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The way social classes exist is closely related to representation. In this paper, I look at the representation of class difference from a psychoanalytic perspective, using the concepts of symbolic, imaginary and real register introduced by Jacques Lacan. These concepts make it possible to distinguish between different dimensions of representation (above all, the symbolic and imaginary dimensions), and also raise the question of the aporetic nature of any representation (thanks to the notion of the real register). The symbolic dimension is related to group formation (inclusion and exclusion) and points to the normative character of class identifications. Related to the imaginary dimension are the embodied images of self and others, driven by the dynamics of envy and resentment. The real dimension, on the other hand, is introduced by metaphors of lost objects and traumatic interclass violence. I use a variety of visual materials and literary texts from different historical moments of capitalist social formation to illustrate the analyses of the three registers. In the concluding section of the text, I describe the interconnectedness of the three registers using the example of an excerpt from the biographical narrative of a worker. In the conclusion, I address the contemporary opacity of class relations, but I do not interpret it as an indicator of the "death of classes," but as a historical moment of the disarticulation of class difference.

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Class Distinction: Symbolic, Imaginary and Real

The existence of social class is inextricably tied to representation. That much is already clear in Karl Marx's foundational formulations, which distinguished between "class as against capital" and "class for itself."[1] The former is set apart by its economic conditions, and exists as a collective of individuals recognizing their similarity within a common situation. In the course of political struggle, this collective eventually becomes conscious of its political interests, and then – reconstituted as "a class for itself" – finally "sees itself" as a class within a certain historical and political process. The transition between the two is prompted by the emergence of class consciousness – and this is always a sort of self-awareness, which incorporates the self-representation of one's situation. Representation is a component of self-awareness, reflected in the process of "recognizing oneself in the image." Therefore, class consciousness growing into consciousness "for itself" reflects a certain representation, whether in the form of a clear image or a symbolic "nomination" of being a member of the class. It can emerge spontaneously, in opposition to the hostile image, but can also be shaped, for example, by political discourses which will either amplify class articulation or impede it.

Due to the close ties between representation and political struggle, both the question "Is class real?" and its answer point to a specific position within the space of historical struggle around social reproduction, and therefore are never neutral. That is why leftist representations frame people as classes (like the workers and farmers from socialist propaganda posters), while the right draws on other principles, usually the "native/foreign" binary.[2] The stake here is the very representation of class, and thus the constitution not so much of its existence (because class, in the sense of class "against

capital," to borrow from the passage above, does not disappear when it is not mentioned), but its historical role (as Marxian class "for itself"). The existence of class is a historical reality discovered through a variety of theoretical frameworks (one example being Machiavelli arguing that in every state there is a conflict between the "powerful" and the "people").[3] From that perspective, the "non-existence of class" is both a fantasy (about a cohesive body politic) and a (right-wing) political position, rather than a verifiable thesis. What matters, however, is the manner in which class exists. At certain points in history, class was neither a symbolically designated reality available to users of language, nor one connected to strong, typified visual representations. Therefore, asserting that class is not a linguistic or visual construct, but rather a social reality, does not imply that its definition and "depiction" (within a certain figure) does not change anything – in a sense, it actually changes everything.[4]

In this essay, I examine the representation of class distinction using concepts taken from psychoanalysis – more precisely, the distinction of the symbolic (S), imaginary (I), and real (R) registers introduced by Jacques Lacan. These frameworks enable us to identify different dimensions or registers of representation – especially their symbolic and imaginary forms – but also permit the interrogation of the aporia of any representation (in the case of the real register). As such, they broaden our understanding of class identification, the complexity of class representation, and the variety of registers and modes of representing class distinction. Furthermore, psychoanalytic phraseology may sensitize us to certain aspects of social reality that cannot be observed under "textbook" research methods. This essay of course only outlines certain possibilities, but to avoid making the argument unreasonably arbitrary, I settled on the following structure: over the next three parts of the text, I will methodically examine the manner in which class distinction manifests itself in all (three) registers. While the registers are

separate, they appear in connection to one another, and are usually divorced only for analytical reasons.[5] For clarity, however, I will present them as separate, only signaling their indisputable connection and interdependence (expressed in Lacan's later teachings by the knot theory).[6] Illustrating the connections between the three registers will "wrap up" the questions of relationality, class, and the S–I–R registers.

When writing about the bourgeoisie, petite bourgeoisie, middle class, workers, and peasants, I rely on traditional terminology rather than adopt the concept of "popular class" that some Polish scholars have borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu – I prefer Marxian terms. Rooted in its lifestyle, the ethos of the petite bourgeoisie differs considerably from that of the middle class (just as the entrepreneur ethos differs from the ethos of what we would call, in Marxian terms, the "dependent middle class" – clerks or scholars), while the working-class ethos is different still from that of the peasantry – which is why I still consider Marx's categories accurate, and believe their premature dismissal to be part of the contemporary problem with articulating class distinction. More recent concepts, currently in fashion, are not always adequate for the reality they seek to describe, as illustrated by the many hasty diagnoses anticipating the fundamental reshaping of the class system or the fate of many trendy but problematic concepts that quickly lost their significance.[7]

This essay situates itself in the long history of class analyses performed from a psychoanalytic perspective, which must be stressed in order to highlight the specificity of the presented approach. Wilhelm Reich examined "ideological stratification"[8] from a perspective that could be described as the search for class sexual ethos, and argued that the sexual repression of the petite bourgeoisie primed it for embracing political reaction. A similar view was formulated by Theodor Adorno and his research team in *The Authoritarian Personality*: in the pseudo-

conservatism espoused by parts of the middle classes whose ambitions are frustrated, Adorno sees a failed and superficial attempt to identify with authoritarian norms. He argues that this inner conflict predisposes members of the middle class to violence.[9] These classic interpretations, however, either draw on explicitly Freudian topologies or on Freud's interpretations of libidinal fixations and disorders, which in no way align with the theoretical premise of this essay.

The perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis shifts emphasis toward signifying structures and mechanisms of representation – which will be particularly important to me in this text. Jacques Lacan, however, does not apply the S–I–R framework to class relations; he uses it to analyze either the topology of the subject (from early interpretations which saw the subject as the product of the signifying chain, to later analyses of the subject's structure using Borromean knot categories) or the foundations of social relations. Like Freud (in his seminal treatise *Civilization and Its Discontents*), Lacan situates the subjective regime directly in the foundations of the social order; the subject–culture relationship is key and supersedes all other historical and class interpretations. Against such a backdrop, Lacan's seminar on the "other side of psychoanalysis" (1969/1970) seems to be unique, but still does not interpret class relations as much as propose its own concept of social dialectics, rooted in Hegel's notion of the struggle for recognition. Class struggle, Lacan claims, plays out "on the level of identification,"[10] but does not penetrate to the "level of the true dialectic of the master's discourse" (the mechanism of power) – only psychoanalysis does that.[11] My intention is different (and psychoanalytically "unorthodox"): it involves the use of the Marxian class structure framework (in its "historical" version)[12] and the application of the three registers concept to it.

Much of my thinking on class is informed by the structuralist concepts of Louis Althusser and his attempts to link Marxist theory with psychoanalysis – outlined, among other places,

in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.* Rather than systematically draw on Lacan's theories, Althusser instead uses psychoanalytical inspirations, and his analyses of the origin of the subject concentrate on the mechanism of identification with the One – a model subject for which religion is the matrix. Althusser, therefore, seeks to identify the constitution of every subject, only secondarily assigned to a class, and not for different dimensions of the representation of class difference.
Slavoj Žižek also draws on class issues, combining a (post-)Marxist conceptual framework with psychoanalysis. To the extent that I am familiar with his work, Žižek does not systematically address class relationships from the perspective of the three registers theory. However, if we were to use his analyses, we could assign certain classes to each of the three registers: the logic of symbolic power is best explained by mechanisms of feudal power; the model of subjectivity typical of the modern middle class (exemplified by the "fear of harassment") by the domination of the imaginary; and revolutionary potential by the placement of the modern "proletariat" (made up of the various categories of the "part of no part" and the expropriated) in the "desert of the real," in dire straits, beyond the reach of ideological fantasies.[13] In Žižek's view, any interrogation of class necessarily unfolds within the context of changes in power relations, diagnoses of the current state of culture, or political projects. Like Žižek, I shift Lacanian concepts beyond their original contexts, but do so for different ends – I seek to situate my analysis within the tradition of the social sciences.

The status of the relationship between class distinction and its representation also requires a brief comment. In the text, the question of representation is often closely linked with the very existence of classes conceived as discrete social realities. Representations devised within the bourgeois public sphere cannot, of course, be uncritically accepted as a source of

knowledge about the lives of the working class – they are rather a source of knowledge about how the bourgeois sees and depicts workers. The realm of class stereotypes and fantasies is in no way a reflection of reality. However, drawing on Lacanian theory, we must accept a much more complex relationship between "appearance" and "essence" – one where the former "is no longer the opposite, or a sign"[14] of the latter: the theory points to representation at the heart of every account of reality, and truth emerging through representation. As language is also representation, we are left unable to formulate in it a discourse of "pure reality," unmediated and free of the "bias" produced by representation. Class distinction, meanwhile, manifests itself in representations themselves – either as the object of description, the position of the subject (taken up with respect to the social Other) presumed within a given statement or image, or a trace of the social conflict that has managed to penetrate into the depicted world in a metaphorical manner. Rejecting the discourse of naive faith in the semblance depicted in representation, we bind ourselves to the t r u t h o f r e p r e s e n t a t i o n . Lacanian theory allows us to emphasize some aspects of representation and tie them directly to the Marxian dilemma of the relationship between class "against capital" and class "for itself." For Lacan, all forms of the constitution of reality ultimately presume the existence of representation – not as a "construct," but as a perpetually incomplete matrix.

