailed) something and nothing, and the complementarity between the two aspects of the gap function so that we have first the gap between nothing (void) and something, and only then, in a (logically) second time, a second ‘something’ that fills in the Void, so that we get a parallax gap between two somethings.¹⁸

Žižek further describes the *den* as the result of the passage from lack to hole, from the lack of being to the being of lack in Lacan’s work as such:

This is how ‘there is something rather than nothing’: in order to arrive at something, one has to subtract from nothing its nothing(ness) itself, that is, one has to posit the primordial pre-ontological Abyss ‘as such;’ as nothing, so that, in contrast to (or against the background of) nothing, something can appear. What

¹⁷ Bosteels, B., “Badiou Without Žižek” in: *Polygraph: An International Journal of Culture and Politics*, No. 17, *The Philosophy of Alain Badiou* (1 September 2005).

¹⁸ Žižek, S., *Less than Nothing. Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, p. 929.

precedes Nothing is less than nothing, the pre-ontological multiplicity whose names range from Democritus's *den* to Lacan's *objet a*. The space of this pre-ontological multiplicity is not between Nothing and Something (more than nothing but less than something); *den* is, on the contrary, more than Something but less than Nothing.¹⁹

Without going into further discussion of the idea of the *den* as the minimal difference between desire and the drive and the materialist dialectic in Lacan, we shall rather conclude our paper with reference to presumably the same logic in Althusser's materialist dialectic, which allegedly in his last period completely disappeared in favour of the so called materialism of encounter as a naive version of ontology of the *clinamen*.²⁰ We believe that the dialectical relation between epistemology and ontology can also be seen as operative in Althusser's last work: if we perform Badiou's materialist scission of Althusser's work as a split between his idealist part (the work of the contradiction and overdetermination in *For Marx*) and the materialist, topological part – his work on the question of the *clinamen* and the materialist encounter of his last work – and see the culmination of it as a kind of repetition of the void and its scission. The object of Althusser's first theory was the void of the structuralist causality, which was forever elusive, and the locus of the absent centre of the dominant instances of the overdetermination and their impossible encounter with the economy as the determination of the last instance (of which the lonely hour never comes). This period could be compared to Lacan's structuralist period of the object of desire as the lack of being). Then we have the object of the theory of the materialism of encounter, or the aleatory materialism, the void of the *clinamen*, of the contingent swerve of the atom, the factor of the take (prise) of the aleatory encounter of instances and elements in the conjuncture, which is from the parallax perspective one and the same object. However, this void of the *clinamen* is actually the result of the repetition and therefore scission of the void from "Contradiction and Overdetermination" of the materialist dialectic in *For Marx* and consequently actually the so-called *den*, or the remainder of the secondary split, the result of which is the parallax object, which causes the incommensurability of his first epistemological period and last allegedly ontological pe-

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ See my article "The Parallax Object of Althusser's Materialist Philosophy" in: *Encountering Althusser. Politics and Materialism in Contemporary Radical Thought* (ed. by Katja Dieffenbach, Sara R. Farris, Gal Kim, and Peter D. Thomas), Bloomsbury, London 2013.

riod. What Althusser wanted to do with his theory of aleatory materialism was to repeat the materialist dialectic from his early period as a kind of transcendental materialism within Marxist historical materialism, similar to the idea of Žižek's transcendental materialism in quantum physics (this concept originates from Adrian Johnston).²¹ The epistemological impasse of Althusser's theory of overdetermined contradiction is the parallax view of the inconsistency or "not-all" of the being as such. The parallax object, the *den*, is the product of the particular kind of repetition of the void within his work. Since the core idea of Žižek's transcendental materialism is the overlapping of the limits of our knowledge with the limits or inconsistency of the being itself:

This formula is very precise: 'what is foreclosed to thought in the object' (the transcendent In-itself of the object inaccessible to thought) overlaps with 'what is foreclosed to the object in thought' (the immanence of the subject excluded from the realm of objectivity). This overlapping of the two 'foreclosures' (not to be confused with Lacan's forclusion) repeats the basic Hegelo-Lacanian move: the very distance which separates us from the In-itself is immanent to the In-itself, makes us (the subject) an unaccountable 'impossible' gap or cut within the In-itself. Insofar as, for Lacan, 'what is foreclosed to thought in the object' is the 'impossible' *objet a*, and 'what is foreclosed to the object in thought' is \$, the void of the barred subject itself, this overlapping brings us back to Lacan's formula \$ \diamond a.²²

The *den* as the result of the torsion of two voids and the scission of the void of the subject of the unconscious should therefore be regarded as the new base of the contemporary materialist dialectic. As far as the famous relationship between historical materialism and psychoanalysis is concerned, their common ground should be taken to a higher level. We already know that historical materialism and psychoanalysis are related, because they both take the object of their undertaking (science) as being already split, or not-all in itself, and the limit of knowledge has to always already incorporate the limitedness of the real object, the place of the subject of the enunciation within the enunciation of scientific knowledge (the partisanship),²³ the field of the Symbolic as the production of the signifier. But, if we consider Lacan's work as a scission between the side of

²¹ Cf. Johnston, A., *Zizek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL 2008.

²² Žižek, S., *Less than Nothing. Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, p. 956.

²³ Cf. Žižek, S., *Hegel in označevalec*, Analecta, DDU Univerzum, Ljubljana 1980.

the lack of the subject and the Master signifier as a quilting point of the structure on one side, and *objet a* as the product of the separation of the object from the signifier, on the other, the new platform for the materialist dialectic could be the result of a certain materialist torsion of the latter onto the former. The task of the future work of the materialist dialectic could therefore be to see whether or not this material remainder as the parallax object as the result of this kind of torsion as the double twist could pave the way to new knowledge or a new truth. In other words, the historical materialism of the unconscious within the history of psychoanalysis, on one hand, and research of the unconscious of the history of the unconscious within Marxism, on the other.