

## 5

## The passion for the real and the montage of semblance

What is this 'distancing' that Brecht turned into a maxim for the actor's performance? It is the display – within the play – of the gap between the play and the real. More profoundly, it is a technique that dismantles the intimate and necessary links joining the real to semblance, links resulting from the fact that semblance is the true situating principle of the real, that which localizes and renders visible the brutal effects of the real's contingency.

Much of the century's greatness lay in its commitment to thinking the relationship – often obscure at first – between real violence and semblance, between face and mask, between nudity and disguise. This point can be encountered in the most varied registers, from political theory to artistic practice.

Let's start with the Marxists, or Marxians. Those among them who lived in the century ascribed extraordinary importance to the notion of ideology, a notion designating the dissimulating power of false consciousness with regard to a decentred real that is neither grasped nor localized. Ideology is a discursive figure whereby the representation of social relations is effectuated, an imaginary montage that nevertheless re-presents a real. In this sense there is indeed something almost theatrical about ideology. Ideology stages figures of representation that mask the primordial violence of social relations (exploitation, oppression, anti-egalitarian cynicism). As in the Brechtian theatre of distancing,

ideology organizes a consciousness separated from the real that it nevertheless expresses. For Brecht the theatre is the didactic exposition of this separation; it shows how the violence of the real is only effective in the gap between the real effect and its dominant representation. The very concept of ideology is the crystallization of the 'scientific' certainty whereby representations and discourses must be read as masks of a real that they both denote and conceal. As Althusser observed,<sup>25</sup> we are in the presence of a symptomatic set-up; representation is a symptom (to be read or deciphered) of a real that it subjectively localizes in the guise of misrecognition. The power of ideology is nothing other than the power of the real inasmuch as the latter is conveyed by this misrecognition.

The word 'symptom' obviously indicates, when it comes to this power of misrecognition, that the century's Marxism and its psychoanalysis have something in common. Lacan made this point especially clear when he demonstrated that the Ego is an imaginary construct. Within this construct, the real system of drives is only legible by means of all sorts of decentrings and transformations. The word 'unconscious' precisely designates the set of operations whereby the real of a subject is only consciously accessible via the intimate and imaginary construction of the Ego. In this sense, the psychology of consciousness is a personal ideology, what Lacan calls 'the individual myth of the neurotic'. There exists a function of misrecognition which makes the abruptness of the real operate only through fictions, montages and masks.

Where the positivism of the nineteenth century affirmed the power of knowledge, the twentieth century deploys the theme of the efficacy of misrecognition. Against the cognitive optimism that characterized positivism, the twentieth century both discovers and stages the extraordinary power of ignorance, of what Lacan rightly calls 'the passion of ignorance'.

Distancing – conceived as the way that semblance works out its proper distance from the real – can be taken as an axiom of the century's art, and of 'avant-garde' art especially. What is at stake is the fictionalization of the very power of fiction, in other words, the fact of regarding the efficacy of semblance as real. This is one of the reasons why the art of the twentieth century is a reflexive

art, an art that wants to exhibit its own process, an art that wants to visibly idealize its own materiality. Showing the gap between the factitious and the real becomes the principal concern of facticity. For the Marxists, it is clear that a dominant class needs an ideology of domination, and not just domination alone. If art is an encounter with the real channelled through the exhibited means of the factitious, then art is everywhere, since every human experience is traversed by the gap between domination and the dominant ideology, between the real and its semblance. We find the exercise and experience of this gap everywhere. This is why the twentieth century proposes artistic gestures that were previously impossible, or presents as art what used to be nothing but waste matter. These gestures and presentations testify to the omnipresence of art, inasmuch as the artistic gesture ultimately comes down to an intrusion into semblance – exposing, in its brute state, the gap of the real.

Pirandello is a great inventor in this regard – all the more so in that he is entirely alien to Marxism, and even reliant on the worst bourgeois representations (cloistered families, affairs, salons). Pirandello's essential thesis is that the reversibility between the real and semblance is the only artistic path for accessing the real. Pirandello presents the entirety of his theatre under a particularly suggestive title: 'Naked Masks'. The real, or the naked, is what gives itself only by adhering to the mask, adhering to semblance.

What makes the theatrical incarnation of this thesis so forceful is that it takes place in an unusually violent subjective context. An exemplary passage can be found in the conclusion to *Henry IV*, in my view one of Pirandello's strongest works, together with *As You Desire Me*, *The Pleasure of Honesty* and *Madame Morli, One and Two*. The Henry IV in question is a German sovereign of the thirteenth century. The hero of the piece is a present-day man who declares throughout that he is Henry IV, surrounding himself with a court of people who, for various reasons, agree to be the conscious accomplices of this fable. In the end, he carries out a murder. This murder can be understood in a 'historical' register, on the basis of the character traits and existential circumstances that one presumes would pertain to the 'real' Henry IV. It can also be understood in a subjective register, on the basis of the life and