Because of the historical moment in which it is written, this essay attempts to draw up a deeper understanding of interclass relations. This is a particularly pressing subject now, as social inequality continues to reach record levels following decades of rampant deregulation (with Poland ahead of the curve in terms of inequality dynamics),[15] accompanied by the d i s a r t i c u l a t i o n of class identities and interests. Class language is used solely in academic debates and the rare milieus

in which the classic dictionary of the left still functions. Organizations traditionally representing class interests (such as labor unions) have been neutered, while most left-wing parties have stopped building their platforms around class issues. Presently, demands based on class interests (such as protecting the local working class from the forces of globalization, rebuilding local infrastructure, and restoring the state to the position of arbiter between stronger and weaker classes) are put forward, albeit in a haphazard and uncoordinated manner, primarily by politicians affiliated with the anti-establishment right. In this extremely opaque political situation, an understanding of the class-related phantasms that persist despite the absence of a language capable of politicizing class (the formulation of which was a historic achievement of the left; in itself, this language is "historical," and its survival remains an open question) becomes particularly important. Historical examples of representation in which class distinction is expressed clearly and usually with political intent are invoked here not to explains those former realities, but to assist in outlining the theoretical tools that still have to be tailored to the present moment, itself much more difficult to interpret. I cite these examples without the requisite comprehensive historical grounding, presuming that they all pertain to the broad context of a single social formation – spanning different moments in history and a variety of geographically distinct settings of the social division of labor. In this sense, the pre-modern examples are framed as "preceding capitalism" and in relation to it, while representations from the countries of real socialism address the problems of capitalism and its particular social hierarchies.

The symbolic

The symbolic is the realm of discourse created by the signifier. In Lacan's theory, it provides a space for establishing relationships in the most fundamental sense of the word: the

signifier refers to another signifier, and in doing so resembles, as Lacan quoted Mallarmé, "worn coins that are passed from hand to hand in silence."[16] It is not the content (the image that has already "worn off") that is important, but the function of the signifier conceived as a "token" that either grants or precludes admission to a group. In this sense, discourse is the "materiality of the social bond."[17] The symbolic acts as a matrix introducing an incongruity into the realm of practices and interpersonal interactions. As such, it operates in a "virtual" manner: the discourse in question is not "about something," but in relation to something: an Other as the "locus of the signifier,"[18] the virtual guarantor of the meaning behind the speech. It is the fantasy about the Other's desire that decides the position of the subject – our faith in the world or lack thereof, our fundamental assumptions about winning or losing the myriad social games played out in relation to the Other understood in this way. Words are not so much used for communication as for the purpose of securing the recognition of another person (and the Other as an instance of the symbol).[19]

The signifier of "social class" is of course a component of this matrix. Incorporating the concept of "class" into language was a historically necessary first step toward the emergence of class consciousness as a symbolic consciousness. The task required the crystallization of experiences from a certain political perspective,[20] while the spread of a new language of class interest often required it to be "domesticated" by using the vocabularies of other languages, such as religious vernacular, for example.[21] In class conflicts, the stakes include the very possibility of articulating the interests of a given class. The question of visibility or invisibility is directly related to this: the invisible classes cannot have political interests; at most, they can "haunt" the realm of politics like specters – as they did in the post-1989 transformation years, when the middle class was the only one to exist as a subject of politics, while the rest (the working

class, the peasants) were treated as mere "survivors," relegated to a ghostly or abject existence.[22] To use an example from more distant history, when the first "Solidarity" unveiled its platform, the "registration of free labor unions" did not find itself at the top of the list of workers' demands by accident; here, "registration" had not only a legal, but also a symbolic sense, as it literally implied "registering" the political representation of worker interests different to the official one espoused by the Polish United Workers' Party. The demand spelled calamity for the regime, which was supposed to serve not only as the sole champion of working-class interests, but even more so as their historical expression and fulfillment.

An example of radical class domination in the symbolic register is provided by the diagnosis of Franz Neumann: the fate of the workers in the National Socialist state was sealed not by prohibition on labor organizing, but by subsuming workers into a single labor organization, part of the National Socialist apparatus.[23] Where the former was a simple repressive measure (reminiscent of the anti-union proscriptions of early capitalism),[24] the latter meant eliminating any space that enabled or assisted labor organizing – as the workforce was already incorporated by default into the "body" of the working nation. The distinction is informed by political ontology: labor organizing was not negated (forbidden) so much as excluded as a possibility, somewhat akin to Freud's distinction between "negating something" and actually excluding it from existential judgment – between *Verneinung* [repression] and *Verwerfung* [repudiation]. Hence, by the way, refusing to see the difference between the right- and left-wing revindication of working-class interests is the deadliest of all political sins: while the conservative-liberal repression of class struggle can be dealt with by way of underground resistance, fascist corporatism eliminates the symbolic existence of class by directly incorporating it into its political project of atomizing and subordinating labor.

Class distinction's logic of action in the symbolic register is best encapsulated in a brief scene from Luis Buñuel's 1972 film *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, in which two couples await dinner hosts who are running late; to kill time, one of the men improvises a lecture on dry martinis. Addressing the other man, a diplomat, he says he certainly knows that "a dry martini must be sipped like champagne," and proposes they conduct "an interesting experiment." The man calls their chauffeur, then hands him a cocktail glass and orders him to make a toast. After the chauffeur toasts their health, to which the instigator "democratically" replies "And yours, Maurice," he downs the cocktail in a single gulp and is dismissed. After his departure, the man triumphantly declares: "That was precisely the way not to drink a dry martini."[25] The scene is striking in its banality, as the audience can easily deduce where the "experiment" is headed.

"An interesting experiment" – *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972).

The essence of the scene is neither its classist edge, nor the irony of the hypocritical, "progressive" inclusion of the chauffeur by inverting his toast – but the predictability with which the ritual interaction unfolds. Its power and inevitability are both marks of the symbolic – the action of a stable matrix that directs even the most "spontaneous" behavior. By downing the cocktail improperly, the chauffeur "fulfilled his duty" – affirming the validity of the social imperative.

The matrix of positions relies on its taxonomy. In the scene cited above, it is implied by the instigator's phrase "precisely the way not to drink"; the chauffeur is not summoned in order to show his ignorance – he is not merely oblivious to or dismissive of the rules (the observance of which is a *de rigueur* element of bourgeois *savoir-vivre*),[26] but stands as the exact reverse or negation of what is socially legitimate and proper.

"Very good, Maurice" – *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972).

Hence, his "rejection" is not simple, but determined by the matrix of principles. In this sense, the symbolic norm acts as a matrix: by providing systematic patterns in which every "yes" has its "no," each contingent upon the other, rather than by establishing patterns that exist in isolation, as in a simple taxonomy. The symbolic matrix of class distinction should therefore not be imagined merely as a collection of different compartments that allow the categorization of individual behaviors.

A good example of these dependencies, revealing the complex and precise (not abstract) nature of these rules, is provided by Norbert Elias and his discussion of the historical norms of permissible bodily expression. Contrary to popular notions of the coarseness of commoners, the upper classes did not seek to frame their "modesty" as the opposite of the debauchery of the subordinate classes. Exposing oneself or being seen performing natural bodily functions by inferiors in the social hierarchy was not seen as offensive (on the contrary, it was often perceived as a sign of fondness and goodwill),[27] but the same rule did not work the other way around.

In the modern age, much of the strictly hierarchical nature of the rules of polite social conduct is being supplanted. According to Elias, the advancement of the bourgeois classes prompts that change, as it remakes the family into the primary venue for shaping behaviors and instilling feelings of shame, but also masks the social and hierarchical origins of shame – paving the way for contemporary repression, which sees norms of politeness as driven by "hygiene."[28] In Elias's view, this is emblematic of the democratic nature of industrial society, but it would be a mistake to consider social distinction a thing of the past – in a subtler

form, recast as norms of taste, it continues to function as a matrix for segregation, whose arbitrariness can be discerned only by the trained eye (further confirmed by Elias's remarks on the social origins of language norms,[29] and, in a broader sense, by the sociological critique of repression underpinned by aesthetic tastes and meritocracy, as developed by Pierre Bourdieu).[30]

This is related to another observation: the brief scene from Buñuel's film can be used to critique the naive empiricism that sometimes afflicts thinking about class – a corollary to the way that the symbolic register specifically works. The naive-empirical position can be reconstructed as follows: "social classes" exist merely as sweeping taxonomical terms, "imposed" onto social reality in order to group individuals with roughly similar characteristics. The justification of this position is serious, because the very academic nature of the terms we use is at stake: to uncritically personify class is to display naivety (by showing oneself unable to sense the difference between a concept and an empirical reality), or, worse, to refashion concepts into "metaphysical" entities, characters in a historiosophical drama.[31] Declaring the concept of class as secondary to empirical observation, and searching for a set of attributes that would allow the objective allocation of individuals into certain classes, too often ends in failure followed by the statement that "class" is a useless concept.

The abovementioned scene clearly shows the weakness of such an empirical approach: the bourgeois man behind the "experiment" does not actually want to learn anything about his chauffeur. What he intends is rather the sort of presentation that a chemistry teacher might hold in class: he wants to s h o w something to his audience, rather than v e r i f y something. A certain reaction is expected: the chauffeur displays his "being a chauffeur" by drinking in a certain manner – class distinction thus becomes an imperative that can be confirmed only

empirically, in practice, rather than the other way around; specific behaviors do not determine class affiliation. Due to its imperative nature (a matrix in which every "yes" has its own corresponding "no"), the symbolic precisely indicates the insufficiency of the empirical approach: there is an incongruity between the system of symbolic positions, the set of social imperatives, and the individual empirical attributes, which ultimately recasts the matrix of class positions into something other than a straightforward product of empirical differences between groups.

