

Editorial

Inscriptions

– contemporary thinking on art,
philosophy and psycho-analysis –
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The word *outsourcing* made its entry into the dictionary in the late 1980s, and has rapidly increased in use from the mid 1990s. This is a linguistic trend that coincides roughly with the increasing dominance of neo-liberalism and the financialisation of production in contemporary society: new financial tools made it easier to streamline the production of goods and services. One key component in this novel approach to business was the technique of outsourcing, the practice of hiring an outside party to perform services or create goods that had hitherto been performed in-house by the company's own employees and staff.

In the work of psychoanalysts Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek the notion of outsourcing has taken on a new and even more sinister meaning.¹ In the late 1990s these scholars pointed out that in some cases the media “provide for their own reception,” so that our response to the expression in some sense is outsourced to the medium itself.² Žižek's most well-known example is the persistence of so-called “canned laughter” on TV-shows, which serves as a way for the show to interact with itself, preempting our response, and thus allowing us to relax while the show laughs on our behalf.³ However, it was after 9/11 that the term outsourcing reached its fullest potential. In an essay in the *London Review of Books*, Žižek described how in our time not only simple production processes and services are outsourced, but even, and perhaps more importantly, the dirty work required by states' secret services. While torturing those suspected of associating with the perpetrators of 9/11

would be controversial in the USA, sending them to so-called “black sites” outside American soil enabled water-boarding and other unpalatable techniques to be used anyway. To Žižek this demonstrated how torture became outsourced after 9/11: “This is how, today, the First World democracy more and more functions: by way of ‘outsourcing’ its dirty underside to other countries.”⁴

The term became a critical tool to describe how some of our key experiences are in the process of being outsourced. For instance, marriage agencies, which had gone through an explosive growth with the advent of the internet, took over the function of dating, allowing consumers to experience marriage and sexuality without the “messy” and often troublesome phase of meeting and getting to know someone quite different from themselves. However, what Žižek perceived as the new trend was that outsourcing would go beyond “recycling, charity and dating,” to encompass our most sincerely felt political convictions: “After outsourcing work and torture, after the marriage agencies started to outsource even our dating, [many people] saw that for a long time they were also allowing their political engagements to be outsourced,” by letting powerful politicians and organisations formulate programmes and pragmatic demands on their behalf, and in that way emasculate popular movements, such as Occupy Wall Street, or the Yellow Vest movement in France.⁵

In the present issue of *Inscriptions* we are particularly interested in yet another domain in which

¹Robert Pfaller “invented” the term interpassivity in 1996; it was then adopted and further developed by Žižek to include the notion of outsourcing from the late 1990s.

²The term is from Gijs van Oenen, “A machine that would go of itself: interpassivity and its impact on political life,” *Theory & Event* 9, no. 2 (2006), <https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2006.0030>.

³The example is from a talk given by Slavoj Žižek, “The interpassive subject,” Centre Georges Pompidou, Traverses, 1998, <https://www.lacan.com/zizek-pompidou.htm>, and given further treatment in the essay “Is it possible to traverse the fantasy in Cyberspace?,” in *The Žižek Reader* (London: Blackwell, 1999), p105ff.

⁴Slavoj Žižek, “Between two deaths,” *London Review of Books*, vol. 26, no. 11, 3 June 2004, 19, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n11/slavoj-zizek/between-two-deaths>. The quote is from Slavoj Žižek, “Move the underground! What's wrong with fundamentalism? (Part II),” accessed 12 December 2019, <https://www.lacan.com/zizunder.htm>.

⁵Slavoj Žižek, “Occupy first. Demands come later,” *The Guardian Online*, 26 October 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/oct/26/occupy-protesters-bill-clinton>.

psychoanalysts such as Žižek have implemented the term outsourcing, namely that of *belief*. We often hear that belief stands in distinction to that of knowledge, such as in the adage that one should strive to separate facts from “mere opinion.” However, as Moore’s Paradox shows, there can be no knowledge without belief, and the present predominance of scepticism with regard to conviction has, in Žižek’s view, ushered in a preference for *outsourced beliefs*, where we “let the primitive others, ‘fundamentalists,’ do their believing for us,” allowing the “Rational West” to carry on governing on the basis of “facts” and “knowledge.”⁶ This kind outsourcing is essential to us when the beliefs we want others to hold on our behalf are those which most radically uphold our societies, and which even so are of such a nature that we cannot admit their necessity.

We find an example of such *disavowed* belief precisely with regard to torture. When it was uncovered, by WikiLeaks and others, how prisoners at Abu Ghraib had been brutally tortured and humiliated, it was possible to realise the extent to which this unacknowledged faith in torture was the very ground on which public morality, our denial of the efficacy of torture, could be upheld. Abu Ghraib showed that it is our “disavowed beliefs, suppositions, and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, although they form the flipside of public morality” that constitute the real concern of our time.⁷

What we have here is an instance of what Sigmund Freud referred to in his essay “A child is being beaten” (1919): a fundamental fantasy serving to disguise a traumatic kernel of truth. In this essay Freud explained that the child’s fantasy, that of a child being beaten by his father, begins when the child sees a sibling being beaten by their father, giving rise to an utterance such as “My father is beating a child *I hate*.” This beating generates conflicting pleasures in the witness: while the child despises the victim of the beating, he or she is also able to identify with the humiliation of being beaten, and feelings of jealousy and rivalry are mixed with a sense of egoistic and erotic pleasure.