passions of the hero of the piece who, perhaps, exploits the historical mask of Henry IV. Throughout the bulk of the play, the thesis of reversibility, set forth with amazing virtuosity, stems from our inability to decide whether the hero 'really' does take himself for Henry IV – which would mean that he's mad (in the ordinary sense of the term) – or whether, for complicated reasons to do with the context of his private life, he's only playing at being Henry IV, and thus 'making it seem' (the verb is here particularly apposite) that he is mad. Once the murder is committed, however, things change. From that moment on, lest he be condemned for murder, the hero is definitively forced to make others believe that he's mad and that he killed because he took himself for Henry IV. Beyond semblance there is a *necessity* of semblance, which has perhaps always constituted its real. At this juncture Pirandello introduces a remarkable stage direction: 'Henry IV is to remain on stage with eyes wide open, terrified by the living force of his own fiction, which in the flash of an instant has led him to crime.' Though it reckons with the living force of fiction – and therefore with what makes fiction into a real power – this stage direction is not entirely decidable. It only says that a force must pass through a fiction. But a fiction is a form. One will therefore conclude that every force is only localizable, or effective, through a form that nevertheless cannot decide upon meaning. This is why one must maintain that it is precisely the energy of the real that presents itself as mask.

Within the century, there has been no shortage of terrifying manifestations of this thesis. First and foremost, we must recall the *mise en scène* by Stalin and his entourage of the Moscow trials at the end of the thirties. After all, in these trials it is purely and simply a matter of killing people, of liquidating a significant part of the communist establishment. We are in the realm of pure, real violence. The 'Bolshevik Old Guard', as it was called by Trotsky (its supposed linchpin and himself the victim of assassination), must be annihilated.

Why then stage trials in which pre-designated and most often resigned victims will be forced to recount utterly far-fetched things? Who would ever believe that throughout their whole lives

people like Zinoviev and Bukharin were Japanese spies, Hitler's puppets, hirelings of the counter-revolution, and so forth? What is the point of this gigantic sham? Of course, rational hypotheses can be formulated about the need, in Stalin's eyes, to eliminate all these people. One can also try to reconstruct the political landscape during the great purges.<sup>26</sup> But it is far more difficult to establish the necessity of the trials, especially since a large number of high-ranking officials, particularly among the military, were eliminated in the basements of the secret service without the slightest public performance. For these trials are pure theatrical fictions. The accused themselves, who had been carefully prepared, by torture if necessary, had to conform to a role whose performance had been rehearsed and pretty much scripted in the punitive corridors of the regime. In this regard it is very instructive to read the transcript of Bukharin's trial,<sup>27</sup> in which a significant slip momentarily unsettled the entire *mise en scène*, as though the real of semblance had come to perturb its functioning.

It seems that the absolute violence of the real (here, the terrorist Party-State) is indeed obliged to go through a representation which nevertheless is only capable of convincing those people (numerous, it's true) who've already decided to be convinced. But on the whole, these people – the convinced communists – would just as easily have sanctioned the straightforward liquidation of the 'enemies of the people'. They didn't need a trial to offer their endorsement. Their passion for the real, it seems, would have saved them this laborious semblance, especially since most found it quite difficult to explain to sceptics the mechanism of the trials. We are therefore left with the following enigma, which touches upon one of the great questions of the century: What is the function of semblance in the passion for the real, this passion that places politics beyond Good and Evil?

I think the crucial point (as Hegel grasped long ago with regard to the revolutionary Terror)<sup>28</sup> is this: the real, conceived in its contingent absoluteness, is never real enough not to be suspected of semblance. The passion for the real is also, of necessity, suspicion. Nothing can attest that the real is the real, nothing but the system of fictions wherein it plays the role of the real. All the subjective categories of revolutionary, or absolute, politics – 'conviction',

'loyalty', 'virtue', 'class position', 'obeying the Party', 'revolutionary zeal', and so on – are tainted by the suspicion that the supposedly real point of the category is actually nothing but semblance. Therefore, the correlation between a category and its referent must always be publicly *purged*, purified. This means purging subjects among those who lay claim to the category in question, that is, purging the revolutionary personnel itself. Furthermore, this must be carried out in accordance with a ritual that teaches everyone a lesson about the uncertainties of the real. Purging is one of the great slogans of the century. Stalin said it loud and clear: 'A party becomes stronger by purging itself.'

I would not want you to take these somewhat bitter reflections as yet more grist to the mill of the feeble moralizing that typifies the contemporary critique of absolute politics or 'totalitarianism'. I am undertaking the exegesis of a singularity and of the greatness that belongs it, even if the other side of this greatness, when grasped in terms of its conception of the real, encompasses acts of extraordinary violence.

To cut short any anti-political interpretation of these dark deeds, bear in mind that, among other things, purging, or purification, was also an essential slogan for artistic activity. There was a desire for pure art, an art in which the only role of semblance would be to indicate the rawness of the real. There was also a call to purify – through axiomatics and formalism – the mathematical real, to purge it of the entire spatial or numerical imaginary of intuitions. And so forth. The idea that force is attained through the purging of form was by no means monopolized by Stalin. Or by Pirandello. What all these attempts have in common, I repeat, is the passion for the real.