It is easy to imagine a dialogue about "having class," with someone inquisitive asking what makes a person "classy." Such a conversation could easily turn into an act of spontaneous reduction, with every question about a specific, empirical quality being answered by "no, it's not that," until the moment when the interlocutor, with nowhere left to turn, finally admits that it is about the undefinable *x* of social distinction. "Having class" cannot be objectivized or ascribed to a given attribute, and this "social metaphysics" is the measure of the rift between empirical differences and the system of distinction – and, which more or less turns out the same, between empirical characteristics and the actions of the signifier (in this instance signifying "having class"), which literally "produces emptiness" (always "*x*, but not that"),[32] introducing a discrepancy between the subject's empirical attributes and its symbolic dignity. This is directly related to a particular attribute of the signifier indicated by Lacan in his *Encore* seminar: the signifier is "stupid"[33] and carries no meaning. This is related to its influence: the signifier is effective precisely because it is "stupid," and, through its stupidity, implies an automatism evoking the operation of a magic spell in a fairy tale. "Having class," therefore, means nothing.

In a stable symbolic system, individual classes may allow themselves to tone down mutual hostility and contempt, even

going so far as to extend courtesies toward each other, emptily gesturing to someone who is different, whose position does not threaten them. The situation, however, grows starkly different when the lines between classes are blurred or openly questioned.

As long as class is actually noticed, class struggles (even if they turn bloody) will contain a minimum of mutual recognition – as the concept actually enables the perception of the other as a separate entity within a certain system of distinction, even if it does not automatically confer upon that entity the status of a partner in social exchange, which is reserved instead for members of one's own group. Furthermore, from such a perspective, eruptions of class resentment could be read as symptomatic of some sort of meaningful redistribution that violated existing class boundaries and revealed new tensions.[34] Recognition is noticed and, in a sense, "validated" (through an outburst of aversion) by the class other, while resentment can be considered a manifestation and measure of the shifts taking place on the symbolic level.

It is not overt class hostility that is the "worst possible outcome" of symbolic dialectics, but the complete social annihilation of the other in language – making it absent. Here, we encounter the aforementioned distinction between *Verneinung* that Freud outlined in *Negation*,[35] and the term *Verwerfung*, which Lacan later used to formulate his theory of psychosis. In his essay, Freud states that negation, by necessity, admits the very possibility that the negated does exist, and should be distinguished from foreclosure,[36] which implies total removal from the symbolic. Removing a term from the symbolic triggers its "invasion" of the real. This is not the "return of the suppressed," because, as Freud argued, the suppressed element returns in its negated form, and is thus present, although negated.[37] The foreclosed, meanwhile, cannot appear within the symbolic in any form, but may penetrate into other registers – in the real, for example, it appears as hallucination.[38] Precluding

existence is thus worse than its negation; deliberate disregard is worse than struggle, as it leads to "dissociation," the divergence of languages, the hallucination of distinct social worlds that can no longer be shared with the other even in the weak sense of holding the other responsible for the corruption of our world. This does not mean, of course, that symbolic violence in interclass relations ought to be viewed with nostalgia – the ability to discriminate between repression and foreclosure seems to me a prerequisite for understanding contemporary difficulties with the political articulation of class distinction.

Banished from language, the class other returns to haunt it as a specter – a terrifying threat. Slavoj Žižek described this mechanism in his commentary on the spread of rumors about mass violence in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina: most of the alarming reports were proven to have no factual basis. The narrative of mass violence was subordinated to the logic of faith in a construct that Žižek called "the subject supposed to loot and rape,"[39] with the New Orleans poor cast as the source of the threat. As Žižek notes, the key element driving this mechanism is not whether the accounts are true or false, but the satisfaction produced by reporting them. A similar satisfaction can be found in media reports about the "undeserving poor" ruining their social housing and communal property, and spoiling public spaces; and about the homeless framing their exile to the margins of society as a "lifestyle choice," etc. Reports like these legitimize class distinction – removed from language – and serve to assuage a sense of ethical responsibility for the fates of others. Key here is the difference between acknowledging the class other as an actual other – even if stereotyped or damaging – and the emergence of "unidentified others," cleaved from any recognizable distinction matrix. The class other may be perceived as a "nuisance," but an other whose otherness becomes hard to grasp quickly arouses fear and revulsion. Distinction, meanwhile, is depoliticized and relegated to

the realm of moral and aesthetic judgments. In the early 1990s, the Polish public sphere was rife with deliberately stoked fears of working-class power, framed as a threat to the process of market reforms. At the time, the fear of that class had clear political stakes, as it was widely known that much of the burden of the coming market reforms would be borne by blue-collar and farm workers.[40] Not long afterward, the "victims of the transformation"[41] would be portrayed using a rather slanderous register.[42] Labor unions were simultaneously demonized (as "tire burners")[43] and ridiculed, but both of these strategies of symbolic violence drew on means much different than those so readily levied against the marginalized and welfare recipients. In the Polish political landscape of recent years, this methodical refusal to identify class distinction is tapped primarily by the right wing in order to create a collage blending the symbolic affirmation of "low-culture tastes" and fear-driven representations of the many non-conservative lifestyles. Their liberal opponents, meanwhile, exploit it as an alibi for endless political moralizing, including the all-too-predictable allegation of "selling out democracy for welfare benefits" directed against the "inferior" masses.

The expulsion of class language from public debate ultimately decides the manner in which class distinction appears in the symbolic order. It turns out that the realm of culture, by definition a sphere of m e d i a t i o n , seems to preclude mediation in this case. It is as a result of the "culturalization of politics"[44] that class struggles nowadays rage until the point of total annihilation. This is, of course, the product of a more complex historical process. Following the neoliberal and neoconservative reconquest of the 1980s, the 1990s and their euphemizing of social conflict in the language of diversity, and the 2000s, which added the language of security to the configuration, contemporary societies live in the ruins of the public sphere in the modern sense of the term. This perhaps explains the lively

reception, unfolding alongside these processes, of Carl Schmitt and his concept of "existential distinction," defining the impassable line between "friend" and "enemy"; the distinction appears at its most clear in conflicts over values that do not involve any sort of middle ground, as abandoning one's position in such a conflict usually implies a threat to some form of existence.[45]

The issue of the banishing of class distinction from language and the consequences of this state of affairs is directly related to the third attribute of the symbolic: it is always a "second-order representation" – the signifier refers to another signifier, and can represent something only in relation to other elements. This duality and this "second order" were described by Lacan in many different ways, including using the concept of the Other in the sense of "the place of the signifier" as cited above: language is always used in relation to the Other, which is why "a letter always arrives at its destination."[46] The symbolic register is indicated by a minimum mediation resembling a theatrical situation – when we speak to another person and presume the presence of an observing audience. The scene from Buñuel discussed above features a number of these elements, including the character of the "experiment" as a presentation performed for someone's gaze; the performative character of the toast, stressing the exaggerated civility and artifice of convention; and the dialectics in which the chauffeur's uncertain gaze is "reflected" by the encouraging, smiling glances of the experiment's instigator, who trusts in the effect achieved by his presentation. The cruelty of the scene is literally performative: it presumes that the distinction will reveal itself in a theatrical manner. When named, class distinction "emerges" as a historical object and is incorporated into a certain framework of social and political life. Recognized symbolically, it can also be regulated by symbols. Removed from the symbolic register, class distinction

does not disappear, but takes on a different dynamic in the imaginary register (as an image of otherness triggering hateful affect) and in the real one (as the trauma of violence and a lack that is impossible to render symbolically).

The imaginary

Imaginary representation involves the creation of figures which enable orientation in space, a sense of cohesion of one's "self," a sense of power over oneself, and agency at the level of establishing relationships between the "self" and other "objects." The secondary representation of perceptions in the form of an imaginary "depiction" is responsible for the subject's sense of "reality."[47] If we accept this general framework, the imaginary register would be able to hold all possible visual (auto-)representations of the self, proxemic interactions, and competitive relations stemming from the constitution of the images of oneself and of others. In the lecture on the relationships between the symbolic, imaginary, and real registers cited above, Lacan likens the imaginary to the signifying behaviors of animals – their mating dances, for example, which typically combine signals hailing from different sequences of behavior into one set. Consequently, the instinctive is subject to "representation" in another sphere, and acquires a separate existence, provided that the given behavior is sufficiently "image-oriented" and commands enough "value as an image."[48] This context allows us to understand the significance of the figure for the imaginary register – it is simultaneously conceived as an image; as a dance figure, indicating the appropriate moves and defining proper form; and as a "decoy,"[49] triggering certain motor reactions in the other party. As Lacan noted in his seminal essay on the mirror stage, one's image of the self is an "orthopedic" and model figure that resembles the "contour of his stature"[50] – akin to an idealized freeze-frame. It is representation strongly tied to the body – always deceptive, as

the reality of the body and its experiences can ultimately be reduced to the immobile and situated, the perennially "inert."[51] In this sense, the imaginary is tied to "misrecognition" [*méconaissance*][52] and strongly penetrates the subject's temporal relationship with itself: the subject first "imagines" who it will become.[53] In a seminar on James Joyce from his later teachings, Lacan stresses the link between the imaginary and the fundamental notions of c o n s i s t e n c y : self-love is a principle of the imagination, centered on the notion of possessing a body – which is a "container" sustaining this consistency.[54] The pursuit of a holistic approach, built around the fantasy of the figure as a "container" – alongside the opposition toward everything that differs from the "container" and is thus read as hostile toward it – are all hallmarks of imaginary representations. They do not have to refer to the individual or the body in the literal sense, but can also encompass one's own group or the "body politic" as an imaginary extension of one's own body (as in the symbolism connoted by the phrase "health of the nation," for example). In his 1969/1970 seminar, Lacan draws the attention of the audience to the intimate relationship between political persuasion and the imaginative discourse focused on the body and the image of the whole.[55]

The relationship between self-love, wholeness, and the body, emphasized by Lacan, enables us to equate the imaginary with a particular register of identification, which entails identifying oneself not with a place within a structure, but with a figure among other figures that feels safe "inside" and perceives the "outside" as dangerous. Such identification will be associated with a set of specific attributes: if symbolic identification presumes identification with a certain strictly symbolic dignity (meaning the signifier in its capacity to name, rather than "describe") and a location in a certain matrix of positions, then imaginary representation presumes identification with a particular vision of the self, often idealized, leading to

stagnation or an overwhelming sense of inadequacy – an ideal figure that is both the object of identification and animosity.[56] Within the imaginary, it is the "pragmatic" character of representation that is most pronounced, serving the power of the subject, but in a manner that imprisons it in a visual complex, and alienates[57] it in the image.

