Toward a Materialist Ontology

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The paper places Alenka Zupančič's *What Is Sex?* in a broader framework, in which the Lacanian take on the problematic of being is linked with the history of ontology. The psychoanalytic contribution to the ontological debates comes down to the difference between Lacan's concept of the real and the traditional philosophical concept of "being qua being". According to Zupančič the real is conceived as a cut in being, as that *in* being, which is "less than being". Here a thorough reformulation of the traditional ontological opposition of being and non-being is at stake. Although *What Is Sex?* discusses primarily sexuality and the unconscious this focus is underpinned by the problematic of the signifier that the paper examines more extensively by distinguishing between the metaphorical, metonymic and materialist ontologies.

Primitive Accumulation of Signifiers

At the core of the psychoanalytic intervention in the ontological debates stands the "ontological scandal" of the signifier. In some way psychoanalysis here seems to go along with Heidegger's philosophy of being, which already reformulated the traditional question of being from the viewpoint of the co-belonging of being and language (that Heidegger famously describes as the "house of being").[i] Alenka Zupančič emphasises that from the Lacanian perspective the ontological scandal of language consists in the fact that the signifier does not simply introduce a cut into some unproblematic and uncorrupted *physis*, but rather seems to emerge out of a pre-existing ontological deadlock that is already at work in *physis*. The signifier thus somehow "translates" the instability of "natural being" into the instability of "linguistic being". In this ontological scenario nature and culture are not simply separated by an unbridgeable abyss but are instead linked by negativity *in* the order of being, which is itself not being.

Two passages in Lacan are particularly significant for determining the ontological scandal of language. In his responses to the questions posed by the journal *Cahiers pour l'analyse* Lacan addresses the issue of materialist theory of language by remarking "the signifier is matter transcending itself in language" (Lacan 2001, 209). His reply is also explicit about the relation between his theory of language and Marxism: "Only for my theory of language as structure of the unconscious can be said that it is implied by Marxism, if only you are not more demanding than the material implication" (ibid., 208). Lacan's provisory definition of the signifier contains a double rejection, since it is directed against our everyday understanding of matter (sensuous ground of reality) and language (intellectual tool of communication). By associating matter with the signifier Lacan at the same time detaches matter from sensuousness and the signifier from abstraction, thus implicitly stating that materialism involves a double effort of thinking the material character of abstractions and the abstract character of matter. To put it with Marx, what matter and language have in common is that they are paradigmatic examples of sensuous suprasensuous or *gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit* (spectral objectivity). Matter is already an abstraction and the signifier already a

materiality – again, one could hear in this framing a rejection of the traditional dichotomy between nature and culture.

Six years later Lacan makes another peculiar remark in this direction: "[N]ature is full of semblances" (Lacan 2007, 16). Rather than absenting the signifier, this semblance *par excellence*, from nature, Lacan indicates that we should look at nature as a container of signifiers. If nature indeed contains semblances then materialism inevitably confronts an ontological complication. It cannot postulate matter in the naïve sense of the term, as immediate material ground or principle, since this sensuous understanding of matter fails to account for the proliferation of semblances in nature, which directly expose the action of "self-transcending" or ontological redoubling in "natural being". Still, there is an important difference between the natural and the linguistic semblance. The natural semblances do not form a link, they are not articulated in a system, which would make of them signifiers *for other signifiers*. In short, the self-transcendence in the natural semblance is not yet forming a language.

What is particularly interesting about Lacan's remark is that it again echoes a Marxian problematic, the so-called primitive accumulation: "[W]e do not know how it came, if I may say so, to the accumulation of signifiers. For the signifiers, I tell you, are distributed in the world, in nature, there are plenty of them" (ibid.). Nature may be a container of semblances-signifiers but it does not encompass the action of their accumulation. As long as these semblances remain dispersed or "free-floating" they sustain the self-identity of discourse: "The semblance, in which discourse is identical to itself, this is a level of the term *semblance*, is the semblance in nature" (ibid.) – which means that it is not a discourse, insofar as discourse always involves accumulation of semblances, i.e., mobilisation of their difference, which, however, is already build in the natural semblance (otherwise it would make no sense to speak of semblance in the first place). The "level of the term *semblance*" that Lacan aims at concerns appearance of reality, similarity and even deception, like in the case of animal mimicry and defence colours.[ii] Because on this level "discourse" remains identical to itself, and hence does not contain the systematisation and economisation of difference it does not point toward an absence. In other words, self-

identical discourse does not involve action, insofar as the action of discourse is conditioned by a lack. For this reason Lacan hints that his "meditation" on the presumable self-identity of discourse in the semblance of nature is made from the perspective of the non-self-identical discourse and merely serves as a functional fiction, which is supposed to make a point about the problematic status of the semblance rather than speculating about an uncorrupted natural state. Self-identical discourse would be a discourse, which is not of a semblance – and the point of Lacan's seminar is to show that there is no such discourse, first and foremost not on the level of natural semblance (in contrast to what Plato argued in *Cratylus* or what Galileo claimed for geometry and mathematics).

Hence, before hearing in Lacan's considerations a dubious attempt in naturalising language, searching for some presumably lost "language of *physis*" or establishing a positive continuity between the natural semblance and the linguistic semblance, it is worth taking his thesis on the primitive accumulation of signifiers seriously. For the action of accumulation involves both continuity and break between the natural and the linguistic semblance. The continuity consists in the fact that both semblances are endowed with autonomy and problematise the assumption of some uncorrupted "natural being". But what is *not* to be found in nature, and what primitive accumulation produces, is the signifier that Lacan calls the "master-signifier", a signifier, which stands for the non-self-identity of the discourse. In other words, nature does not contain a signifier, which signifies the difference at work in the natural semblance. In the production of the master-signifier the problematic ontological status that already concerns natural semblance becomes its privileged materialisation – but it can only obtain it in the systematisation of the self-transcendence of the signifier in language, hence in the accumulation of semblances.[iii]

This is where the "second level of the term" semblance enters the picture: semblance as something that, due to the "ontological complication" it contains already in nature, virtually implies other semblances, a set of semblances, semblance as *assemblage*. We can recognise Lacan's couple "S_1–S_2" here, master-signifier and knowledge or the battery of signifiers (precisely *assemblage*), which formalise the two

levels of "semblance", however only under the regime of accumulation already intact, hence in language. To be clear again, Lacan's point with regard to the accumulation of semblances is not that the emergence of the master-signifier disrupted, corrupted or abolished some natural unity but mobilised the ontological deadlock on the level of *physis*, which was implied by the natural semblance, itself not yet embedded in an *assemblage*, not yet forming a distinct set or register of semblances; something, which was already an ontological feature of "natural being" but did not have any real consequences, because it did not form a non-self-identical discourse. The accumulation of signifiers produced a system of differences, hence Lacan's earlier "definition" of the signifier as "matter transcending itself in language". In this self-transcendence of matter the ambiguity of *semblant*, similarity and deception, obtained a systematic expression, while its problematic ontological status in nature underwent a transformation.

Perhaps this development from natural to linguistic semblance is sufficient reason for correcting Lacan's formula by replacing, or at least supplementing, the Kantian sounding "transcendence" with the Hegelian "sublation" (*Aufhebung*) in order to strengthen Lacan's point regarding the accumulation of semblances (insofar as this accumulation is constitutive for the emergence of the symbolic system of differences and endows semblance with absolute autonomy, which differs from the autonomy of natural semblance, its objective appearance in nature, even though it stands in direct continuity with it): the signifier is matter *sublating* itself into language. This means that what is articulated in a system is not simply natural semblance in its presumable self-identity but as ontological peculiarity in nature, which already points toward a deadlock in being. It is this ontological deadlock of *physis* that is abolished-elevated in a system, thus making of semblance a systematised deadlock or "ontological scandal". To paraphrase Heidegger, language is the house of the ontological deadlock of being (in a way Heidegger intuited this ontological deadlock, when he spoke of unveiling [*Entbergen*] and veiling [*Verbergen*] of being in language).