Let's go back for a moment to the Hegelian anticipation of this theme. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel tries to explain why the French Revolution was terroristic. His thesis is that the Revolution presents the subjective figure of absolute freedom. But absolute freedom is a freedom that is not bound by any objective representation of the Good. Therefore, it is a freedom without criterion, a freedom whose efficacy nothing can ever attest to. One is always justified in thinking that such and such a subject is about

to betray it. Ultimately, the essence of absolute freedom within concrete experience is given only as freedom-that-must-be-betrayed. The subjective name of true freedom is Virtue. But it is impossible to put forward a shared and reliable criterion of virtue. Everything suggests that what reigns is the opposite of virtue, the name of which is 'corruption'.<sup>29</sup> In the end, the essence of real freedom is the struggle against corruption. And since corruption is the 'natural' state of affairs, everybody is a possible target of this struggle, which means: everybody is *suspect*. Freedom is thus enacted, in an entirely logical manner, both as the 'law of suspects' and as a chronic purge.

What matters for us is the following: we are in the realm of suspicion when a formal criterion is lacking to distinguish the real from semblance. In the absence of such a criterion, the logic that imposes itself is that the more a subjective conviction presents itself as real, the more it must be suspected. It is thus at the summit of the revolutionary state, where the ardent desire of freedom is incessantly declared, that the greatest number of traitors is to be found. The traitor is both the leader and, ultimately, oneself. In these conditions, what is the only certainty? Nothingness. Only the nothing is not suspect, because the nothing does not lay claim to any real. The logic of purification, as Hegel astutely remarks, amounts to bringing about the nothing. Ultimately, death is the sole possible name of pure freedom, and 'dying well' the only thing that escapes suspicion. The maxim – all in all a rather simple one – is that strictly speaking, and despite the theatre proceeding *a contrario*, it is impossible to seem to die.

This why our century, aroused by the passion for the real, has in all sorts of ways – and not just in politics – been the century of destruction.

Yet we must immediately distinguish two orientations. The first assumes destruction as such and undertakes the indefinite task of purification. The second attempts to *measure* the ineluctable negativity; this is what I will call the 'subtractive' orientation. Destruction or subtraction? This is one of the century's central debates. What is the active figure taken by the negative side of the passion for the real? I'm particularly sensitive to the conflict

between these two orientations since it has played a decisive role in my own philosophical trajectory. An important section of my *Theory of the Subject* (1982) bears the title 'Lack and Destruction'. At that time, an altogether prophetic phrase of Mallarmé served as my banner: 'Destruction was my Beatrice.' In *Being and Event* (1988), I formulated an explicit self-critique on this point, showing that a subtractive thinking of negativity can overcome the blind imperative of destruction and purification.

Art provides the first guiding thread for our attempt to think the couple 'destruction/subtraction'. The century experienced itself as artistic negativity, in the sense that one of its themes, anticipated in the nineteenth century by a number of texts (for example, Mallarmé's *Verse in Crisis*, or farther back still, Hegel's *Aesthetics*), is that of the end of art, of representation, of the painting, and, finally, of the work as such. Behind this theme of the end there obviously lies, once again, the question of knowing what relationship art entertains with the real, or what the real of art is.

It is with regard to this point that I would like to call on Malevich. Malevich is born in Kiev in 1878. He arrives in Paris in 1911. By then, his painting is already organized geometrically. Then, around 1912–13, with Mayakovsky's collaboration, he moves to another doctrine, suprematism.

Malevich affirms the Bolshevik revolution. He returns to Moscow in 1917, and is appointed professor at the University of Moscow in 1919. In 1918, he paints the very famous *White on White*, now at MoMA in New York. In the twenties, as the situation for artists and intellectuals becomes increasingly tense, he is relocated to Leningrad and more or less forbidden from exhibiting his work. In 1926 he publishes, in German, an essay that bears a decisive title: *Die gegenstandlose Welt* (The World of Non-Representation). He dies in 1935.

*White on White* is – within the field of painting – the epitome of purification. Colour and form are eliminated and only a geometrical allusion is retained. This allusion is the support for a minimal difference, the abstract difference of ground and form, and above all, the null difference between white and white, the difference of the Same – what we could call the vanishing difference.

We find here the origin of a subtractive protocol of thought that differs from the protocol of destruction. We must beware of interpreting *White on White* as a symbol of the destruction of painting. On the contrary, what we are dealing with is a subtractive assumption. The gesture is very close to the one that Mallarmé makes within poetry: the staging of a minimal, albeit absolute, difference; the difference between the place and what takes place in the place, the difference between place and taking-place. Captured in whiteness, this difference is constituted through the erasure of every content, every upsurge.

Why is this something other than destruction? Because, instead of treating the real as identity, it is treated right away as a gap. The question of the real/semblance relation will not be resolved by a purification that would isolate the real, but by understanding that the gap is itself real. The white square is the moment when the minimal gap is fabricated.

There exists a passion for the real that is obsessed with identity: to grasp real identity, to unmask its copies, to discredit fakes. It is a passion for the authentic, and authenticity is in fact a category that belongs to Heidegger as well as to Sartre. This passion can only be fulfilled as destruction. Herein lies its strength – after all, many things deserve to be destroyed. But this is also its limit, because purification is a process doomed to incompleteness, a figure of the bad infinite.

There is another passion for the real, a differential and differentiating passion devoted to the construction of a minimal difference, to the delineation of its axiomatic. *White on White* is a proposition in thought that opposes minimal difference to maximal destruction.