All visual representations of class carry a stamp of the imaginary, meaning that they contain a certain surplus that transforms the image into a figure and a model. Its visual characteristics are rendered into "contours" that are "orthopedic" or disfiguring in nature. Bodily representations often have an imaginary character, as does clothing: the class uniform, "the body of the body,"[58] duplicating and amplifying individual bodily attributes. In the scene analyzed earlier in the essay, this dynamic was accurately portrayed by the visual relationship between the tailored suits of the bourgeoisie and the plain livery of the chauffeur, and the implications of the characters' stances: the chauffeur stands stiffly, examined by the other men and exposed to the gaze of the women. Framing him on either side, the bourgeois are caught in profile, comfortable and relaxed.

The attributes of the character, the silhouette, the garments, and the proxemic relations may all make up a certain whole, a figure with a narrative constitution. For example, consider the politically themed work of Viktor Deni, whose posters portray class struggle using classically articulated spatial opposition between the towering worker and his class enemies – including a capitalist, a clergyman (wearing the papal tiara), a savage-looking soldier with a swastika on his helmet, and a man wearing a hat emblazoned with the letters "S-D" (for "social democrat"), implying a hostile political operative.

Victor Deni, lithography, c. 1941, source: MoMA, public domain.

Communist propaganda posters attempted to "appoint" the proletariat as a historical subject – to create a representation of it replete with positive characteristics, for the purpose of direct positive identification, in this case with a clearly political objective. In the above example, the figure representing the worker dwarfs the figures of the other classes and dominates the space. The worker confidently occupies the right side of the picture – leaning slightly forward, as if ready to attack – while his enemies are in retreat, backing off, suggesting their precarious position (along with the buildings, their foundations literally shaking). The worker's powerful, mighty body is juxtaposed with a formless, misshapen, distorted, weak body. The unity of the worker's body (and, by extension, the proletariat) stands in stark contrast to the diverse mob of his political enemies, different but still sharing class interests (capital, state-sanctioned violence, religion). Conceived thus, the figure of the worker represents an unstoppable force opposing the myriad, but still ultimately vanquished "reactionary forces." It should also be added that this representation is specifically "leaning" toward the symbolic – the worker, the capitalist, and the clergyman are figures of class and estates (in the case of the clergy, commonly referred to as the "First Estate"), referring to the conceptual matrix of Soviet propaganda. As such, they have symbolic value but are not symbolic elements in the strict sense – the worker is supposed to be powerful, and the capitalist repulsive (saggy cheeks, puffy lips, "clawed" hands) in a way that is associated with bodily fantasies.

In representations expressing fear of the revolutionary classes, a different dynamic emerges, which was retraced by Klaus Theweleit. While not explicitly drawing on Lacanian language,[59]

he still investigates the complex of notions that could be situated within the imaginary register. In the *Freikorps* literature narratives that Theweleit examined, he identified tropes suggesting the peril inherent in the fluid, irregular character of the rebelling masses, which must be opposed by a stable "corpus" of knights ready to stand on the ramparts of civilization and fight off the revolutionary flow that threatens them.[60] In the problems stemming from the relationship between a weak self and the outside, Theweleit sees the source of the effectiveness of political phantasms peddled by the far right, in which the revolutionary masses are equated with destabilizing, amorphous "lava." The personality type interrogated by the author of *Male Fantasies*, the "soldier male," feels threatened by the flow and lability of the lower classes, seen as "raving masses" and the "Red flood."[61]

It is relatively easy to transfer these relationships to Lacanian theory: the inconsistent self is threatened by the destabilizing and threatening object that cannot be placed in space; this space must be fixed and reconstructed in a manner that will put a stop to the dangerous vacillation between fascination and revulsion. The phantasms threatening the subject, built around the figures of the dangerous classes (rebelling masses, unbridled murderous proletarians,[62] revolutionary termagants),[63] all of which are staples of the fear of the lower classes, are countered in National Socialist representations (and art that the Nazis appreciated) by depictions of individuals "packed in space," formed in the ancient fashion to express the harmony of family life, labor, and social relations.

Class can also be represented visually even where it ostensibly does not appear. A certain imaginary surfeit is present, for example, in some architectural approaches to spatial planning. Gated communities or detached single-family houses, isolated from their surroundings, constitute both an architectural approach and a representation that defines the proper line between the interior (the domain of the privileged classes) and the exterior.[64]

Woman from the people depicted in "classicist" style. Adolf Wissel's painting *Peasant Woman* on the cover of national socialist women's magazine „NS-Frauen-Warte" (1938), source: Elbląska Biblioteka Cyfrowa, public domain.

The practical purpose of gating, or "providing security," suggests a specific vision of communal relationships that makes the very act of gating necessary – the link between the "precious jewel" of intimacy and the family relationships of the privileged classes with the menacing gaze (and ill will) of the undesired other. Here, class distinction manifests itself not so much in the representations of the classes themselves or the visual differences between them, but in the difference between what the classes see. In the case of a gated community or a family residence isolated from its surroundings, the distinction boils down to the difference between a view of the patio (often with a simulacrum of a "garden" or "yard") and a view of the iron fence, high wall, and "armed" gateway to the property. And, importantly, it does not even matter what particular residents identify with or which class they belong to: the appearance of the interior and the exterior are designed to shape a certain "distribution of the visible," to paraphrase a term first coined by Jacques Rancière.[65]

Furthermore, if what we see is always a mirror reflecting our own figure (which is the general import of Lacan's remarks: what we see is always related to identification), then even the landscape of our surroundings has a significant imaginary meaning. It can engage us in a game of identification and disidentification – as when we read a certain environment as "familiar" or "alien." Apartment interiors are often "portraits" of aspiration and ideas of order and beauty; as such, they are elements of a fuller "picture of the world" with which a given person may identify.[66] Due to this reciprocity, the environment seems to respond to us – as we respond to a question or a gaze – and the response may be friendly or hostile. This is why the sight of a building facade could have stung the protagonist of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* "like a glance of polite disdain."[67] The architectural order of expensive neighborhoods stands in stark contrast to the spatial chaos of working-class districts. The processes of gentrification reflect this dynamic, in which the materiality of space is inextricably linked with representation (the "broken windows" theory – connotations linking select neighborhoods and urban enclaves with luxury, juxtaposing them with the limited opportunities of the chaotic peripheries), as does the abstract realm of speculation (as in artificially inflating real estate prices), in which some districts are framed as desirable from an investment perspective and potentially exclusive, prompting the redefinition of their class affiliation. This has happened to many previously working-class neighborhoods in Warsaw in recent decades: the tenements of Praga-Północ were sold off and redeveloped into premium real estate, while the industrial areas of Wola now bristle with apartment high-rises offering what the market has come to call "investment flats" with a total floor area of less than 20 square meters.

1. Estate oppression on anonymous illustration from the Revolution period, source: Gallica, public domain.
2. Pyramid of the capitalist system, print, 1911, source: ULS Digital Collections, public domain.

Terms like "upstairs" and "downstairs," at first glance denoting basic categories of orienting oneself in space (alongside "interior" and "exterior," mentioned earlier, as well as proximity and remoteness), are already imbued with certain class notions and representations of class hierarchies.[68] These implications are patently apparent in two iconic images: in one, dating back to the French Revolution, the feudal "oppression" of the subordinate classes is portrayed literally as them being ridden; the other, meanwhile, depicts the class structure of the capitalist system as a pyramid. The specific class and estate divisions always contain an element of nomination and symbolism. However, the representation of a spatial relationship, in which the system of positions seems to emerge as the whole of an image, gesture, appearance, or position, carries the stamp of the imaginary. Those "below" must look up to see those above – even this juxtaposition of bodily gesture and image (who is "cast down" and who looks "from above") lays bare the imaginary underpinnings of social hierarchy (interestingly inverted in the abovementioned Viktor Deni poster).

Reframing class hierarchies into an "upstairs"/"downstairs" binary is a key motif in many cinematic representations of social distinction – class is often visually "marked," and sometimes even literally positioned within this spatial opposition. A classic example can be found in Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis*, where the workers are literally portrayed as "dwellers of the underworld,"

living in infernal spaces, standing in stark contrast to the world inhabited by the owning classes. The juxtaposition plays a similar role in Akira Kurosawa's 1963 *High and Low*, in which an upper-class family, living in a hilltop mansion, is blackmailed by a man observing them from the poor districts below. The imaginary characteristic of spatial relationships is commented upon diegetically by one of the police officers investigating the case, who says of the house that it seems "as if it's looking down"[69] on its immediate environment. The dwelling, with its large, paneled windows, "stings the eyes" and reflects the cityscape like a mirror, while the murderer is seen wearing mirrored sunglasses, reflecting the "hubris" of the building.

"As if it's looking down" – *High and Low* (1963).