If in the natural semblance discourse is identical to itself this means (to refer to Lacan's remark from *Seminar XVI*) that it has no consequences. Only in *assemblage* the semblance becomes a cause.

When natural semblances begin to accumulate, and moreover, when this contingent accumulation reaches a critical point, a transformation of semblance takes place, and therefore a transformation of nature from an ontologically problematic space, in which discourse had no consequences, to an equally problematic space, in which discourse has consequences precisely because it stands in direct continuity with the "ontological incompleteness of nature" (Žižek) and instability of being. Henceforth, the ontological deadlock of nature assumes the form of language and begins to speak through the *body* of the speaking animal (*parlêtre*). However, what is spoken is not the language of sense (or the language of the sense of being, to put it with Heidegger) but the language of *joui-sens* (or the language of enjoyment of being, to put it with Lacan). The house of being is a factory of enjoyment.

On the background of this problematic, Alenka Zupančič 's *What Is Sex?* can be read as materialist treatise on the primitive accumulation of semblances and the ontological consequences of this accumulation. The sublation of matter in language produces a loss and a surplus. What *appears* to be lost is the feature of the signifier, which would sustain the self-identity of discourse; what is produced is an addition to the function of signifier, its causality, which endows the *assemblage* of semblances with the power of producing real consequences. The sublation of the ontological deadlock, signalled by the very presence of semblance in nature and its problematic mode of existence in relation to other natural beings, amounts to an ontological scandal, which obtains its expression in the absolute autonomy of the signifier. This autonomy overcomes or abolishes but also transforms and radicalises the autonomy of natural signifiers (hence sublation instead of transcendence). The semblance in nature is autonomous because it already is objective appearance. But it is objective as a *sign*, sometimes a deceiving sign (like in the case of mimicry), but nevertheless a sign. If this sign indeed contains the function of semblance, the latter remains "locked" in the sign and does not have any signification "for another semblance". Again, the semblance objectifies a deadlock on the level of natural being, which is expressed in the ambiguity of natural semblance, namely that it already is appearance and deception (*Schein*). If self-transcendence of matter is part of natural being then a problematic difference already stains being qua being. This

is the insight from which the ancient materialists and philosophers of nature departed from.

With the emergence of language the ontological deadlock that concerns natural being not only begins to articulate in a non-identical discourse but it also assumes a subjective form. As soon as semblance relates to another semblance it brings a subject of the unconscious, and hence a sexuated subject (insofar as sexuality is unconscious) into existence. This is how Zupančič frames the transformation in question:

> What distinguishes the human animal is that it knows (that it doesn't know). Yet at stake here is not simply that humans are aware, conscious of this lack of sexual knowledge in nature; rather, the right way of putting it would be to say that they are "unconscious of it" (which is not the same as saying that we are not conscious of it). The unconscious (in its very form) is the "positive" way in which the ontological negativity of a given reality registers in this reality itself, and it registers in a way which does not rely on the simple opposition between knowing and not knowing, between being or not being aware of something. And the reason is that what is at stake is precisely not "something" (some thing, some fact that we could be aware of or not) but a negativity that is itself perceptible only through its own negation. To be "unconscious of something" does not mean simply that one does not know it; rather, it implies a paradoxical redoublement, and is itself twofold or split: it involves not knowing that we know (... that we don't know). This is one of the best definitions of the unconscious [...]. As Lacan put it, unconscious knowledge is a knowledge that does not know itself (Zupančič 2017, 16).[iv]

This formulation can be extended to the primitive accumulation of semblances and its transformation of "self-identical discourse" into non-self-identical discourse, or transformation of the sign into the signifier. What binds humans and animals is lack of knowledge, but what distinguishes them is the form, in which this lack is articulated. Animals do not know that they do not know, whereas humans not only know that they do not know but must deal with the material consequences of this

knowledge, which differ from the consequences of the ontological deadlock, to which both humans and animals are "subjected". The problematic of enjoyment is intimately related with this primitive accumulation of signifiers and the emergence of the master-signifier (what Zupančič describes as "one signifier gone missing" [42]; I will get back to this crucial materialist point toward the end of this paper). If the discussion of enjoyment at a certain point of Lacan's teaching dramatically changed its character (enjoyment was no longer addressed from the viewpoint of prohibition but from the viewpoint of imposition) this is closely related with his insistence that there is something like a real of language that the philosophical tradition hitherto failed to acknowledge (or did so only insufficiently). For this reason Lacan's talk of the primitive accumulation of semblances should be taken seriously. The existence of language is a sign of an "ontological accident", which produced an unexpected "bonus", signifier of the loss of signifier (or signifier of the lack in the Other). What Zupančič describes as "one signifier gone missing" contains as its flipside the production of a signifier in excess, one signifier "too much", which differs from other signifiers insofar as it signifies the failure of the function of the signifier and the gap in the *assemblage* of semblances.

      With this vision of primitive accumulation of natural semblances and the self-transcendence of matter in language Lacan proposes the most radical alternative "fable" to the "pragmatic myth" shared by the various philosophies of language, according to which humans "invented" language in order to communicate their inner needs, describe external reality in an adequate manner etc. This pragmatic myth entirely suppresses the ontological scandal at stake in the emergence of language and its problematic mode of existence. The myth in question also ignores that, if language indeed communicates something, it ultimately communicates the dilemma that the speaking being experiences in face of (the ontological deadlock of) sexuality and the discursive production of enjoyment. For this reason Lacan's teaching progressively moved from the classical structuralist take on the autonomy of the symbolic order to the insistence that the symbolic is included in the real – whereby the ontological status of this real is as problematic as the ontological status of language. Lacan's move can

also be interpreted as a polemic reaction to the theories of performativity, which took exactly the opposite direction. If performativity stands for the paradigm of discursive action its accounts still miss the *real* discursive consequences, which cannot be brought down to the discursive production of reality in terms of manipulable fictions or innocent language games. Sexuality and the unconscious are two privileged Freudian names for such real consequences, which must not be confounded for performative effects. For the theories of performativity, too, discourse has no consequences in the real.ᵛ

What is equally at stake in primitive accumulation of semblances is the problem of *Urverdrängung,* primary repression, which makes repression appear as productive operation, constitutive for sexuality and unconscious, articulated around the lack of the signifier of sexuation and around the emergence of the signifier of this lack. Primary repression stands for the emergence of the *negative* force, which holds language together. Quoting Lacan, Zupančič reads this emergence as the "necessary fall of the first signifier" (11). This does not mean that the signifying order comes into existence by losing a signifier, which was first there and now has to be searched (in vein). Would this be the case then the *assemblage* of *all* semblances or signifiers would already have to precede the loss of the one signifier in question. Then the loss of one signifier would mean as much as the loss of some hypothetical natural language, the loss of an authentic language of being, which is now corrupted in the errant language of human animal. Rather, the "necessary fall of the first signifier" stands for the emergence of disclosed, non-all, incomplete and unstable structure, which is "with-without one signifier" (48) rather than simply without one signifier. Again, the primitive accumulation of semblances involves production of a signifier, whose signified is this "without one signifier". But precisely for this reason the "signifier of the lack of signifier" can be considered as a signifier "too much", a signifier in excess. Or differently put, a signifier, which brings to the point the constitutive *inadequacy* of the function of the signifier. Here the difference between the semblance in nature and the linguistic semblance, master-signifier, signifier without signified, becomes most apparent: whereas the semblance in nature still signifies "inwards", if I may say so, the linguistic signifier externalises this "introverted

inadequacy", which testifies of the problematic ontological status of natural semblances, and begins signifying for other signifiers. This externalisation creates the appearance that an actual signifier was lost or went missing and now has to be sought. Speech would then be something like an endless Odyssey, an errant quest for the lost signifier that was never there. If anything was lost at all it was this inward relation of the signifier to itself, the hypothetical self-identity of discourse in the natural semblance, which precisely *did not* constitute a discourse. Put differently, if mimicry can be taken as the paradigmatic example of natural semblance, with all the ontological complications it entails on the level of the imaginary, then language could be described as backfired mimicry, imitation of nothing rather than of something. With the accumulation of semblances the natural signifier transformed its signified: it no longer "signifies" its own paradoxical status in nature to itself (which means as much as saying that it ceases to not-signify) but the lack of the signifier, thereby bringing a disclosed field of signifiers into being. It functions as a magnet for all other semblances in nature and articulates them in a system. For the speaking being, in whose body this transformation of semblance occurs, now everything in nature obtains meaning. The signifier is now indeed encountered everywhere, not the natural but the linguistic signifier that the speaking being has great trouble distinguishing from the natural semblance.[vi] All natural things seem to point toward a missing signifier, or differently, the emergence of language rests on a loss of something, which was never there but which nevertheless has real consequences, a *productive* loss, whose first real consequence is precisely language or discourse as constitutively non-self-identical and efficient.