This opposition within art relates to a conviction about beginning. The passion for the real is always the passion for the new – but what is the new? And, as Brecht asked, when will it come, and at what price?

To end on this question of the new, I would like to quote for you a poem by Malevich, written immediately prior to the composition of *White on White*:

Try never to repeat yourself – not in the icon, not on the canvas, not in the word;  
 if something in its act recalls an ancient deed,  
 then, the voice of the new birth tells me:  
 Erase, be quiet, stifle the fire if fire it be,  
 so that the corset of your thoughts may be lighter  
 and not rust,  
 so that you may hear the breath of a new day in the desert.  
 Cleanse your hearing, erase the bygone days, only thus  
 will you be more sensitive and more white,  
 for like a dark stain these days sagely  
 lie upon your vestments, and in the breath of the wave  
 you will find the furrow of the new.  
 Your thought will find the contours and stamp them with the seal  
 of your advance.

We have done enough work for you to be able to grasp immediately two things that this poem intertwines.

The first, typical of the century's prophetic stance towards the real, is that thought must interrupt repetition. There must be, and there will be, a new act, a 'new birth' which it is the century's task to invent. It is a question of responding, once and for all, to the imperative: 'Erase the bygone days.'

The second concerns the hearing that must be cleansed in order to find the contours. Attentiveness is realized as the invention of an outline, the seal of an advance, and not by grasping a pre-existing ideality.

Finally, Malevich tells us what the act of subtraction is: to invent content at the very place of the minimal difference, where there is almost nothing. The act is 'a new day in the desert'.

## 6

## One divides into two

So the century is in no way the century of 'ideologies', in the sense of the imaginary and the utopian. Its major subjective trait is the passion for the real, for what is immediately practicable, here and now. We have shown that the importance of semblance is simply a consequence of this passion.

What does the century have to say about itself? At any rate, that it is not the century of promise, but that of realization. It is the century of the act, of the effective, of the absolute present, and not the century of portent, of the future. The century experiences itself as the century of victories, after millennia of attempts and failures. The cult of the vain and sublime attempt, and the ideological enslavement it entails, is ascribed by the actors of the twentieth century to the unhappy Romanticism of the nineteenth century. The twentieth century declares: no more failures, the time of victories has come! This victorious subjectivity outlasts all apparent defeats because it is not empirical but constitutive. Victory is the transcendental theme that determines failure itself. 'Revolution' is one of the names for this theme. The October revolution of 1917, followed by the Chinese and Cuban revolutions, as well as the victories of the Algerians and the Vietnamese in their wars of national liberation – they add up to an empirical validation of the theme and to the defeat of defeats, redressing the massacres of June 1848 or of the Paris Commune.

The instrument of victory is theoretical and practical lucidity in preparation for a decisive conflict, a total and final war. Only a total war will lead to a victory that is truly victorious. In this respect, as we have said, the century is the century of war. But

this statement ties together several ideas, all of which turn around the question of the Two, or of antagonistic scission. The century declared that its law was the Two, antagonism; in this respect, the end of the cold war (American imperialism versus the socialist camp), as the last total figure of the Two, also signals the end of the century. However, the Two is conjugated in three different ways:

1 There exists a central antagonism, two subjectivities organized on a planetary scale in mortal combat. The century is the stage for this combat.

2 There is an equally violent antagonism between two ways of considering and thinking antagonism. This is the very essence of the confrontation between communism and fascism. For the communists, the planetary confrontation is in the last instance the confrontation between classes. For the radical fascists it is instead the confrontation between nations and races. Here the Two itself divides into two. There is an entanglement between an antagonistic thesis, on the one hand, and antagonistic theses about antagonism, on the other. This second division is essential, perhaps more than the first. All things considered, there were more anti-fascists than communists, and it is characteristic that the Second World War was fought in accordance with this secondary split, and not on the basis of a unified conception of antagonism. The latter gave rise only to a 'cold' war, except on the periphery (the Korean and Vietnam wars).

3 The century is summoned as the century of the production – through war – of a definitive unity. Antagonism will be overtaken by the victory of one camp over the other. Therefore we can also say that, in this respect, the century of the Two is animated by the radical desire for the One. What names the articulation of antagonism with the violence of the One is victory, which testifies for the real.

Note that we are not dealing with a dialectical schema. Nothing allows us to foresee a synthesis, an *internal* overcoming of contradiction. On the contrary, everything points to the suppression of one of the two terms. The century is a figure of the non-dialectical juxtaposition of the Two and the One. Our question is that of the century's assessment of dialectical thinking. Is the

motor of the victorious outcome antagonism itself or is it instead the desire for the One?

In connection with this question, I would like to invoke an episode – renowned in its time yet largely forgotten today – of the Chinese revolutions.<sup>30</sup> Around 1965 there begins in China what the local press – ever inventive when it came to the designation of conflicts – calls ‘a great class struggle in the field of philosophy’. On one side stand those who think that the essence of dialectics is the genesis of antagonism, and that it is given in the formula ‘one divides into two’; on the other, those who argue that the essence of dialectics is the synthesis of contradictory terms, and that consequently the right formula is ‘two fuse into one’. The apparent scholasticism harbours an essential truth. For what is really at stake is the identification of revolutionary subjectivity, of its constituent desire. Is it a desire for division, for war, or is it instead a desire for fusion, for unity, for peace? In any case, in China at that time those who espouse the maxim ‘one divides into two’ are declared ‘leftists’, while those who advocate ‘two fuse into one’ are called ‘rightists’. Why?