The above/below binary in the proxemic context also underpins the critical thrust of Ben Wheatley's 2015 film *High Rise*, based on J. G. Ballard's dystopian novel, in which the eponymous building is the stage for a class conflict between residents of the lower and upper floors. Another rather spectacular example of reframing class hierarchies and distinctions into spatial relationships can be found in Bong Joon-ho's 2019 thriller *Parasite*, which drew on a whole palette of tropes relating to upstairs/downstairs and inside/outside binaries as it pitted two families against each other: one bourgeois and the other representing the precarized working class. These examples well illustrate the disarticulation of class distinction in the modern neoliberal order: to tell a story about class conflict, *High Rise* draws nostalgically on 1970s aesthetics.

Resentment: shades mirroring the "gaze" of the surroundings – *High and Low* (1963).

In *Parasite*, meanwhile, this tension is subject to refeudalization[70] – class distinction has no recognizable outline; it is more of a rift between two "estates" (the bourgeoisie and the underclass), who lead radically different lives, with little to no mutual interaction or political significance.

The tropes drawing on the strange/familiar binary, the figures of identification (native) and disidentification (aliens, intruders), and at least a handful of motifs revolving around proxemic relationships (attack and defense, the isolation and separation built into the proxemics of gated communities, etc.) constitute fundamental attributes of representations carrying the stamp of the imaginary: they are linked with narcissism[71] (the preference for one's own image) and aggression. All that is not me and that does not align with my self-image is read as intrusive and menacing.[72] The class other threatens me both with his very presence and as an image – his appearance and aesthetic norms literally "violate" my own self-image. This aggressiveness employs the logic of confrontation, which implies that the more images of the class other there are (with their attendant visual codes and aesthetic preferences), the less there is left of m e , and therefore of my safe space. Interclass resentment is also subordinate to that logic. The upper classes are envied due to their comfortable lives, but the working class was traditionally envied because of its "vitality."[73] Class resentment and revulsion as two forces regulating self-identification are strongly present in the abovementioned representations – within the imaginary, they are bound together in a sort of frustrating equilibrium. The dynamic of one affect refers to the other – and so fascination is linked to revulsion, and idealization to resentment and humiliation. In representations, these affects are present as

presupposed by the representation itself: either in a form that is already awakened, or one that is still shaped and encouraged. In the imaginary register, there is no escape from affective oscillation: it can be transcended only by way of symbolic intervention – in the case of the social phantasms analyzed herein, by way of the symbolic structure of class consciousness, which can politicize resentment and revulsion, and then orient them and define their limits.

The real

One fundamental problem in the interrogation of class distinction within the realm of the real is the resistance of this register toward representation. From the very beginning, Lacan describes the real as appearing for the subject "when he runs up against something,"[74] or as a confusing experience of lack or radical chance.[75] In his later writings, Lacan's interpretations of the real tend to emphasize its aporic character: it is simultaneously necessary and inconceivable, like the death drive, which "can only be pondered qua impossible."[76]

In Book XVII of his seminars (1969/1970), Lacan places the real "at the level of the impossible,"[77] which is why the psychoanalyst must intervene within the real, because his situation is also "impossible," as it is situated in aporic space. In my reading of this formula, "impossible" in this context does not mean "unknowable" or "inexistent," but implies an existence irreconcilable with the symbolic and imaginary identifications of the subject.[78] Lacan's 1962/1963 seminar on fear (Book X) is groundbreaking in this regard, as therein he systematizes his interpretation of the real, identifying the key role played by the concept of *objet petit a* conceived as a real object. *Objet petit a* is not the object of experience; it is not something that the subject may desire, but it is the cause of desire.[79] In fantasy, it is usually bound up with what was previously lost, the "remnant" that the subject sheds when he enters into relationships established by

language, with the *locus* of lack. What the subject loses is the object that exists solely as that which is "already lost," perceivable only through the lens of loss.[80]

The fact that the real cannot be represented "as-is" does not mean that secondary, derivative definitions of the real register are impossible. One example can be found in scientific notation, which denotes the real and can even expand its influence, which Lacan points out in his commentary on the contemporary meaning of science.[81] Science essentially broadens the realm of uncertainty related to what resists incorporation into either the symbolic order or imaginary representations. From such a standpoint, scientific notation – demographic or medical statistics, for example – might lay bare the actual scale of class relationships, which remains elusive to other registers. Such a status could potentially be conferred on "raw" data outlining the difference in life expectancy between classes. Tabulated in a variety of ways – by education, profession, or income – this disparity may even exceed ten years,[82] while the real difference can of course translate into symbolic political support.[83]

Below, I explore in greater detail the figural and literary representations that consequently indicate this aporic dimension of the real.

Unlike in the symbolic and imaginary registers, representations of the real will have a much more localized and particular character, and will often indicate that impossibility in themselves. Some hints can be found in the character of the aforementioned *objet petit a* conceived as an object falling away from the subject – at times, the subject identifies with this "dropping" object, which Lacan points out in his interpretation of the suicide jump of one of Freud's patients.[84] In this sense, suicidal acts can be read as a desperate attempt at interceding in the real when the "means" from other registers fail. They obviously have their class variants, reflected in a series of representations: the suicides of frenzied

noblemen[85] are different from melancholic bourgeois suicides,[86] or peasant suicides prompted by "utter hopelessness."[87]

Representations of class distinction in the real register suggest that the distinction itself is aporic in nature, meaning that class distinction in the real register is portrayed as an aporia that cannot be described explicitly, but can only be symbolized by the impossibility or the loss of something that others have taken from us, unjustly and for unclear reasons. One classic example is the symbolism of lost body parts, which carries clear religious connotations (as it brings to mind a form of votive offering in Roman Catholicism).[88] A telling example of this can be found in Alfred Döblin's 1929 novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, which tells the story of proletarian Franz Biberkopf, who decides to lead an honest life after serving time in prison for murder, but is unable to find his way in the reality of post-WWI Germany. Caught in the dealings of a criminal gang and deceived by his companions, he loses an arm when fleeing a crime scene – a classic representation of the loss of symbolic dignity (bringing up connotations of historical punishment for theft). In the passages of the novel describing the loss, we may find traces of the aporic dimensions we have been discussing: "Where is the sense in this criminal, repulsive and pitiable nonsense, what twisted meaning can be imputed here, maybe even to become the fate of Franz Biberkopf?"[89] The author suggests that Providence ("fate") plays no role in Franz's experience, and can be only "imputed" there in a "twisted" manner. Franz simply cannot find his bearings, and moves in a space with no direction; that changes only after he takes a job as an assistant porter in a factory – not as an individual, but a member of a class – and his new consciousness will manifest itself in a handful of passages in which the narrator's commentary mixes with free indirect speech: "[a] man may not be without other men"; "[a]ll around me

my battle is being fought"; "Biberkopf is a little worker. We know what we know, we had to pay dearly enough for it."[90]

Violence in its "purest," traumagenic form may also apply to the real register. Symbolic violence is imprinted on the subject in the form of shame, and the aggressiveness inherent in violence situates itself in the imaginary register, but it is within the real that we ought to situate all phenomena rooted in the disruptive impact of violence – that which is impossible to represent about violence, but which makes it possible for acts of violence to be "forgotten" by the subjects who suffered them, only to resurface in consciousness as another intrusion – second-order violence.

Representations of class violence are often framed in an allusive manner, stylistically drawing on the grotesque or, inversely, on highly conventionalized means, whose mollifying power is capable of carrying the problematic historical "content." Violence tends to be naturalized as an element of tradition allusively present in the lifestyle of the upper classes (with their hunting trips, sports, traditions of military service), where it accrues symbolic import and is reframed as group honor:[91] "Shooting men and animals were the occupations of a gentleman."[92] In more precise terms, the real-life aspect of violence is often represented by specters, phantoms, wraiths, and the living dead. This infernal dimension of history is often perceivable only from a certain symbolic angle. A good example of such an event in Polish history is the Galician Slaughter of 1846, the memory of which has been construed in a number of different ways, while its "real aspect" is rendered into a variety of symbols, deeply influenced by the political and class views of their authors. Although the event itself belongs to the course of "feudal" history (of relationships between estates), its status in Polish culture has become rather peculiar, as it has been recast as a way in which to talk about class relations.[93] Perhaps its liminal character – as the final pre-modern rebellion of the

peasantry, which simultaneously inaugurated Polish modernity – might explain its enduring significance.

The Galician Slaughter – a peasant uprising that targeted manors and members of the gentry in Galicia[94] – is described in Stanisław Wyspiański's *The Wedding*, with clear reference to the real register. Recalled as an event from the "other side" of national history, it is simultaneously forgotten and remembered, present and absent. The leader of the uprising, Jakub Szela,[95] appears in Wyspiański's poem (and in Andrzej Wajda's 1973 film adaptation) as a bloody wraith. Both Wyspiański's text and Wajda's film, the latter drawing strongly on the post-gentry imaginary, depict the rebellion from the perspective of the *szlachta* [nobility], which, as the symbolic elite traditionally holding power in Poland, must forget its grievances if it is ever to preside over national reconciliation, considered an impossible but still necessary task. To usher in that act of forgetting, the rebellion must be recast as a nightmarish dream, while Szela himself must be remade into a monster banished from the human realm.[96]

An alternative interpretation of the memory of the Slaughter, formulated from a class perspective (rather than the "national" imaginary) and in opposition to the memory of the elites but still drawing on the trauma and its symbolic designations, can be found in Bruno Jasieński's narrative poem, *Słowo o Jakubie Szeli* (1926).[97]

Cover of the 1st edition of *Słowo o Jakubie Szeli* (Paris, 1926), designed by Z. Waliszewski, source: wikimedia.org, public domain.