In a second phase this primary perception is constructed as an event that disguises both the victim and the perpetrator. Here, the child generates utterances such as “a child (one child? any child?) is being beaten (by whom?).” The point here is that in this second phase the child allows for the implication that it is the child themselves that is the victim, and that some kind of genital infraction on the part of the child is being punished by the father, entailing a jealous paternal figure. However, Freud is clear that this phase, while constructed, is also not remembered:

This second phase is the most important and the most momentous of all. But we may say that in a certain sense it has never had a real existence. It is never remembered, it has never succeeded in becoming conscious.⁸

It is as if we are presented with a knowledge that *nobody really knows*, of what Slavoj Žižek has referred to as *non-subjectivised* knowledge. Another way of putting it is to acknowledge that while this fantasy certainly has a distinct *reality* it is *not claimed* by anyone, at least not in this second phase; it is a knowledge that floats around, waiting for a subject to symbolise it, and thus claim it. Žižek suggests that we can draw from Freud’s case study a distinction between knowledge and truth, and the distinction resides on the level of symbolisation: while we can say that there is a *drive* for knowledge (who is being beaten? by whom?), any notion of *truth* requires an act of symbolisation, and therefore a subject who has entered the symbolic stage, the domain of desire.

In this issue of *Inscriptions* Tidhar Nir’s essay show how such experiences (*Chockerfahrung*) are key to understand how the ego is reconfigured as it encounters the “trauma inherent in language.” Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno Nir proposes that art can provide for us a place where we experience an alienation that *returns the ego to nature*, and thus facilitates reconstitution and knowledge, or what we Žižek refers to as the reincorporation of the traumatic kernel of language.

Jørgen Veisland shows in his essay on imagination and reality how it is necessary for the artistic creativity to establish a relation to the “pressure of reality,” or what we in terms of psycho-analysis would perceive as the *force of the drive*. Taking his queue from the aesthetic programme of Wallace Stevens Veisland goes on to demonstrate ways of abstracting reality into the poetic imagination in works by Alain Robbe-Grillet, Haruki Murakami, Paul Auster, Bruno Schulz, and Stevens himself. To complete their aesthetic task these writers employ various means to abstract themselves from reality, and, in turn, to make appropriate abstractions of the same reality into their art. The distance proscribed by the work of the imagination is strictly analogous to the distinction between the drive and language, knowledge

⁶However, Žižek has noted how what he calls “new religious fundamentalisms” in our own societies appear to undermine even this function of the Third World to the West; see “Move the underground!”

⁷See “Between two deaths.”

⁸Sigmund Freud, “A child is being beaten,” in *Standard Edition*, vol. 17 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955/1919), 176.

and truth, that issues from the work of psycho-analysis.

Our editor in Lebanon, Sharif Abdunnur, explains in an interview in this issue how academic work becomes entangled in social and political upheavals at particular historical junctures. In a personal and powerful narrative Abdunnur shows how effective teaching at times involves taking risks, and that these risks can have a profound impact on our professional and personal lives. In the midst of an ongoing revolt Abdunnur negotiates the demands of social and political upheaval with a quest for contemporary and relevant expressions that give an appropriate academic account of the situation. As Abdunnur explains popular expressions are key to understand the deep shifts that are taking place in the Lebanese imaginary.

A sense of a disavowed pleasure, described by Freud in the second phase of “A child is being beaten,” reemerges as a story of victimisation and expiation that lies at the core of René Girard’s theory of the scapegoat. In his view there is a hidden, expunged element in myths such as that of Oedipus of Thebes, the king who was greeted as a saviour of a city in distress, and vilified and exiled when the expected about-turn failed to materialise. To Girard the myth, as well as Sophocles’ play fail to give an account of a logic of the mob, a raging crowd that turns their former hero into a martyr, casting him out of his native land, in a furious attempt to come to terms with the plague that is haunting them. It is as a myth that the vilified Oedipus reemerges as a tragic hero, and the myth and the play serve as totems over an act of brutal banishment, an exemplary *pharmakos*.

What Girard showed was precisely the constructed nature of this *second phase* of the disavowal: when the event returns as a myth, and as a foundational ground for a novel community, it isn’t any longer clear *who* was beaten (Oedipus? his mother? his father?), or, indeed, who did the beating. It is in *this* sense we can say that Girard’s theory provides a model of knowledge in the Real: it is a knowledge that is *common* and yet not claimed by anyone; it is objective knowledge waiting for a subject.

Such veritable acts of communal *outsourcing* lies at the core of the very public artworks of AFK. In a series of murals depicting various public figures in positions of the martyr AFK reconnects the emerging form of street-art to art’s ability to maintain our relation to the sacred. Cannily drawing on ambiguities concerning victimhood, pleasure, and mob logic AFK returns us to profound issues that facilitate art as a distinct domain of inquiry. We are happy to present a series of his artwork in this issue, works that have made headlines in the mass media, and that have reignited a debate concerning the place of street-art in the public domain and in the space of arts.