In relation to the production of the lack of one signifier all other signifiers *appear* as redundant, superfluous and as surplus. Hence, primary repression, insofar as it stands for the production of an efficient appearance of a substantial signifier gone missing, sustains the constitutive incompleteness of the symbolic order. Again, the loss of the signifier does not mean that this signifier was ever there, and if Lacan toward the end of his teaching spoke of the necessity to invent a "new signifier" (Lacan 1979, 23) this does not mean that he suddenly began believing in the existence of the signifier that supposedly went missing

and thus fell for his own trick. Even in this framework the loss remains for Lacan a productive act, which on the one hand triggers the articulation of signifiers in a system, transcendence of matter in language (sublation of the deadlock of natural semblance into linguistic semblance), and on the other hand functions as a driving force of Lacan's theoretical endeavour – insisting on the ontological scandal of language. The articulation of signifiers is driven by the materiality of the lack produced in the process of transformation of natural semblances, which do not form a system, into signifiers, which form a system under the condition that they are moved by a void. This is where the question of matter in a dialectical-materialist sense of the term – not as sensuous matter but as materiality of the cut that assumes real status – becomes most apparent: materiality of the lack, hole, void stands at the core of materialism since the beginning of philosophy. I shall return to this issue further below.

Language and Ontology

Zupančič 's *What Is Sex?* engages in a polemic directed against those who deny every ontological significance (and thereby any relevance whatsoever) to psychoanalysis as well as those who place sexuality and the unconscious on the level of discursive performativity. Arguably the most influential figure among the latter was Foucault, whose contribution to the theories of gender remains indisputable. While Foucault rejected ontology and focused on the epistemic production of sexuality, Zupančič 's *What Is Sex?* insists that psychoanalysis not only operates with a knot of epistemological, political and ontological, but it inevitably introduces a political ontology, which gravitates around something *in* being, which is not of the order of being as it was understood traditionally by philosophy. Foucault's opposition between discursive production and symbolic repression is hence false, since it overlooks the consequences of discursive action, which reach "beyond" the symbolic, while being conditioned by the existence of discourse. This is the reason, why *What Is Sex?* is a treatise on dialectical materialism as well as on materialist ontology, which in the following I would like to differentiate from two other types, metaphorical ontology and metonymic ontology.

By making this distinction I would like to pick upon Heidegger's claim that the question of being is inseparable from language, and that the oblivion of the "originary question of being" involves the oblivion of the exceptional ontological status of language itself. Lacan addresses the blind spot of philosophy in quite similar manner when he writes, *qu'on dise reste oublié derrière ce qui se dit dans ce qui s'entend* (Lacan 2001, 449), the fact that one speaks (enunciates) remains forgotten behind what is said (enunciated) in what is heard. Bluntly put, philosophy forgets that it speaks, and more precisely, it forgets that speaking is an action with ontologically problematic consequences. Again, this does not imply the same as theories of performance, in which Heidegger's linking of language and being could be easily translated. In other words, Lacan does not say that philosophers have hitherto been blind for the performative production of language and mistook performative effects for ontological realities.[vii] Theories of performativity would state that language "brings being into being", i.e., that speech is always accompanied by the being-effect and that therefore all being is symbolic. To repeat, Lacan's point is not simply that being stands for *the* performative effect of language that the ontological tradition mistook for the "ground of all things". For Heidegger being already exposed the ontological scandal of language, one could even say the real of language (which is where Lacan would disagree). Heidegger's point is that as soon as we "remember" the original co-belonging of being and language, being turns out to "be" something more or rather something different than "being qua being" in the traditional sense. Being is not the highest of beings – and this is the confusion that grounds the metaphorical ontologies, where being is translated into the metaphor of the highest of beings. Lacan, critical as it was toward ontology, made a step further by pointing out why Heidegger was not radical enough: being contains an internal complication that psychoanalysis addresses most notably through the recognition that "there is jouissance of being" (Lacan 1999, 70), there is *Lust,* this privileged Freudian name for a discursive product, which is most intimately related to being but not homogenous with it. More generally, Lacan's concept of the real addresses the ontological deadlock, from which "being qua being" is not exempted but stands in the midst of it:

Lacan holds the Real to be the bone in the throat of every ontology: in order to speak of "being qua being," one has to amputate something in being that is not being. That is to say, the Real is that which traditional ontology had to cut off in order to be able to speak of "being qua being." We arrive at being qua being only by subtracting, eradicating something from it. Being qua being is not some elementary given, but is already a result which presupposes another, previous step. And this step consists not in eradicating or suppressing some contradictive positivity, but in eradicating a specific, real negativity (contradiction as such). What gets lost here is the something in being that is less than being – and this something is precisely that which, while included in being, prevents it from being fully constituted as being (Zupančič 2017, 44).

Heidegger may have intuited this "bone in the throat" when he spoke of the oblivion of the originary question of being. The entire history of metaphysics that Heidegger strived to deconstruct in order to demonstrate its repetitive error[viii] consists of a series of attempts to think being in its pure, uncorrupted state. The entire history of ontology involves a *fetishisation* of being, which turns it into the highest of beings by rejecting from being that which is "less than being" – in other words, by distinguishing being from language as the privilege mode of its unveiling and veiling. In order to constitute itself, philosophy must forget that it speaks – it must repress the consequences of enunciation and focus only on "what is said in what is heard". This is the reason why I think the traditional philosophical take in ontological matters could be described as metaphorical ontology – insofar as the "highest of beings" functions as metaphor for "being qua being" and thus privileges something that Heidegger (who was anything but immune against the logic of metaphor) called the "sense of being" (sense being precisely "what is said in what is heard"). Traditional ontology, insofar as it is discursively anchored in the metaphor of the highest of beings, must forget the ontological scandal of language that is nevertheless brought to the point in the very signifier "being". In contrast, metonymical ontology,

which historically predominated with Heidegger's turn from his early fundamental ontology to his mature philosophy of being as well as with philosophies of the linguistic turn, whether analytical or continental, and with the theory of performativity, recognises in being the privileged discursive effect, and thus seems to grasp the ontological scandal of language by drawing an absolute equation between being and language. But these metonymic ontologies, too, overlook the ontological scandal of language, since they remove the real from the overall picture. In short, metonymisation of being is not the same as real discursive consequences that Zupančič discusses in *What Is Sex?*

It should be clear that metaphorical and metonymic ontologies do not forget some uncorrupted state of being qua being but rather the fact that being, whether considered in the realist or discursive framework, originary contains "corruption". Being is never truly being, or to repeat Zupančič 's phrasing, being contains "less than being", which "prevents it from being fully constituted as being" (44). The originary corruption of being is what Heidegger intimately associated with the unveiling and revealing of being in and through language. The "authentic" formulation of the question of being thus concerns first and foremost its constitutive inauthenticity, its imposing and subtracting in language, which means that being is never truly "presence of the present" but always-already involves dynamic, instability and negativity. To put it with an allusion to Freud, *Sein* is *Fort-und-Da-Sein*. However, such phrasing still remains in accordance with metonymic ontology.