Jasieński juxtaposes the brutality of the Slaughter with the unspoken savagery of centuries of nearly forgotten violence. The peasants from Jasieński's poem initially look to state authority for support, and first submit their complaints against the manor lords through official channels, choosing a form of protest that recognizes the logic of state hierarchies – like the traditional supplication, requiring proper abasement before a higher power. Documented examples of such abasement formulas carry the unmistakable stamp of the long-enduring violence of feudal relations: "we crawl like worms in the dirt [...] like wretched sheep we beg for tenderness."[98] In Jasieński's poem, however, the peasants are refused imperial protection but offered another method of settlement – a bloody reckoning with the nobility, which would quell the nascent rebellion of the *szlachta* against the emperor. Instead of recognition, they are invited into a "dirty pact" – their revolt will have the tacit approval of the emperor, but will never be symbolically recognized, and instead remain relegated to the obscene realm of violence that serves as the shadowy double of the law.[99]

Jasieński also draws on religious language to emphasize the exclusion of peasant grievances from the domain of the law. As the savage rebellion rages, Jakub Szela comes across Christ himself,[100] who has descended from the heavens after learning of the bloodbath below. He questions the leader of the uprising about the fates of the murdered noblemen, drawing clear biblical connotations – echoing a scene from Genesis in which God asks

Cain about his brother ("Where is Abel thy brother?" Genesis 4:9). The scene reframes the rebellion as a "fratricide,"[101] an act that demands the strictest condemnation (the ghastliness of which is second only to patricide). In response, however, Szela points to the grievances of the peasantry,[102] a similar injustice which never made it into the official symbolic record, then accuses God of "building paradise" on "peasant tears." The repudiation of religious principles implies, in a sense, the rejection of one of the foremost injunctions against violence, one rooted in eternal divine law. At the poem's "didactical" level, this is a key point in its argument; ultimately, all forms of legitimacy are withheld from the rebellion – earthly powers disavow it (the imperial court will never acknowledge its backing of the uprising), and even the heavens "refuse to take its side." The actions of the peasantry thus find acknowledgment not in the symbolic register, but in the memory of "wading in blood up to the knees," a metaphor for an experience that transcends the symbolic.

At this point, we ought to make it clear that the real is not simply the part of reality that remains undescribed "as of yet." Recent years have seen an outpouring of various "people's histories," intent on reconstructing class perspectives that mainstream historiography has ostensibly neglected.[103] Their abundance indicates the need for a certain revindication, a retracing of the genealogies of modern society – and thus situates them squarely within the realm of the symbolic. Rather than "penetrate" the real, they perform a historical reality check – in the case of Poland, mostly correcting the phantasm of the noble genealogy of modern society, the critique of which[104] was, to some extent, the previous stage of this particular discursive process. The power of the concept of the "real" and its value to the interrogation of class distinction lies in its ability to indicate the scale of "fatalism" in thought and speech: the traumatic dimension of class relations m u s t remain unexamined. In Jasieński's poem, that notion also manifests itself within the text

– the view of the forgotten trauma is clearest in the moment of blasphemy, i.e. expression that is farthest removed from political discourse. By definition, blasphemy is marginal, a complaint against the existing regime of reason, but also a form of self-condemnation. Blasphemy is more than simple indifference toward religion or godless "atheism," as it situates itself within the framework of religious discourse while simultaneously demeaning it.

This reveals in *Słowo o Jakubie Szeli* the extent of the tragedy of the titular character, in line with the findings of Lacan, who situated the tragic hero in the space "between two deaths," populated by figures dead to their contemporaries, who live the life of phantoms, condemned to death.[105] Jasieński wishes to show the genealogy of the oppressed classes – in the foreword to his poem, he calls Szela a hero of the new class pantheon. The real side of history, therefore, is viewed from the perspective of the symbolic objective: to label the menacing classes with an appropriately "terrifying" name befitting their revolutionary future. Jasieński, like a psychoanalyst, wants to "treat the real by the symbolic,"[106] i.e. to define certain forces within society in a manner that will change their subjective positions. Such a view is essentially retroactive: through the lens of political currency, Szela is "rewritten" as a contemporary hero, while the historical reality of serfdom becomes important to the fates of the working class in rapidly industrializing Poland. However, this effort, as I outlined above, is fundamentally aporic, as it is based on the negativity of grievance rather than the positive "entitlement to govern,"[107] while Szela's heroism is ultimately that of a "living corpse." The power of Jasieński's poem, rooted in its evocation of the real register, is thus proportional to the failure to fulfill the objective formulated by the author himself – remaking Szela into a political hero.[108]

Identification and "becoming who I am"

In this essay, thinking about class distinction entails confrontation with various forms of violence, either explicit (expressed as cultural contempt or bloody confrontation), or implicit in the tension of aggressiveness. Focusing on these aspects allows us to illustrate the discordant character of class distinction, and resist the temptation to turn discussing distinction into lending legitimacy to the existing order. Lacan notes that the subject tends to use words to make his ideas "fit together in his thought"[109] – our discourse thus makes an orderly set of our mental perceptions. And when we notice class distinction, the same mechanism triggers the temptation to harness words to legitimize what we see: for example, to reframe the deprivations suffered by the working classes as a sort of cultural or subjective impoverishment (and reason enough for dragging these classes into grand designs conceived by the middle class, which are mere expressions of its fantasies about its own benevolence or political bravery).

However, we are seen and named not only by the class other, but also, and perhaps above all, by our immediate social environment. It is primarily from our class peers that we seek acknowledgment and recognition – we seek it from those with whom we share a genealogy. This genealogy ties into the pleasure we experience when we associate with people like us: it is from the people around us that the metonymical movement of desire, in which we look for "more of the same," so to speak,[110] begins. Hence, positive identification can be expressed so clearly by people with more experience of living in social conditions that allowed them to build stable relationships. Below is an example of such a narrative, taken from an interview with a retired welder. Following vocational training, the man found employment in a shipyard, where he quickly noticed

that the knowledge he acquired from classes was of precious little use for the actual work of fitting ships' plating:

> Not to brag, but I was at the top of my class at welding school. But as soon as I found myself on a real job – the gaps were big, because the sheets were cut with an acetylene torch; I saw the master welder come down [...]. Most of us held the mask close to the nose, but he did it differently, and so he went up to weld the deck plating, the gap was this big. So I got my mask [...], followed him up, and looked on from afar as he worked; he saw me in the tinted glass of the mask, put his torch away, turned around and said: "You'll make a fine welder one day, because you want to learn." And so the rates got better and so on... soon afterward I started making proper welds, responsible welds [...] and along with that came a wage hike, because I got entrusted with welding the plating and that was a responsible job.[111]

Retraced from this vernacular account, the man's story begins with a conundrum – what good is being "best" at school when work involves much bigger challenges? Looking for a solution, the young worker decides to surreptitiously follow a supervisor, shadowing him from afar. The master welder, however, soon notices him, reflected in his tinted face shield (notice the complex "optics" at the heart of this story), and delivers an observation that will make an indelible mark on the apprentice (while resembling a symbolic matriculation): "You'll make a fine welder one day." The story ends happily with professional advancement – more responsible tasks followed by better wages.

This story perfectly represents the genesis of class identification – the narrative in which a certain (always somewhat incidental) life path is retroactively rewritten as both destiny and choice. It carries traces of all three of the aforementioned registers, closely related to each other: symbolic sanction, thanks to which the happy fate of the subject is sealed; the aspirational relationship, rooted in the imaginary,

between the young worker and the experienced co-worker capable of feats others see as impossible; and the fantasy of merit capable of organizing one's life ("because you want to learn"). The real is likewise signified in the interplay of gazes – the subject fantasizes about being seen by someone who will appreciate his commitment. This gaze of the master – reflected in the dark tinted glass of the welding mask – brings to mind the gaze conceived as *objet petit a* – the real object, the cause of desire. This particular story features an almost-complete connection between the aspect of word-nomination, the image, and the aspect of the lost real object. As such, it is a good illustration of Lacan's notion that, for most people, the S, I, and R registers are intertwined to such an extent that each seems a continuation of the other.[112] Imaginary identification (with human traits) meshes with nomination (indicating dignity-related and ethical traits), and both are reflected in the gaze of the master, which the narrative portrays as a (real) object. The narrative is a phantasmal framework, the structure of which reflects how the S–I–R knot is imbued with deep subjective meaning. In its entirety, the story above carries strong nostalgic overtones, with the retrospective retracing of one's own path through life definitely playing a role here. At the same time, however, it encourages reflection on the specific conditions for the emergence of positive class identification. Perhaps some stable forms of defining social value are necessary for such an emergence to even be possible.

Class consciousness may only have been an episode in history. From a historical perspective, decades of neoliberal rule can be seen as a form of counter-revolution, seeking to overturn not only the institutional achievements of the post-war welfare state, but also the symbolic instruments of defining social reality. Neoliberal governance ultimately turned the "body politic" into a chaotic series of discreet statuses assigned to individuals, which were subject to perpetual evaluation and transformation.

The long history of the neoliberal counter-revolution can be briefly described as an evolution – from the motto "there is no such thing as a society" to more contemporary models of social policy that categorize individuals by "hireability" and evaluate their motivations rather than their formal qualifications. In the face of inequality so entrenched that it resembles the oligarchies of the past, individuals are stripped of the collective identities which would offer the chance of institutional representation.[113] "Class as against class" will continue to exist, but without the signifiers capable of naming and civilizing class distinction and conferring political meaning upon it, and thus converting actual life-and-death struggle into a political agon. The suppression of class language is accompanied by the naturalization of inequality (an example of which can be found in the argument presuming a link between poverty and low IQ),[114] the normalization of social violence (alongside the dismantling of welfare safety nets), and the ruination of the public sphere. We are dealing with what Bourdieu foresaw as the dream of all bourgeoisie, "the dream of a bourgeoisie without a proletariat."[115] The effort of erasing the working classes from language has been so thorough that any attempt to challenge it using new concepts and frameworks encounters considerable difficulties. Pitting the 99% against the 1% is not, after all, a form of class consciousness. This widespread juxtaposition lacks relationality and dynamism, which could potentially infuse the abstraction of statistical difference with political content. Populist language juxtaposing the people and the elites is also guilty of misrepresenting class relationships, dissolving them within labile and convenient political rhetoric – in the narrative spun by the Polish populist right, the "elite" can be represented by a retired teacher protesting the mass violation of human rights, while a nationalist-leaning columnist with a celebrity contract serves as a tribune of the people, relying on crass and brutal language (which he believes merely blunt, and therefore folksy) to make his points. The concept of the

precariat is too broad, and, as such, too easily universalized as a way of describing the modern condition that "spills over" into a variety of other contexts.[116] Even in critical sociology, keenly aware of the dependencies described herein, problems abound: the concept of the "popular class," informed by Bourdieu's theoretical findings, also obscures certain aspects, as it creates a "people" from class factions with different, if not outright antithetical, living circumstances, ethe, and interests.[117] In this situation of uncertainty and disarticulation, it will be increasingly harder to come up with positive identification, while class distinction will increasingly be relegated to the dubious sphere of what "works," although for some reason we pay it no attention.