Taken as a subjective formula, as desire for the One, the maxim of synthesis (two fuse into one) is declared rightist because in the eyes of the Chinese revolutionaries it is entirely premature. The subject of this maxim is yet to fully traverse the Two to its end, and does not yet know what a fully victorious class war is. It follows that the One it covets is not even yet thinkable, which means that *under the cover of synthesis, this desire is calling for the old One*. This interpretation of dialectics is restorative. In order not to be a conservative, in order to be a revolutionary activist in the present, it is instead obligatory to desire division. The question of novelty immediately becomes that of the creative scission within the singularity of the situation.

In China, particularly during 1966 and 1967, and in the midst of unimaginable fury and confusion, the Cultural Revolution pits the partisans of these two versions of the dialectical schema against one other. When it comes down to it, there are those who follow Mao – at the time practically in a minority among the Party leadership – and think that the socialist state must not be the policed and police-like end of mass politics, but, on the contrary,

that it must act as a stimulus for the unleashing of politics, under the banner of the march towards real communism. And then there are those who, following Liu Shaoqi but especially Deng Xiaoping, think that – since economic management is the principal aspect of things – popular mobilizations are more nefarious than necessary. The educated youth will spearhead the Maoist line. The Party cadres and a great number of intellectual cadres will put up a more or less overt opposition. The peasants will cautiously bide their time. Last but not least, the workers, the decisive force, will be so torn between rival organizations that in the end, from 1967–8 onward, with the State at risk of being swept away in the whirlwind, the Army will be forced to intervene. What ensues is a long period of extremely violent and complex bureaucratic confrontations, not without a number of popular eruptions, right up to the death of Mao (1976), which is swiftly followed by the Thermidorian coup that brings Deng to power.

As far as its stakes are concerned, this political hurricane is so novel but at the same time so obscure that many of the lessons it no doubt harbours for the future of the politics of emancipation have yet to be drawn. This is in spite of the fact that it provided a decisive inspiration for French Maoism between 1967 and 1975, the only innovative and consequential political current of post-May 1968. In any case, the Cultural Revolution undeniably signals the closure of an entire sequence, whose central ‘object’ is the Party, and whose main political concept is that of proletariat.

By the way, it is fashionable nowadays, among the restorers of imperial and capitalist servility, to describe this unprecedented episode as a feral and bloody ‘power struggle’, with Mao, in a minority position within the Chinese politburo, attempting, by any means necessary, to climb his way back up to the top. First of all, one will reply that to affix the epithet ‘power struggle’ on a political episode of this type is to invite ridicule by busting down a wide-open door. The militants of the Cultural Revolution never stopped quoting Lenin’s declaration (perhaps not his best, but that’s another matter) according to which in the final analysis ‘the problem is that of power’. As Mao himself officially indicated, his threatened position was one of the explicit stakes of the conflict.

The ‘findings’ unearthed by our sinologist interpreters<sup>31</sup> are nothing but immanent and public themes of the quasi-civil war that took place in China between 1965 and 1976; a war whose authentically revolutionary sequence (in the sense of the existence of a new thinking of politics) is to be found only in its initial segment (1965–8). Besides, since when are our political philosophers outraged by a threatened leader who tries to regain his influence? Is this not what they spend all their time commenting on, deeming it to be the delectable, democratic essence of parliamentary politics? Furthermore, we can observe that the meaning and importance of a power struggle is judged according to the stakes involved. Especially when the weapons in the struggle are classically revolutionary, in the sense that led Mao famously to remark that the revolution ‘is not a dinner party’: the unprecedented mobilization of millions of workers and youths, a truly unparalleled freedom of expression and organization, gigantic demonstrations, political assemblies in all places of work or study, brutal and schematic debates, public denunciations, the recurrent and anarchic use of violence including armed violence, and so on. Now, who today can dispute that Deng Xiaoping – portrayed by the activists of the Cultural Revolution as the ‘number-two capitalist roader in the party’ – did in fact endorse a programme of development and social construction diametrically opposed to Mao’s innovative, collectivist project? After seizing power in a bureaucratic coup following Mao’s death, did we not witness Deng, throughout the eighties and right up to his death, unleashing an utterly savage and corrupt variety of neo-capitalism, all the more illegitimate in that it prolonged the despotism of the Party? When it comes to these questions, and especially the most important (relations between town and country, between intellectual work and manual work, between the Party and the masses, and so on), we can indeed say that what the Chinese, in their delightful tongue, call a ‘struggle between two classes, two paths and two lines’ really did take place.