Lacan's distancing from metonymic ontologies not only involves the introduction of the concept of the real, which enables to think rigorously "that which in being is less than being", but also and above all to unmask the philosophical discourse on "being qua being" as a specific mystification and repression of enjoyment. The flipside of the question of being is the problem of enjoyment, and one could add that what philosophy overlooks, represses or forgets is that being stands for enjoyment of philosophy. Lacan articulates his critique of philosophy as the master's discourse around the insight that "being qua being" is corrupted with the "real qua enjoyment". Being is the object *a* of philosophy, embedded in an exploitative discursive regime, in which being stands both for the highest of beings, the ontological master (S_1)

and enjoyment of being or surplus-being (*a*) that is added to the ontological master. In difference to this ontological master and the produced surplus-being the rest of beings (S_2) appears in the guise of lack-of-being ($\$$).

Lacan's first critical move thus concerns the reformulation of the question of being through the psychoanalytic problematic of enjoyment. From here the second move follows. If it makes sense to talk about something like the philosophical oblivion of enjoyment (insofar as psychoanalysis reveals, in contrast to philosophy, that "there is jouissance of being"[ix]) this does not imply a pure and uncorrupted origin, an originary scene, in which thinking and being would be harmoniously the same, but rather a state of constitutive corruptness, impurity and antagonism. Again, for psychoanalysis Heidegger's house of being is always-already a factory of enjoyment and the unveiling and revealing of being intertwines with the production of enjoyment and reproduction of the lack of enjoyment. This is where Heidegger's renewal of the philosophy of being and his return to Pre-Socratics fell short. In addition, Heidegger failed to recognise that in the presumably authentic Pre-Socratic origin of philosophy there is already an immanent split, tension between metaphorical ontology (Parmenides), metonymic ontology (Heraclitus) and materialist ontology (Democritus).

From what was said it should not come as surprise that Zupančič 's *What Is Sex?* turns around a triple problematic: sexuality, ontology and language, even though the main focus seems to be on the link between sexuality and ontology. This triangularisation is brought to the point in the mobilisation of Lacan illuminating remark, according to which philosophy was hitherto preoccupied with a real, in which discourse has no consequences (hence with being qua being), and what needs to be thought (what is only worth thinking) is a real, in which discourse has consequences – a real, which includes the (real of the) symbolic. This is also where materialist ontology distinguishes itself from the metaphorical and metonymic ontologies. The following passage from *What Is Sex?* most sharply determines the specifically materialist take on the ontological scandal of language:

While the signifying order creates its own space and the beings

that populate it (which roughly corresponds to the space of performativity [...]), something else gets added to it. It could be said that this something is parasitic on performative productivity; it is not produced by the signifying gesture, but together with and "on top of " it. It is inseparable from this gesture, but, unlike what we call discursive entities/beings, not created by it.

It is neither a symbolic entity nor one constituted by the symbolic; rather, it is collateral for the symbolic. Moreover, it is not a being: it is discernible only as a (disruptive) effect within the symbolic field, its disturbance, its bias. In other words, the emergence of the signifier is not reducible to, or exhausted by, the symbolic. The signifier does not only produce a new, symbolic reality (including its own materiality, causality, and laws); it also "produces" the dimension that Lacan calls the Real, which is related to the points of structural impossibility/contradiction of symbolic reality itself. This is what irredeemably stains the symbolic, stains its supposed purity, and accounts for the fact that the symbolic game of pure differentiality is always a game with loaded dice. This is the very space, or dimension, that sustains the "vital" phenomena mentioned above (the libido or jouissance, the drive, the sexualized body) in their out-of-jointness with the symbolic.

So: the something produced by the signifier, in addition to what it produces as its field, magnetizes this field in a certain way. It is responsible for the fact that the symbolic field, or the field of the Other, is never neutral (or structured by pure differentiality), but conflictual, asymmetrical, "not-all," ridden with a fundamental antagonism (40-41)

Even though metonymic ontologies overcome the confusion of being with the highest of beings, they fail to think this "magnetisation" of the symbolic, its points of structural impossibility, and consequently, they fail to think the real of structure or structure as real. Metonymy (qua metonymy of being) is one of the fundamental laws and dynamics in the symbolic order. But what interests Lacan, and what makes of language the privileged entry point in a materialist ontology, is the persistence of

the contradiction in symbolic reality. It is this contradiction that sabotages every attempt to reduce discursive consequences to linguistic performativity and prevents language to constitute a complete and distinct register of human experience, which would either separate thinking from the real (what postmodernism claimed) or relate to the real in adequate manner (what analytical philosophy claims). Lacan expresses the inclusion of the symbolic in the real in the following manner: "Structure is to be taken in the sense that it is most real, the real itself. (…) In general, this is determined by convergence toward an impossibility. It is through this that it is real" (Lacan 2006, 30). For classical structuralism – and in this respect it remains a metonymic ontology – structure is synonymous with the symbolic; there is no real of the symbolic, which would undermine structure from within, just like for metonymic ontologies there is no real of performativity, or differently, linguistic performativity is not a real discursive consequence: if discourse has consequences, the latter are ultimately conceived as performative play, language games, metonymy of being etc. Lacan clearly does not pursue this line of thought; as he remarks elsewhere with regard to the scientific discourse, "it makes the right holes at the right place" (Lacan 2007, 28; see also Zupančič, 81). This does not mean that natural sciences are a meta-discourse. On the contrary, the scientific discursivity successfully mobilises something that characterises every discourse, including natural language, its "convergence toward an impossibility". For this reason, Lacan insisted that there is direct epistemological continuity between physics and psychoanalysis. The unconscious and sexuality are two cases, where Freud registered the action of discourse, which consists in making the right holes at the right place, or in other words, the points, where discourse encounters its own real.

If the history of philosophy was predominated by metaphorical ontology and the 20th century by the emergence of metonymic ontology then the recent ontological turn in philosophy seems again to engage everyone in a competition in proposing their own version of materialist ontology. Still, the various new materialisms, object-oriented ontologies, ontologies of active matter, vibrant matter, plasticity, neo-vitalisms etc. perpetuate an important weakness of metonymic ontologies, their hostility against the notion of the subject, which quickly evolves in the

hostility against the unconscious and sexuality and amounts to the hostility against (the real of) language. No surprise, then, that these "materialist" ontologies have rather poor things to say about everything that they are hostile against, or better, their hostility against discourse is a sign of the poverty of their materialism. Language is the "royal road" to negativity, so it should not surprise if contemporary attempts in materialism occasionally amount to a fetishisation, which is as problematic as the one at work in metaphorical ontologies, the fetishisation of self-affection of matter, which implicitly turns the latter into an "automatic subject" (see Nachtigall 2018). Since the dialectical-materialist take in ontological questions preserves the notion of the subject, it remains an outcast. In contrast, what Zupančič calls "object-disoriented ontology" is precisely an ontology, which reaffirms the necessity of the concept of the subject for truly materialist ontological inquiries. Only a materialist theory of the subject can prevent ontology from spiritualising matter (something that Slavoj Žižek already criticised extensively in various new materialisms). In this respect Zupančič's confrontation with the speculative realism indeed brings a crucial moment of her book, despite the fact that the philosophical current meanwhile lost in its significance and turned out to be precisely what many suspected it to be, an instant ontology fabricated for the capitalist "market of knowledge" (Lacan 2006, 39).[x]

Lacan's Materialismusstreit

Zupančič's discussion of Lacan's materialism illuminates Lacan's rather problematic notion of antiphilosophy, in which too many philosophers heard an insult and too many psychoanalysts a cynicism that they willingly reproduce. As Zupančič shows, Lacan's criticism of philosophical discourse contains a decision for dialectical materialism against other materialist orientations in ontology. In retrospective this position makes the entire history of ontology appear in different light, for Lacan famously associated his entire teaching with the foundational tension, which exposes the impurity and the conflictuality of the philosophical origins, a tension expressed in the contrast between Heraclitus and Parmenides:

> The fact that thought moves in the direction of a science only by being attributed to thinking – in other words, the fact that being is presumed to think – is what founds the philosophical tradition starting from Parmenides. Parmenides was wrong and Heraclitus was right. That is clinched by the fact that, in fragment 93, Heraclitus enunciates *oute legei oute kryptei alla semainei,* "he neither avows nor hides, he signifies" – putting back in its place the discourse of the winning side itself – *ho anaks ou to manteion esti to hen Delphos*, "the prince" – in other words, the winner – "who prophecizes in Delphi" (Lacan 1999, 114)

One Parmenidian error concerns his understanding of the "sameness of thinking and being": if thinking and being are indeed the same then only because they both contain the same *non-identity*. This non-identity is linked with the function of the signifier that the Heraclitian fragment in Lacan's quote puts forward: the signifier as the paradigm of non-identity. The Oracle of Delphi is said to produce signifiers, which operate on two levels, the level of meaning and the level of non-sense. *Seminar XX,* from which the above quote is taken, contains three crucial claims about the function of the signifier, which serve as base for Lacan's critique of ontology and which repeatedly show why the elaboration of a materialist ontology must encompass a materialist philosophy of language.