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1 Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, trans. Harry Quelch (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1920), 189; the terms were later reframed as the "class in itself"/"class for itself" binary.

2 When writing about right- and left-wing representations, I of course mean the model and not the empirical differences between types of political discourse.

3 See, for example: Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 15–19, 95, 111–113.

4 I would separate the problem of representation from the question of the tension between objectivization (class conceived in structural terms, as the product of the distribution of capital) and subjectivization (the lived experience of class and its social relationality), as discussed by Pierre Bourdieu. Although the question of representation is related to the tension between objectivization and subjectivity, in this essay I focus more on the relationship between the existence of classes (class against class) and their representation, as well as the relationships between classes that emerge in representation. Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Objectivity of the Subjective," in: idem, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 135–141.

5 On the significance of this separation in therapeutic practice, see: Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Adrian R. Price, vol. 23, *The Sinthome* (Cambridge–Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016), 58.

6 The S–I–R knot is a theoretical representation of the topology of the subject, developed in Lacan's 1970s seminars, e.g. *RSI* (1974–1975) and *The Sinthome* (1975–1976).

7 Major examples include, of course, proclamations announcing the "death of class," or concepts like "the creative class."

8 See: Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, trans. Theodore P. Wolfe (New York: Orgone Institute Press, 1946), 9–14.

9 See: Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Stanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1969), 675–685.

10 Therefore, it takes place within the imaginary and (perhaps) the symbolic registers, but not in the real. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg, vol. 17, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (New York–London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007), 190.

11 Lacan's remark might of course be read in context, as referring to a certain form of class struggle that, by the late 1960s, was becoming a thing of the past.

12 Here, I mean the "historical" rather than the dialectic layer of Marx's writings.

13 Cf., respectively: Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (New York–London: Verso, 2008), 235–236; Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 40–46; Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London–New York: Verso, 2008), 423–427. Žižek's linking of the radically expropriated and revolutionary potential does not repeat the notion of the historical subjectivity of the proletariat – see: Jodi Dean, *Žižek's Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 184–188.

14 Bogdan Wolf, *Lacanian Coordinates: From the Logic of the Signifier to the Paradoxes of Guilt and Desire* (London: Karnac Books, 2015), 7.

15 See the prominent report: Thomas Blanchet, Lucas Chancel, and Amory Gethin, *How Unequal is Europe? Evidence from Distributional National Accounts 1980–2017*, World Inequality Lab, April 2019, 29–32.

16 Jacques Lacan, "The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real," in: idem, *On the Names-of-the-Father*, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge–Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 20.

17 Wolf, *Lacanian Coordinates*, 80.

18 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Adrian R. Price, vol. 10, *Anxiety* (Cambridge–Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015), 23.

19 See: Jacques Lacan, "The Symbol and Its Religious Function" (presentation, Congress of Religious Psychology, Paris, France, September 1, 1954).

20 See the trope of "awakening" in autobiographical worker narratives from 1905: the raw material of experience is refined using political language. Cf. Wiktor Marzec, "The Birth of the Militant Self. Working-Class Memoirs of Late Russian Poland," *East-Central Europe* no. 46 (2019), 33–34.

21 See: Andrzej Chwalba, *Sacrum i rewolucja. Socjaliści polscy wobec praktyk i symboli religijnych (1870–1918)* (Kraków: Universitas, 2007).

22 Like the residents of rural, post-State Agricultural Farm communities, who were portrayed as "doomed" to their fates.

23 The organization in question was the German Labor Front (*Deutsche Arbeitsfront*, DAF), a body with approximately 25,000,000 members. See: Franz L. Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009), 413ff. On atomization as the political purpose of the DAF, see: ibid., 415–419.

24 See: ibid., 337–340. We should add that this was not just the preserve of "early capitalism," but that the phenomenon continues today wherever enforcement of worker protections is not a political priority.

25 The scene was also underscored by Agnieszka Taborska, who decoded it as satire on "the arrogance of the bourgeoisie"; Agnieszka Taborska, *Spiskowcy wyobraźni* (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2013), 335.

26 Already signaled by the formulaic nature of the lecture on the preparation of dry martinis, as keenly noted by Marie-Claude Taranger, *Luis Buñuel. Le jeu et la loi* (Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1990), Chapter VIII, Paragraph 20, https://books.openedition.org/puv/1682 (accessed January 5, 2021).

27 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, eds. Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom, and Stephen Mennell, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 118.

28 Ibid., 97.

29 Ibid., 95.

30 See: Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), and Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage, 1990).

31 A key figure in critiques of this "historiosophical" understanding of class, Max Weber believed the concept of "class interest" to be a sort of umbrella figure, concealing the complexity of historical phenomena. See: Max Weber, "The 'Objectivity' of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy," in: idem, *The Essential Weber: A Reader*, ed. Sam Whimster (London–New York: Routledge, 2004), 359–404.

32 Moustapha Safouan emphasizes the link between the "but not that" formula and the production of emptiness. See: Moustapha Safouan, *The Seminar of Moustapha Safouan*, eds. Anna Shane and Janet Thormann (New York: Other Press, 2002), 7.

33 Here, Lacan uses the word *bêtise*. See: Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink, vol. 20, *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge: Encore 1972–1973* (New York–London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999), 20; see also Bruce Fink's comment on p11, fn42.

34 The recent expressions of class resentment observed in public debate in Poland over the 500+ child allowance program (along with all the relevant tropes, from allegations of buying unnecessary – i.e. unsanctioned – cultural goods, such as TV sets and used cars, to sensationalist attacks against classes who used the allowance to holiday at the seaside, accusing them of "littering the landscape") are really telling – the program was universal and not tied to income levels, which carried symbolic implications: it was not addressed to the "deserving" poor, selected using complex criteria and according to the principles of interclass "empathy," nor did it feature any disciplining elements. Instead, it was universal and democratic.

35 Sigmund Freud, "Negation," in: *Organization and Pathology of Thought: Selected Sources*, ed. David Rapaport (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 338–348.

36 The term *Verwerfung* is rendered as "foreclosure" by Jacques Lacan.

37 Ibid., 340.

38 Jacques Lacan, "Response to Jean Hyppolite's Commentary on Freud's 'Verneinung'," in: idem, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York–London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), 323–325.

39 Žižek, *Violence*, 92–104.

40 To quote Aleksander Smolar's diagnosis from November 1992: "Liberal ideas, recently garnering increasing influence, would have us believe that the worker is the biggest obstacle to the modernization of the country." See: Aleksander Smolar, "Obywatelu – kim jesteś?," *Res Publica Nowa* vol. 53, no. 2 (1993), 64. The same author explicitly pointed at the class aspect underpinning the legitimization of emerging inequalities: "Will millions of ordinary people ultimately accept the legitimacy of not only the state [...], but also the legitimacy of the economic order on the one hand, and the new social hierarchy on the other." Ibid., 65.

41 "Victims of the transformation" is a loose translation of the phrase "przegrani transformacji," widely used in the Polish public sphere to denote individuals or entire groups who, following the economic transformation away from state socialism, failed to keep up with the new market economy – mainly blue-collar workers, rural smallholders, the unemployed, and the poor.

42 For example in the acclaimed TV movies *Arizona* (1997) and *13* (1996), directed by Ewa Borzęcka.

43 In Polish news media, reports of working-class protests were often illustrated with photos of burning tires, which formed a visual stereotype that was used to delegitimize worker resistance and labor unions.

44 Žižek, *Violence*, 140–144.

45 Carl Schmitt, "The Concept of the Political," in: idem, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 27–28.

46 Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'," in: *Écrits*, 30.

47 See: Lacan, "Response to Jean Hyppolite's Commentary," 324.

48 Lacan, "The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real," 13. Cf. the same example in the context of the imaginary: Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg, vol. 3, *The Psychoses 1955–1956* (Cambridge–Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1988), 93–97.

49 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, vol. 3, 95–97.

50 Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in: *Écrits*, 76, 78.

51 Ibid., 80.

52 Ibid.

53 As Lacan puts it: "the subject always has an anticipatory relationship to his own realization," see: Jacques Lacan, "The Neurotic's Individual Myth," *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* vol. 48, no. 3 (July 1979), 423.

54 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, vol. 23, 51–52.

55 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, vol. 17, 31.

56 Safouan, *The Seminar*, 12.

57 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, vol. 3, 95.

58 "Clothing, he says now and again, is in a sense the body of the body," see: Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 67.

59 Rather, he calls on the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Their ideas, however, could be considered – to borrow a phrase from Michał Pospiszyl – as a sort of "marginal psychoanalysis." See: Michał Pospiszyl, *Zatrzymać historię. Walter Benjamin i mniejszościowy materializm* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2016), 18.

60 Cf. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, trans. Stephen Conway, vol. 1, *Women, Floods, Bodies, History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 238–249, 384–385.

61 cf. ibid., 229–234.