What about the violence, often so extreme? The hundreds of thousands of dead? The persecutions, especially against intellectuals? One will say the same thing about them as about all those acts of violence that, to this very day, have marked the History of

every somewhat expansive attempt to practise a free politics, to radically subvert the eternal order that subjects society to wealth and the wealthy, to power and the powerful, to science and scientists, to capital and its servants, and considers worthless what people think, worthless, the collective intelligence of workers, worthless, to tell the truth, any thought that is not homogeneous to the order in which the ignoble rule of profit is perpetuated. The theme of total emancipation, practised in the present, in the enthusiasm of the absolute present, is always situated beyond Good and Evil. This is because in the circumstances of action, the only known Good is the one that the status quo turns into the precious name for its own subsistence. Extreme violence is therefore the correlate of extreme enthusiasm, because it is in effect a question of the transvaluation of all values. The passion for the real is devoid of morality. Morality’s status, as Nietzsche observed, is merely genealogical. Morality is a residue of the old world. As a result, the century’s threshold of tolerance for that which, from the vantage point of our weary, pacified present, constitutes the worst, was incredibly high – regardless of which camp one pledged allegiance to. This is obviously what leads some today to speak of the century’s ‘barbarity’. Nevertheless, it is entirely unjust to isolate this dimension of the passion for the real. Even when what is at stake is the persecution of intellectuals, disastrous as its spectacle and effects may be, it is important to recall that what makes it possible is the conviction that what permits political access to the real is not knowledge and its privileges. As Fouquier-Tinville had already declared during the French Revolution, when he judged and condemned Lavoisier, the creator of modern chemistry, to death: ‘The Republic does not need scientists.’ Barbarous words if there ever were, totally extremist and unreasonable – but they must be understood, beyond themselves, in their abridged, axiomatic form: ‘The Republic does not need.’ It is not from need or interest – or from the correlate of interest, privileged knowledge – that originates the political capture of a fragment of the real, but from the occurrence of a collectivizable thought, and from it alone. This can also be stated as follows: politics, when it exists, grounds its own principle regarding the real, and is thus in need of nothing, save itself.

But perhaps it's the case that today every attempt to submit thought to the test of the real – political or otherwise – is regarded as barbarous. The passion for the real, much cooled, cedes its place (provisionally?) to the acceptance – sometimes enjoyable, sometimes grim – of reality.

It is true that the passion for the real is accompanied by a proliferation of semblance, and that the purification and stripping bare of the real must always begin again. I believe I've already elucidated what drives this process.

What I would like to underscore today is that to purify the real is to extract it from the reality that envelops and conceals it. Whence the violent taste for surface and transparency. The century attempts to react against depth. It carries out a fierce critique of foundations and of the beyond; it promotes the immediate, as well as the surface of sensation. As an heir to Nietzsche, it proposes the abandonment of all 'otherworlds' and posits that the real is identical to appearance. Precisely because what drives it is not the ideal but the real, thought must seize hold of appearance as appearance – or of the real as the pure event of its own appearance. To achieve this, it is necessary to destroy every density, every claim to substantiality, and every assertion of reality. It is reality that constitutes an obstacle to the uncovering of the real as pure surface. Here lies the struggle against semblance. But since the semblance-of-reality adheres to the real, the destruction of semblance is identified with destruction pure and simple. At the end of its purification, the real, as total absence of reality, is the nothing. We can call this path, taken up by innumerable ventures within the century – whether political, artistic or scientific – the path of terroristic nihilism. Since its subjective motivation is the passion for the real, it does not represent a *consent* to the nothing; it is a creation, and in it one should recognize the lineaments of an active nihilism.

How do we stand today with regard to these questions? The figure of active nihilism is regarded as completely obsolete. Every reasonable activity is limited and limiting, hemmed in by the burdens of reality. The best one can do is to avoid evil and to do this the shortest path is to avoid any contact with the real.

Eventually, one meets up once again with the nothing, the nothing-real, and in this sense one is still within nihilism. But since the element of terrorism, the desire to purify the real, has been suppressed, nihilism is deactivated. It has become passive, or reactive, nihilism – that is, a nihilism hostile to every action as well as every thought.

The other path that the century sketched out – the one that attempts to hold onto the passion for the real without falling for the paroxysmal charms of terror – is what I call the subtractive path: to exhibit as a real point, not the destruction of reality, but minimal difference. To purify reality, not in order to annihilate it at its surface, but to subtract it from its apparent unity so as to detect within it the minuscule difference, the vanishing term that constitutes it. What takes place *barely* differs from the place where it takes place. It is in this 'barely', in this immanent exception, that all the affect lies.

For both paths the key question is that of the new. What is the new? The century is obsessed with this question, because ever since its inception the century has summoned itself as a figure of commencement. And first of all as the (re)commencement of Man: the new man.

This phrase has two opposite meanings.

For a whole host of thinkers, particularly in the area of fascist thought (and without excepting Heidegger), 'the new man' is in part the restitution of the man of old, of the man who had been eradicated, had disappeared, had been corrupted. Purification is actually the more or less violent process of the return of a vanished origin. The new is a production of authenticity. In the final analysis, the task of the century is viewed here as restitution (of the origin) through destruction (of the inauthentic).

For another cluster of thinkers, particularly in the area of marxist communism, the new man is a real creation, something that has never existed before, because he emerges from the destruction of historical antagonisms. The new man of communism is beyond classes and beyond the state.

The new man is thereby either restored or produced.