The *first feature of the signifier* concerns its imperative character: "Every dimension of being is produced in the wake of the master's discourse – the discourse of he who, proffering the signifier, expects therefrom one of its link effects that must not be neglected, which is related to the fact that the signifier commands. The signifier is, first and foremost, imperative." (Lacan 1999, 32) Nowhere else is the imperative character better expressed as in the signifier "being", this philosophical master-signifier, which brings to the point the discursive production of surplus-being. Lacan takes as the crown example of this excess in the imperative function of the signifier Aristotle's distinction between *to ti esti*, what is, and *to ti en einai*, what has to be: "It seems that the pedicle is conserved here that allows us to situate from whence this discourse on being is produced – it's quite simply being at someone's heel, being at someone's beck and call – what would have been if you had understood

what I ordered you to do" (Lacan 1999, 31; see also Zupančič, 3). If it indeed makes sense to speak of a constitutive oblivion or repression in philosophy then these operations concern the excess of the signifier, and most particularly of the signifier "being" (that Lacan writes *m'être*, my being, in homophony with *maître*, master, thereby exposing the exploitative regime and the master's appropriation of surplus-being in and through the discourse of ontology). The signifier "being" is the privileged marker of this oblivion and the persistence of the excess of the signifier behind the philosopher's back.

The *second feature of the signifier* concerns its stupidity: "The signifier is stupid. It seems to me that this could lead to a smile, a stupid smile, naturally. A stupid smile, as everyone knows – it suffices to visit cathedrals – is an angel's smile. Indeed, that is the only justification for Pascal's warning. If an angel has such a stupid smile, that is because it is up to its ears in the supreme signifier" (Lacan 1999, 20). The mention of the angel's smile as the ultimate metaphor of the signifier's stupidity cannot but evoke Bernini's statue of St. Theresa that Lacan comments in the same seminar. The saint's mimic testifies of enjoyment caused in the body by the stupid signifier, a signifier that misses its reference, inadequate signifier, for which, again, the signifier "being" ultimately stands for. Being – the signifier of the stupidity of the signifier? Lacan addresses the constitutive inadequacy of the signifier in the following manner:

> Signified effects [*effets de signifié*] seem to have nothing to do with what causes them. That means that the references or things the signifier serves to approach remain approximate – macroscopic, for example. What is important is not that this is imaginary – after all, if the signifier allowed us to point to the image we need to be happy, that would be very good, but it's not the case. At the level of the signifier/signified distinction, what characterizes the relationship between the signified and what serves as the indispensable third party, namely the referent, is precisely that the signified misses the referent. The joiner doesn't work (Lacan 1999, 20; transl. modified).

As soon as this disfunctioning is recognised another Parmenidian axiom begins to crumble, the distinction of being and non-being: "It is precisely because he was a poet that Parmenides says what he has to say to us in the least stupid of manners. Otherwise, the idea that being is and that nonbeing is not, I don't know what that means to you, but personally I find that stupid. And you mustn't believe that it amuses me to say so" (Lacan 1999, 22). If Parmenides' distinction is stupid it is because it is closely linked with the effort to stabilise being, to repress, as Zupančič writes, an "*inbuilt negativity* – negativity transmitted with the 'positive' order of being" (104). Only by opposing being to non-being can Parmenides conceive "being qua being" as a fully constituted, immovable and self-identical One, and thus provide the first metaphorical ontology on the background of the "prohibition of negativity". This brings us back to the foundational ontological quarrel between Parmenides and Heraclitus, between absence of movement, or what Lacan calls *l'êtrernel*, eternal being, and movement, or what is considered the main invention of Heraclitus, becoming, instability of being.[xi]

Finally, the *third feature of the signifier* evolves around the key problem of psychoanalysis, enjoyment, and concerns the definition of the signifier as its cause:

> The signifier is the cause of jouissance. Without the signifier, how could we even approach that part of the body? Without the signifier, how could we center that something that is the material cause of jouissance? However fuzzy or confused it may be, it is a part of the body that is signified in this contribution. Now I will go right to the final cause, final in every sense of the term because it is the terminus – the signifier is what brings jouissance to a halt. After those who embrace – if you'll allow me – alas! And after those who are weary, hold on there! The other pole of the signifier, its stopping action, is as much there at the origin as the commandment's direct addressing can be (Lacan 1999, 24).

The signifier produces with the same blow a disappointment ("alas!") and an excess ("hold on there!"), too little and too much, lack-of-enjoyment

and surplus-enjoyment. This is what the formula of the master's discourse, which not only covers ontology but summarises the logic of the signifier as such, brings to the point: on the upper level there is the chain of signifiers abbreviated in the couple S_1–S_2 and on the lower level the two products of the signifier in the living body: underneath the master-signifier the barred subject, subjectivation of the lack, and underneath the battery of the signifiers the object of enjoyment, the objectification of surplus. The same scheme between lack and surplus can be linked to the ontological question of being, and this is where the Parmenidian delimitation of being and non-being is rejected. Contrary to the simple opposition imposed by the "stupid" remark "what is, is, and what is not, is not" Lacan insists that the master's discourse is marked by an internally doubled production of lack-of-being and surplus-being.[xii]

Looking back at the conflictual couple "Heraclitus-Parmenides" one could argue that the foundation has been laid for the opposition of metaphorical ontology and metonymical ontology, but also for a materialist ontological orientation, which strives to overcome the two by taking the function of the signifier seriously. Metaphorical ontology postulates the One as enclosed totality. It can only do so by anchoring the symbolic in the imaginary. This is one of the main reasons for Lacan's scepticism toward the logic of metaphor: it presents the real as endowed with sense. In contrast, metonymic ontology postulates the One as virtually endless field of differences, the negative One conceived as disclosed multiplicity. This postulate is anchored in the autonomy of the symbolic. Lacan departed from the logic of metonymy but considered it insufficient. It tackles the issue of ontological incompleteness but does not reach beyond the register of the symbolic. Materialist ontology finally recognises the One in the grey zone between being and non-being. This is what Lacan's saying *yad'lun* (there is something of One) aims at. Neither: "The One exists" (the claim of metaphorical ontology) nor: "The One does not exist" (the claim of metonymic ontology, which correlates with: "Multiplicity exists"), but there is an effect of Oneness, whose ontological constitution is incomplete.[xiii] This incompleteness does not imply that the One lacks something. The incompleteness is constitutive in the sense that it comes with a void in the midst of One. If I may again mobilise Heidegger here, lack operates on the *ontic* level, which is why it

always comes in pair with the appearance of lack of something, whereas void (or hole, *trou*) operates on the *ontological* level, which is why its conceptualisation radicalises something that is already at stake on the level of the lack, its objective status. It should not come as a surprise that Lacan found the ultimate materialisation of the hole and *yad'lun* in the Borromean knot.