In the first case, the definition of the new man is rooted in mythic totalities such as race, nation, earth, blood and soil. The

new man is a collection of predicates (Nordic, Aryan, warrior, and so on).

In the second case, on the other hand, the new man is envisioned in opposition to all enveloping forms as well as to all predicates, in particular against family, property and the nation-state. This is the project of *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* by Engels. Marx had already underscored that the universal singularity of the proletariat derives from its bearing no predicate, possessing nothing, and in particular not having, in the strong sense of the term, any 'fatherland'. This anti-predicative, negative and universal conception of the new man traverses the century. A very important point in this respect is the hostility towards the family as the primordial nucleus of egoism, rooted particularity, tradition and origin. Gide's cry – 'Families, I hate you' – partakes in the apologetics of the new man thus conceived.

It's very striking to see that, as the century draws to a close, the family has once more become a consensual and practically unassailable value. The young love the family, in which, moreover, they now dwell until later and later. The German Green Party, allegedly a protest party (everything's relative – they're now in government . . .), at one time contemplated calling itself the 'party of the family'. Even homosexuals, who during the century, as we've just seen with Gide, played their part in the protest, nowadays demand their insertion within the framework of the family, inheritance and 'citizenship'. How far we have come. In the real present of the century, the new man primarily stood – if one was progressive – for the escape from family, property and state despotism. Today, it seems that 'modernization', as our masters like to call it, amounts to being a good little dad, a good little mum, a good little son, to becoming an efficient employee, enriching oneself as much as possible, and playing at the responsible citizen. This is the new motto: 'Money, Family, Elections.'

The century concludes on the motif of the impossibility of subjective novelty and the comfort of repetition. This motif has a categorical name: obsession. The century ends with the obsession of security, under the dominance of the following, rather abject maxim: It's really not that bad being where you are already; it is, and has been, worse elsewhere. Yet precisely what was most alive

in these last hundred years placed itself, in the wake of Freud, under the sign of a devastating hysteria: What novelty have you to show us? Of what are you the creator?

Which is why it's not a bad idea to also enter the century via psychoanalysis.

politics and of democracy. To cut to the chase, this is the conception proposed by the Organisation Politique, of which I am proud to be a militant.

- 18 On this point one should consult the excellent short essay by Dominique Janicaud, 'The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology', translated by Bernard G. Prusak, in *Phenomenology and the 'Theological Turn': The French Debate* (Fordham, 2000).
- 19 Jean-François Lyotard gave expression to a kind of melancholic farewell to the century (to 'modernity') when he declared the end of 'grand narratives'. For him, this meant above all the end of Marxist politics, the end of the 'proletarian narrative'. He did this with elegance and profundity, scouring the refinements of contemporary art for something capable of relaying – in the discontinuous and the infinitesimal – the lost Totality and the impossible Greatness. One should read *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, translated by Georges Van Den Abbeele (University of Minnesota, 1988).
- 20 The concept of 'disjunctive synthesis' lies at the heart of Deleuze's conception of the 'vitality' of Being, which is the same thing as its productive univocity. It designates the power of the One that manifests itself even in the most divergent series. I tried to reconstruct this position (and rationally to demarcate myself from it) in my *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, translated by Louise Burchill (University of Minnesota, 1999).
- 21 On this point, see the study on Lenin and time in Sylvain Lazarus's great work *Anthropologie du nom* (Anthropology of the Name) (Seuil, 1996).
- 22 Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* is an excellent book, there are no two ways about it. It achieves a lucid balance between the epic sense of the 'irruption of the masses' (the formula is taken from the book) and marxist political analysis.
- 23 The work of Erich Maria Remarque articulates different dramas within the century, from his great classic on the war of 1914 (*All Quiet on the Western Front*, translated by A. W. Wheen, Little and Brown, 1929) to the figures of wandering, action, and disconsolate love from the inter-war period (*Three Comrades*, also translated by Wheen, Ballantine, 1998).
- 24 The brevity and poverty of the history of the United States, beyond the current hegemonic Empire, is such that those few episodes within it whose political weight is indisputable have been subjected to pitiless examinations and powerful artistic formalizations. This is the case with the Civil War, of course, and more generally with the

question of the South. It's also the case with the persecution, chiefly aimed at artists and intellectuals, at the end of the forties and the beginning of the fifties, unleashed under the pretext of anti-communism. The committee against so-called 'un-American' activities was presided over by Senator McCarthy, which is why this period bears the name of 'McCarthyism'. It was a particularly intense time, since everyone was required to snitch on everyone else. Those who informed in order to avoid suspicion and keep their jobs were numerous and sometimes famous. The most debated case is without doubt that of the great filmmaker Elia Kazan. Innumerable artists, actors, scriptwriters and directors appeared before the committee. Ever since, American art, and particularly cinema, is replete with allusions to this period.