With *yad'lun* Lacan could be said to affirm both features of Heraclitus' materialism, becoming ("In the same river we enter and do not enter, we are and we are not") and the signifier ("Have you not understood me but the word [*logos*] then it is wise and in accordance to logos [*homologein*] to say that everything is one"). Heraclitus introduced the notion of dynamic One, which overcomes the simple opposition of Structure and History. "Everything flows" (*panta rei*) and "Everything is one" (*hen panta*) describe two different and yet inseparable aspects of the same ontological reality, the One in the sense of *yad'lun*, whereby the first claim (*panta rei*) describes the diachronic and the second (*hen panta*) the synchronic aspect of the One. The One is marked by a parallax, which means, to put it somewhat paradoxically, that the One is whole only insofar as it is incomplete. This is the materialist outlook of Heraclitus' ontology, in contrast to Parmenides' static notion of the One and the metaphorical ontology it grounds. Lacan recognised in the notion of structure a paradigmatic example of such Becoming-One, split between mathematically formalizable relations and continuous historical dynamic, *langage* and *lalangue,* in which every ultimate differentiation of being and non-being becomes impossible. Structure stands for the becoming of *logos*, a logical and rational becoming. This is also why the topology of the One in Parmenides, the sphere, does not apply to Heraclitus. The flow of being, the ontological flux or becoming abolishes the spherical model. Its topological consistency would instead be that of Möbius strip, Klein bottle, cross-cap or the Borromean knot (Lacan's "favourite" topological objects, whose materialist character he repeatedly accentuated).

When speaking of materialism one irresistibly thinks of sensuousness, as if the mission of materialism would be to exorcise abstractions. Quite the contrary, materialism stands for a specific way of dealing with abstractions. From this perspective the conflict between

empiricism and dialectical materialism appears as conflict between (false) materialism without abstraction and (true) materialism with abstraction (examining the materiality of abstractions). This is also what Lacan's inclusion of the signifier among material causes and his talk about real discursive consequences suggests. Matter must be conceived as *gespenstige Gegenständigkeit*, spectral objectivity, to put it again with Marx. Empiricism still builds on a fantasmatic ground, where materiality coincides with immediacy, while for dialectical materialism matter functions as category of mediation, abstraction. Or, this history reaches back to the Greek inauguration of materialist orientation in ontology. True materialism has less to do with the assumption that all beings are grounded in sensuous matter; instead consequent materialism always concerns the determination of an inner torsion of matter, conflictuality of matter.

It would be false to assume that the Greek materialists were not preoccupied with abstract matter, even when they speak of sensuous phenomena like water, fire, atoms etc. Lacan, for whom the questions raised by ancient materialism were indeed crucial, repeatedly commented the Pre-Socratics, whereby one notices that all his commentaries are traversed by one particular thought, namely that materialism contains radical dissolution of the world of appearances, and brings about a homologous achievement to Platonism. Simultaneously, materialism performs an inversion of Platonism, since the abstraction that supposedly grounds the world of appearances is not considered static. Materialism thus aims at a real dynamic and negativity in being. This double orientation – ontological foundation and instability of being – does not only stand in contrast with Plato but even more so with Aristotle. Both philosophical rivals agree that the main task of the science of being qua being consisted in describing (or saving) the phenomena (*sozein ta phainomena*). In contrast to Plato's realism of (mathematical and ideal) abstractions, Aristotle's empiricism and logicism strives for a double normalisation: of the inner world (language and thought) and the outer world (nature and the real). The ancient materialists in this history do not play along, for they aim at the abstract materiality of negativity in being, which would later in the history of materialist ontology translate into the materiality of the void (Lucretius).

Lacan occasionally remarked that "to be a philosopher of nature never passed not even for a moment as certificate of materialism and also not of scientificity" (Lacan 2006, 33; see also Zupančič, 78). Pre-Socratics such as Thales, Heraclitus, Democritus or Empedocles are normally described as philosophers of nature, because they take a natural substance as foundation of all beings and thus turn away from mythology. They seem to be materialists because they equate the being of beings with a sensuous elementary reality. They are not yet on the abstract level of Parmenides, who was the first one to conceive Being as abstraction and postulated its immovable character. This traditional reading misses a crucial point. The Pre-Socratic philosophers of nature make of the dynamic in being their main preoccupation. The flux of being is at the core of their materialist ontologies (water flows, fire burns, atoms fall, the conflict between *philia* and *neikos* introduces in nature dialectical movement etc.). The Pre-Socratic materialists therefore have a much more sophisticated concept of being that it may seem. On the one hand, being is hardly distinguishable from sensuousness, and on the other hand, its materiality contains something speculative, which Parmenides repressed when he founded philosophy on the imperative of delimiting being from non-being, as well as on the identity of thinking and being. By recognising the dynamic of being the Pre-Socratic philosophers of nature anchored their ontology in the grey zone, where being is mixed with non-being, not yet being and no longer non-being. Their ontology thus consists less in asserting the sensuous character of being than in the dynamics of matter, or in the conception of materiality beyond the dichotomy of being and non-being.

For Lacan, the difference between pre-modern and modern physics consists in the fact that the latter makes something with discourse: "Nature is there. What distinguishes it from physics, however, is that it is worth saying something about physics, namely that there discourse has consequences, whereas, as everyone knows, no discourse has any consequence in nature, and that is why one loves it so much" (Lacan 2006, 33; Zupančič, 78). The most problematic aspect of metaphorical ontology is its love of nature, which makes nature appear as harmoniously ordered whole, unproblematic reality, which is supposed to be simply there and which can be linguistically more or less

adequately described in human language. Aristotle, the paradigmatic example of metaphorical ontology, made of wonder (*thaumazein*) the origin of philosophy and considered the love of knowledge its driving force. Or, in Pre-Socratic philosophers of nature there seems to be no love, and because these materialists do not love nature, they can grasp in it something, which cannot be transformed into a love object. Materialism defetishises nature, again in contrast to Aristotle, who grounds his ontology and physics on an epistemic and political fetishism: the fetishisation of the (ontological) master, the immovable mover, whose ontic embodiment Aristotle believed to have found in the aristocrat (politics) and the philosopher (knowledge).

In sharp contrast to the Aristotelian scenario, the materialist orientation in ontology implies a double thesis. First, the materiality of matter is paradoxical: too corporeal to be a separate immaterial substance and too nonsensical (in both meanings of "sense") to overlap with empirical materiality or the phenomenal world. As Lacan remarked, "a body hasn't seemed materialistic enough since Democritus" (Lacan 1999, 71). In order to react to the problematic character of matter, one must introduce the atom. But what is an atom? In his common-sense empiricism, Aristotle falsely interpreted it as an elementary particle, the indivisible element of matter, *stoicheion*. But the materialistic orientation of ancient atomism lies elsewhere, namely in the conception of the atom as "element of flying signifierness" (ibid). The important thing about the atom is not its unity and immobility, but its difference and movement. In other words, the atom is not a metaphorical being or metaphor of being (the highest being, in which being would come to its fullness), but a metonymic being or metonymy of being (*Fort-und-Da-Sein*). With this ontological turn, philosophy is based on a conflict, which is more fundamental than "Plato against Aristotle": Parmenides against Heraclitus, or on a conceptual level, the question of being against the problem of becoming.

Secondly, a consistent materialist orientation must reflect the real of discourse and thus overcome the "Aristotelian" orientation (love) in ontological, epistemological and political matters. Here the second ontological thesis becomes palpable: the abstraction is conflictual and therefore dynamic. The dynamics of abstractions only becomes

thinkable when "natural being is defetishised and a dialectical-materialist perspective on abstraction is introduced in ontology.[xiv]

From Lack to Hole

In her work Zupančič draws attention to a crucial psychoanalytic contribution to the materialist ontology and spells out its implications for the contemporary renewal of materialist thought beyond the predominance of metonymic ontologies. This contribution involves the role of constitutive negativity and non-relation in being. The ontological status of the real in Lacanian sense (as well as of the unconscious and sexuality in the Freudian sense) is most problematic, and one should refrain from conflating it with a positive ontological reality or even recognise in it a new, specifically psychoanalytic name of being qua being. This is the trap that many contemporary psychoanalysts expose themselves, when they talk about the "real unconscious" in difference to the "transference unconscious" (one can mention notably Jacques-Alain Miller and Colette Soler). In contrast to such essentialist reading of the real (as well as of sexuality and the unconscious, insofar as they assume the status of real discursive consequences), Zupančič makes a case for a dialectical-materialist stance, which conceives the real as that in being (whether this being is natural or social), which malfunctions and moreover which is not of the order of being as it continues to be understood by the various philosophical ontologies. Materialist ontology would thus point toward a peculiar materiality of non-relation, which, however, needs to be situated correctly:

> The formulation "concrete constitutive negativity" requires further explanation. In general theoretical terms, we should say of this configuration: it is not that there is one fundamental non-relation and a multiplicity of different relations, determined by the former in a negative way. It is, rather, that every relationship also posits the concrete point of the impossible that determines it. It determines what will be determining it. In this sense we could say that all social relations are concretizations of the non-relation as universal determination of the discursive, which does not exist anywhere

outside these concrete (non-)relations. This also means that the non-relation is not the ultimate (ontological) foundation of the discursive, but its surface—it exists and manifests itself only through it. To put it differently: it is not that there is (and remains) a fundamental non-relation which will never be (re)solved by any concrete relation. Rather: every concrete relation de facto resolves the non-relation, but it can resolve it only by positing ("inventing"), together with itself, its own negativity, its own negative condition/impossibility. The non-relation is not something that "insists" and "remains," but something that is repeated—something that "does not stop not being written" (to use Lacan's expression). It is not something that resists all writing, and that no writing can actually write—it is inherent to writing, and repeats itself with it (146, note).