- 25 Althusser, who took interest in Lacan's enterprise very early on, connected the Marxist concept of ideology directly to the imaginary effect of unconscious formations in psychoanalysis. In the end he made the 'subject'-instance, what he called 'interpellation as subject' (*interpellation en sujet*), into the motor that explained the efficacy of both ideologies and their material apparatuses. See Althusser's article 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'.  
A personal testimony: In 1960, I was a student at the École Normale Supérieure and had just discovered, with extreme enthusiasm, Lacan's published texts, when Althusser, at the time in charge of philosophy at the École, asked me to prepare a synthetic presentation for my fellow students on what was then a completely ignored author. I did this in two talks which to this very day serve me as internal guides.
- 26 Bearing in mind the moralizing tendency displayed by contemporary French historians, and even, as François Furet's book on communism shows, the coquettishness with which they assume the role of mere liberal propagandists, it is no doubt to English and American scholars that one should look for intellectually convincing studies of the Stalinist period in the USSR. Even so, a fruitful starting-point for considering what the 'little father of the people' may have represented as a *figure* is to be found in the documents collated and discussed by Lilly Marcou under the title *Les Stalines vus par les hôtes du Kremlin* (The Stalins as Seen by the Hosts of the Kremlin) (Julliard, 1979).  
Concerning the Siberian Gulag in particular, nothing compares to Varlam Shalamov's novellas, collected in English under the title *Kolyma Tales* and translated by John Glad (Penguin, 1995). These

- novellas are undoubtedly one of the century's masterpieces. They are vastly superior to Solzhenitsyn's ponderous constructions, which – as it has since become apparent to everyone but his fervent admirers among the French apostates of Maoism – tend to reinforce a Slavophile and somewhat anti-Semitic mindset.
- 27 A small and excellent book on this question is Pierre Broué's *Les Procès de Moscou* (The Moscow Trials) (Julliard, 1964), published in the outstanding (and now defunct) French series Archives, which also included the book by Lilly Marcou mentioned in the previous footnote. Reading all the books published in this series is the best possible way of learning about some important fragments of universal history.
- 28 One must reread the extremely dense passage in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* devoted to the Terror. By way of a simple invitation, I offer here the following extract, in A. V. Miller's translation:

When the universal will maintains that what the government has actually done is a crime committed against it, the government, for its part, has nothing specific and outwardly apparent by which the guilt of the will opposed to it could be demonstrated; for what stands opposed to it as the *actual* universal will is only an unreal pure will, *intention*. *Being suspected*, therefore, takes place, or has the significance and effect, of *being guilty*; and the external reaction against this reality that lies in the simple inwardness of intention, consists in the cold, matter-of-fact annihilation of this existent self, from which nothing else can be taken away but its mere being.

- 29 For all the questions relating to the French Revolution, as seen from an anti-dialectical perspective, see Sylvain Lazarus's study 'La Catégorie de révolution dans la Révolution française' (The Category of Revolution in the French Revolution), in *Anthropologie du nom*.
- 30 Since when it comes to the Cultural Revolution everything is now either forgotten or covered over by slanderous journalism, one is obliged to refer to sources contemporaneous with the event that were both impartial and measured. A book that allows one to form a synthetic idea of the initial phase (the only phase to contain any universal lessons) of what the Chinese then called the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) is Jean Esmein's *The Chinese Cultural Revolution*, translated by W. J. F. Jenner (Anchor Books, 1973).

- 31 Simon Leys – in other respects a man of talent – is the main proponent of anti-Maoist sinology. His essay *The Chairman's New Clothes: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* (translated by Carol Appleyard and Patrick Goode), originally published in 1971 at the height of the Cultural Revolution's intellectual popularity, functioned at the time as a sort of iconoclastic bomb. That Simon Leys is honoured as the courageous vanguard of the renegade, counter-revolutionary spirit certainly does justice to the courage of opinion that he showed; one which his followers, all of them repentant Maoists, have never displayed – neither at the time, when 'everyone' was a Maoist, themselves included, nor today, when this same 'everyone' only comprises penitents, which they're so eager to be. But we're still not convinced that his books are praiseworthy. It is up to the reader to judge.
- 32 Concerning the meeting between Heidegger and Celan, and more generally the place to be accorded Celan in today's philosophical interrogations, one should consult Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's indispensable book, *Poetry as Experience*, translated by Andrea Tarnowski (Stanford University Press, 1999).
- 33 Though it upsets this closure, we are obliged to mention here the case of Gennady Aygi, Chuvash poet of Russian (and Chuvash) tongue. Regarding Aygi – whose only peer in the use of form, albeit coming from a completely different experience, is Celan – we can say that he comes under the heading of that which, within the century, takes stock in thought of the powers of language. Antoine Vitez, always ahead of everyone else when it came to knowledge of the world's great poets, liked to call him 'the Mallarmé of the Volga'. By way of an introduction, one should read *Aigui*, by Léon Robel, in the famous series Poètes d'Aujourd'hui (Poets of Today) (Seghers, 1993).
- 34 Natacha Michel's doctrine is summed up in a small and essential book, entitled *L'Écrivain pensif* (The Pensive Writer) (Verdier, 1998).
- 35 Two articles by Jacques-Alain Miller remain canonical in terms of what happens to the concept of the subject when the latter is determined by a logic of which it is not the centre but rather the lateral effect. The first is called 'La suture' (Suture), the second 'Matrice' (Matrix).
- 36 On names and their avatars in the century's thought, see J. C. Milner's indispensable essay, the title of which already indicates its pertinence for our question: *Les Noms indistincts* (Indistinct Names) (Seuil, 1983).