The point is thus not that there are relations and underneath there is Non-Relation; rather non-relation is what traverses relationality from within. Paraphrasing Zupančič one could also say that every relation comes with "without relation". It includes non-relation, which, due to this inclusion, cannot serve as the name of being qua being, but instead enunciates that being is neither One nor Multiple but non-all. No surprise, then, that Lacan associates the non-all both with the register of the symbolic (the field of language) and with the register of the real, while the marker "all" relates to the imaginary closure of being into One.

Here it also becomes clear that the triad of metaphorical, metonymic and materialist ontology overlaps with the Lacanian triad of Imaginary, Symbolic and Real. The link between the closure, stabilisation and eternalisation of being (again, for what Lacan forged the neologism *l'êtrernel*), the logic of metaphor and the register of Imaginary would thus be specific for metaphorical ontologies, which work with the condensation of being in the highest of beings, the metaphysical figure of One. The link between disclosure, metonymisation and temporalisation of being, between the logic of metonymy and the register of Symbolic is characteristic for metonymic ontologies, which work with the displacement of being in the system of differences. Finally there is a complication in the link between materialist ontology and the real, since

Lacan defines the real with three negative features: foreclosure of sense (non-sense), absence of law (instability) and incompleteness (non-all). Because the real dissolves every appearance of substantiality, consistency and closure it stands for a non-register rather than for a register. Hence, the real for Lacan appears in the form of a knot, where it is redoubled on the third ring of the Borromean link (or relation) and the real of the knot (which is precisely non-relation). The Borromean knot is both: non-relational relation and relational non-relation, continuity or, better, inseparability of relation and non-relation. The knot, Lacan final topological exemplification of what is at stake in his materialist ontology, brings the paradoxical status of the real to the point: it cannot be pinned down neither to one of the rings in the knot (which is, to be sure, a pseudo-knot, since the three rings do not intersect, but are entirely independent and interchangeable) nor to the knot as a whole (since the knot as a whole is precisely not a figure of the Whole but a figure of *yad'lun*).[xv]

In the psychoanalytic contribution to the materialist ontology the lack plays a crucial role, insofar as it is that which sustains the consistency of language, even in the most banal expression that it is the absence, the lack of a signifier that drives the dynamic of language and the movement of speech. This is how Zupan**čič** reinterprets the peculiar "centrality" of the lack in Lacan's ontology:

> This emphasis allows us to say not only that the signifying order is inconsistent and incomplete, but, in a stronger and more paradoxical phrasing, that the signifying order emerges as already lacking one signifier, that it appears with the lack of a signifier "built into it," so to speak (a signifier which, if it existed, would be the "binary signifier"). In this precise sense the signifying order could be said to begin, not with One (nor with multiplicity), but with a "minus one" (…) We could also say: The emergence of the signifying order directly coincides with the non-emergence of one signifier, and this fact (this original minus one) leaves its trace in a particular feature/disturbance of the signifying system – enjoyment. So it is not so much that the signifier "produces" this surplus as that this surplus is the way in which the lack of the

(binary) signifier exists within the discursive structure and marks it in certain determinable ways. It marks (and thus effectively "curves") it by sticking to a certain set (or chain) of other signifiers that relate in some way to this lack of the signifier. The way enjoyment relates to (or is linked to) the signifying order passes through what is missing in this order; it does not relate to it directly, but via its constitutive negativity (a minus one). This negativity is the Real of the junction between the (missing) signifier and enjoyment; and the conceptual name for this configuration in psychoanalysis is sexuality (or the sexual). Sexuality is coextensive with the effect of the signifying gap, at the place of which surplus-enjoyment emerges, on the rest of the signifying chain (including bodily erogenous zones which are certainly not independent of the signifying grid) (Zupančič 2017, 42).

This sharp materialist description of the ontological status of the lack should be contrasted to two other ways of dealing with the problematic, so that the three ways can again be associated to the triad of metaphorical, metonymic and materialist ontology. Metaphorical ontology would consist in minimisation, if not overall neutralisation or exclusion of the ontological efficiency of the lack. The highest being, the being of beings then appears as the ultimate point of the fullness of being, the metaphor of closed and fully constituted, immovable One, condensation of being. This does not come as surprise, since lack and void have always been associated with movement, even recognised as its cause. On the level of being qua being there cannot be any movement, since this would already signal ontological instability, an inmixing of non-being into being.

If metaphorical ontology postulates being without negativity or being without lack, then metonymic ontology inverts the perspective and recognises in lack an essential feature of reality, which drives its movement, even recognises in lack a negative figure of being qua being. Reality is pure multiplicity, hence a system of differences, structured nothingness. Lack is here conceived as the privileged dynamic, something that shifts, say, along the chain of signifiers. It seems that Lacan occasionally comes suspiciously close to this position. But the

crucial difference is that metonymic ontology conceives lack only in relation to the symbolic, and to its positive correlate, the missing object. In other words, lack is here precisely lack of something (lack of object), and not yet lack of nothing (or lack of the signifier).

This is where the ontological and topological difference between lack and void (or hole) becomes crucial – and is indeed something that delimits metonymic ontology from materialist ontology. If lack can still be related to some positive "something" and could thus potentially be filled, even if merely by fiction or fantasy, then the radical character of Lacan's remark that the Other contains a hole is not yet fully grasped. Lack still implies an empty place, which can be occupied by an object, which veils, or mystifies, as Marx would put it, the radical implication of the lack, namely the void, which stands for the abolition of the logic of places altogether. The shift from lack to hole that Lacan initiates in the late 1960's and accomplishes by the time he introduces the Borromean knot (in *Seminar XIX*, which is at the core of Zupančič's argumentation), is a shift from the symbolic to the real of the symbolic. Lack is not yet the real of the symbolic, but a fictionalisation of the hole in the Other. Consequently, the move from lack to hole (or void) involves a shift in the conception of the autonomy of the symbolic: from structural performativity (discursive materialism) to structural impossibility (dialectical materialism).

The "with without" logic is fully recognised in its real (and not merely in its symbolic performative) consequences when it becomes clear that, for Lacan, things do not stop at lack – which implies an insufficient topology, that of the chain – but introduces the ontologically more fundamental and radical problematic of the hole, which necessitates the reference to topological objects such as the Möbius strip, Klein bottle, and finally the Borromean knot. While metonymic ontologies present the void in the mystified form of lack, which sustains its fetishisation in terms of lack of an object, Lacan's materialist ontology mobilises an entire topological apparatus in order to demonstrate what is at stake in the difference between lack and void, and expose the non-relation between the symbolic and the real (including the real of the symbolic, which means that Lacan's structuralism ultimately engages with the non-relation of the symbolic with its own real). Zupančič's point

concerning the logic of "with-without" aims less at the postulation of place, which could be filled by an object, even if such filling ultimately fails (since the lack is displaced), but rather at the void as the privileged entry point in the unstable consistency and inexistence of the Other. This is also why Lacan in his later phase no longer described the "signifier of the barred Other" as a signifier of lack (that would be the return to metonymy) but as a signifier of hole and of ex-sistence (the ontological category aiming at the grey zone between existence and inexistence in traditional sense) of the Other. The structure and the topological consistency of the Other (Lacan eventually equated topology with structure; see Lacan 2001, 483) is sustained by the hole (like in the case of Klein bottle that Lacan occasionally uses for modelling the real of structure). The fact that the Other lacks a signifier thus fundamentally concerns the ontological problematic of the void, since the issue for Lacan is not in finding the missing signifier (lack is not preceded by a signifier that went lost) but in thinking the ontological implications of the emergence of language, the fact that at some point semblances in nature accumulated, i.e., articulated around a hole, which is nothing other than the hole of primary repression:

> [T]he human (hi)story begins not with the emergence of the signifier, but with one signifier "gone missing." We could indeed say that nature is already full of signifiers (and at the same time indifferent to them); and that at some point one signifier "falls out," goes missing. And it is only from this that the "logic of the signifier" in the strict sense of the term is born (signifiers start to "run," and to relate to each other, across this gap). In this sense, and from this perspective, speech itself is already a response to the missing signifier, which is not (there). Speech is not simply "composed of signifiers," signifiers are not the (sufficient) condition of speech, the condition of speech as we know it is "one-signifier-less." Humans are beings roused from indifference and forced to speak (as well as to enjoy, since enjoyment appears at the place of this deficit) by one signifier gone missing. This temporal way of putting it ("gone missing") is an expression of what would be better formulated as the signifying structure emerging not simply without

one signifier, but rather with-without one signifier— since this "hole" has consequences, and determines what gets structured around it (47).

Perhaps one could also say that what lacks the symbolic is the signifier of the ontological scandal of the symbolic order, a signifier, which, if it existed, would establish an uncorrupted relation between natural semblances and linguistic semblances or, what is more likely, abolish language. The loss, which is constitutive for the emergence of language or for the "transcendence of matter into language", is an act of production of a signifier, which functions only insofar as it dysfunctions or the functioning of which *is* disfunctioning. The One of the symbolic does not exist, and this inexistence, or ex-sistence, makes of language the paradigmatic example of incomplete ontological constitution, which, however, enables thinking to encounter a real that is not the real of language: to life sciences it enables to encounter and to mobilise the incomplete ontological constitution of the phenomena of life and to natural sciences like physics it enables to encounter and to mobilise the incomplete ontological constitution of material reality. According to Zupančič the task of dialectical materialism consists in thinking these encounters: "The true materialism, which [...] can only be a dialectical materialism, is not grounded in the primacy of matter nor in matter as first principle, but in the notion of conflict or contradiction, of split, and of the 'parallax of the Real' produced in it. In other words, the fundamental axiom of materialism is not 'matter is all' or 'matter is primary,' but relates rather to the primacy of a cut" (77). This primacy of the cut explains why dialectical-materialist thinking is never merely thinking but already involves action, praxis. Indeed, discourse has consequences, and nothing proves this discursive feature better than psychoanalysis.

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[i] See Heidegger 1976, 313. For a philosophical account of Lacan's relation to Heidegger, see Balmes 2002.

[ii] It is worth recalling that Lacan extensively discussed mimicry in his *Seminar XI*, which is no less relevant for the issue of primitive accumulation of semblances. See Lacan 1998, 73-74, 98-100.

[iii] Elsewhere Lacan speaks of *essaim* (swarm, homophony with S₁), which concerns both the question of primitive accumulation of semblances and Zupančič's discussion of Lacan's ontological statement *yad'l'un:* "What does *There is something of One* mean? From *one-among-others*, and the point is to know whether it is any at all, arises an S₁, a signifying *swarm* [essaim *signifiant*], a buzzing swarm. If I raise the question, *Is it of them-two that I am speaking?*, I will write this S₁ of each signifier, first on the basis of its relation to S₂. And you can add as many of them as you like. This is the swarm I am talking about: $S_1(S_1(S_1(S_1 \rightarrow S_2)))$" (Lacan 1999, 143, transl. modified).

[iv] All subsequent references to Zupančič's *What Is Sex?* will be indicated only with pagination in brackets.

[v] For Lacan, structure contains a "convergence towards an impossibility" (Lacan 2006, 30) and is ultimately unthinkable without instability. One could equally say that language becomes most real in the points of its breakdown or malfunctioning. No surprise, then, that Roman Jakobson (1969, 15) insisted that the science of language should study language from its extreme points, its generation or becoming in child language and its corruption or dissolution in aphasic disorders. The status of linguistic malfunctions, structural instabilities, deadlocks and contradictions differs from the performative effects of language that have been popular at the peak of various linguistic turns in philosophy. In its examination of the real of language psychoanalysis indeed made an original contribution to ontological debates, which has been only partially highlighted until Zupančič's intervention.

[vi] For the simple reason that the signifier behaves in relation to natural semblances just like "the Animal" in Marx's description of what the emergence of the general equivalent implies for the products of human labour. See Žižek 2012, 410, and my own account in Tomšič 2015, 179-180.

[vii] This is also one of the points of Lacan's delimitation from nominalism that Zupan**čič** (43) brings into the game.

[viii] Again the confusion between being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiendes*), the misconception of being in terms of the highest of beings: One, God, Idea, Matter, Substance, etc.

[ix] With all the ambiguity of the term: that production of being is stained by enjoyment, which is not quite being, or that being is what is enjoyed, consumed, as object of enjoyment, by the master's discourse, and that the entire "creation" works, i.e., produces surplus-being for the ontological master. The discourse of ontology is always-already a social mode of production.

[x] Contemporary "materialist" ontologies touch upon metaphorical ontologies in their assumption that they must exclude the subject and normalise language in order to reach the uncorrupted and absolute order of being, in other words in order to make the world of objects consistent with itself. But what is a subject? Precisely an object, which assumes a double status among objects – it is part of the "order of things", but it is part of this order only under the condition that it is brought into its problematic existence by the signifier. The subject thus assumes a symptomatic status in the world of objects. It is an ontological symptom, so to speak, a symptom that the order of being is contaminated by negativity.

[x] Becoming is less a noun than a verb, action rather than state, and it is here that the limit of the stupidity of the signifier can be detected: "One could even say that the verb is defined as a signifier that is not as stupid – you have to write that as one word – *notasstupid* as the others, no doubt, providing as it does the movement of a subject to his own division in jouissance, and it is all the less stupid when the verb determines this division as disjunction, and it becomes a sign" (Lacan 1999, 25). It becomes a sign, i.e., a symptom, in which the removed negativity in being returns in the guise of an "ontological slip", a slip inscribed in "being qua being".

[xii] Could one not see in this redoubling a reformulation of the "ontological difference": the ontic order of beings is always marked by a certain lack-of-being, a diminished intensity of being, whereas the order of being (here understood as the highest of beings) is marked not simply by the fullness of being but – in relation to the ontic order of beings that it grounds – rather by an excess of being, "too much" being.

[xiii] For the discussion of *yad'lun,* see Zupančič 2017, 125-126.

[xiv] The situation complicates in modernity, because capitalism introduces a new dialectic of fetishism, which extends from the commodity world to the financial world. If a disenchantment of the "closed world" took place in modernity, a spectralisation of the "infinite universe" also occurred. There is an explosion of fetishisation in modernity, which makes of every being a fetish, an embodiment of value and a potential source of surplus value. In this respect there was no disenchantment of the world. The planet is devastated because of intensified fetishisation of value, this specifically capitalist "love for nature", which can love only under the condition that it mutilates (exploits, commodifies) the object of love.

[xv] Lacan eventually abandoned the term "antiphilosophy" and instead spoke of his Borromean knot as the foundation of a "new", materialist philosophy: "It's not terribly easy to support wisdom otherwise than through writing, the writing of the Node Bo, such that all in all, please excuse my infatuation, what I've been trying to do with my Node Bo is nothing less than the first ever philosophy that, to my eye, stands up" (Lacan 2016, 125).

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