62 Ibid., 63–84.

63 Negative depictions of revolutionary women played a key role in efforts to discredit the French Revolution – according to a popular rumor, the king was coerced into signing the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen by inebriated street vendors – leaving the royal chambers, one allegedly said: "We made the bastard sign it!"; see: Bronisław Baczko, *Rewolucja. Władza, nadzieje, rozterki*, trans. Wiktor Dłuski (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2009), 62.

64 For a review of the types of middle-class "recolonizations" of downtown sections of cities, see: Rowland Atkinson, "Padding the Bunker: Strategies of Middle-class Disaffiliation and Colonisation in the City," *Urban Studies* vol. 3, no. 4 (2006), 819–832. The broader context for this phenomenon is the securitization and privatization of the question of safety – see: Ramiro Segura, "Protective Arrangement Across Class: Understanding Social Segregation in La Plata, Argentina," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, July 8, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12889 (accessed July 1, 2021).

65 Here, I refer to the concept of the "distribution of the sensible" (*le partage du sensible*), see: Jacques Rancière, "The Distribution of the Sensible: Politics and Aesthetics," in: idem, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York–London: Continuum, 2004), 12–19.

66 For an interesting description and reading of the domicile of a nineteenth-century worker, see: Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Worker's Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury (London–New York: Verso, 2012), 31.

67 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Ware–Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2001), 183.

68 For a discussion of the repeatability of these representations, see: Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 470.

69 *High and Low*, directed by Akira Kurosawa, DVD (New York: Criterion Collection, 1998).

70 I took the concept of refeudalization from the critique of governance, see: Grahame Lock and Francesco Maiolo, "La guerre totale industrielle. Kilka uwag o Zarządzaniu jako globalnym fundamentalizmie," trans. Jakub Ozimek, *Kronos. Metafizyka, Kultura, Religia* no. 3 (2010), 88.

71 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, vol. 10, 38–39.

72 On the difficulty of distinguishing between the image of the self and the other, and the close ties between self-love and aggressiveness, see: Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, vol. 3, 92–93. Cf. Lacan, "The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real," 24.

73 A pronounced trace of this jealousy, dating back to a time of fully articulated class distinction, can be found in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* – at one point in the novel, the protagonist thinks back to a failed adolescent romance and adds, somewhat sneeringly, that a couple of "slum children" would have handled such a situation perfectly; see: Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 12. A similar thread can be found in Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*, where the vitality and moral liberalism of the intellectual Młodziak family can be explained only through a social counterpoint in the form of the cult of physical prowess and the new morality championed by socialist organizations.

74 Lacan, "The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real," 42.

75 Referring to Mallarmé's and Lacan's metaphor of the symbol as a coin cited above, I would define the real – as conceived in Lacan's early teachings – as that which is responsible for the "coin toss," i.e. the succession of chance in the combinatorics of the signifiers. See: Lacan, "The Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'," 35.

76 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, vol. 23, 106.

77 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, vol. 17, 163.

78 Against such a backdrop, the position of the psychoanalyst seems particularly special, as Lacan believes the analyst ought to identify with the "real object."

79 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, vol. 10, 100–103.

80 Ibid., 37.

81 See: Jacques Lacan, *The Triumph of Religion: Preceded by Discourse to Catholics*, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge–Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 59–63.

82 In general, the disparity is higher in countries where inequality (even in its most basic incarnations, such as income inequality) is highest, higher for women than for men, and higher in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe. In Poland in 2017, the difference in life expectancy between classes with different educations was 12.5 years. See the data for Poland, arranged by education level: http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do (accessed May 5, 2020), and the analysis in: Agnieszka Nocko, "Zróżnicowanie długości życia w zależności od płci i wykształcenia," *Wiadomości Statystyczne* vol. 62, no. 8 (2017), 41–52. For a report summarizing general inequality trends in Europe, see: Johan P. Mackenbah, *Health Inequalities: Europe in Profile*, Expert Report commissioned by the UK Presidency of the EU, February 2006, https://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/socio_economics/documents/ev_060302_rd06_en.pdf (accessed May 5, 2020).

83 For example, for changes to the retirement age: for the bourgeoisie, raising the retirement age might be beneficial (in jobs where retirement is considered mandatory at a given age, this postpones compulsory exit from the workforce), but for the working class it translates into a radical reduction in the amount of retirement, or, worse, working until death.

84 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, vol. 10, 109–111.

85 E.g. in Andrzej Żuławski's *The Third Part of the Night* (1971).

86 As in Louis Malle's 1963 film *The Fire Within*, or Andrzej Żuławski's *That Most Important Thing: Love* (1975).

87 See the moving description in Wiesław Myśliwski's *Pałac* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1970).

88 An interesting reading of this aspect can be found in Michał Rauszer's discussion of the effects of the class-estranged curriculum of the Polish school system that he experienced: "This narrative [excluding the peasantry and their oppression – author's note] is akin to a prosthesis replacing a limb I have lost without ever realizing it." Michał Rauszer, *Bękarty pańszczyzny. Historia buntów chłopskich* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo RM, 2020), 7.

89 Alexander Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, trans. Michael Hoffman (New York: New York Review of Books, 2018), 205.

90 Ibid., 439, 438, and 440 respectively.

91 See the seminal analysis of the lifestyles of the upper classes as rooted in violence and "plunder": Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New Brunswick–London: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 21–60.

92 Edward St Aubyn, *Never Mind* (London: Picador, 2012), 8.

93 One excellent example from recent years is Monika Strzępka's 2011 play *W imię Jakuba S.*, based on the text by Paweł Demirski. Radek Rak's Nike Award-winning novel *Baśń o wężowym sercu albo wtóre słowo o Jakubie Szeli* (Warsaw: Powergraph, 2019) is another. Commenting on Rak's novel, Przemysław Czapliński drafted an interesting reconstruction of the discourse on Szela in Polish culture, see: Przemysław Czapliński, "Antybaśń o Szeli," *Czas Kultury* no. 4 (2020), https://czaskultury.pl/czytanki/antybasn-o-szeli/ (accessed April 19, 2021).

94 On the historical slaughter, see. Michał Rauszer, *Siła podporządkowanych* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2021), 323–370; Adam Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia Polski. Historia wyzysku i oporu. Mitologia panowania* (Warsaw: W.A.B., 2020), 325–329.

95 On the historical Szela, see: Tomasz Szubert, *Jak(ó)b Szela (14) 15 lipca 1787 – 21 kwietnia 1860* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo DiG, 2014). The book also features an interesting examination of the bloody legend of Szela.

96 The nobility's "memory" of Szela is symbolized by a "medallion" featuring the profiles of Szela and Metternich stamped on a... spittoon. See: Szubert, *Jak(ó)b Szela*, 172–175, and its collection of prints.

97 Bruno Jasieński, "Słowo o Jakubie Szeli," in: idem, *Utwory poetyckie* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1960).

98 *Supliki chłopskie XVIII wieku z archiwum Prymasa Michała Poniatowskiego*, eds. Janina Leskiewicz and Jerzy Michalski (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1954), 67.

99 On the subject of this obscene obverse of symbolic law, see: Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 2009), 92–95.

100 Jasieński, "Słowo o Jakubie Szeli," 84.

101 This seems a deliberately "anachronistic" lens, as the peasantry and the nobility were never "brothers" in the sense envisioned by the feudal imaginary – they become fellow classes only within the framework of the modern nation-state. This indicates that, rather than target religious discourse or imaginaries, Jasieński's argument is fixed on essentially modern discourse referring to the idea of "national unity," contrasting it with another perspective, one underpinned by class distinction.

102 Ibid., 85.

103 The proverbial "mother" of these interpretations is Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (London–New York: Longman, 1994). A similar role is played by the tradition of social history, offering a counter-position to political history; see, for example: Henryk Słabek, *O społecznej historii Polski 1945–1989* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 2015).

104 See the seminal works from Jan Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą* (Kraków: Universitas, 2011), and Andrzeja Leder, *Prześniona rewolucja. Ćwiczenie z logiki historycznej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2014), both of which critique the tendency to trace the cultural genealogy of modern Polish society back to the traditions of the nobility.

105 See the analysis of the character of Antigone in: Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter, vol. 7, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (London–New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992), 270–287.

106 Lacan defined praxis as treating the real by the symbolic in his eleventh seminar, see: Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, vol. 11, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (London–New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998), 6.

107 That is, attributes that would entitle one to hold power. See: Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," in: idem, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London–New York: Continuum, 2010), 31.

108 I would argue against reading Szela from Jasieński's poem as a "righteous avenger," contrary to the taxonomy offered by Przemysław Czapliński, who situates the texts of Jasieński and Demirski precisely in that category; see: Czapliński, "Antybaśń o Szeli."

109 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, vol. 7, 48.

110 Cf. ibid., 57–58.

111 From an interview recorded for a study of the cultural practices of the popular classes (2014), conducted by a team headed by Maciej Gdula, Mikołaj Lewicki, and Przemysław Sadura, with funding from the Ministry of National Culture and Heritage. See the final report: Maciej Gdula, Mikołaj Lewicki, and Przemysław Sadura, *Praktyki kulturowe klasy ludowej* (Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Zaawansowanych, 2014), https://issuu.com/krytykapolityczna/docs/isz-raport-praktyki-kulturowe-klasy (accessed February 7, 2021).

112 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, vol. 23, 71.

113 For a suggestive analysis of the relationship between deinstitutionalization and record inequality, see: Wolfgang Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System* (London–New York: Verso, 2016), 28–46, 59–72.

114 For a concise analysis of the "accomplishments" of the neoliberal discourse, see: Loïc Wacquant, *Prisons of Poverty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 12–14, 31–36.

115 Bourdieu, "The Objectivity of the Subjective," 137.

116 These shifts are interestingly explored in Hal Foster's interpretation of the works of Thomas Hirschhorn. See: Hal Foster, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (London–New York: Verso, 2015), 99–113.

117 Ignoring, at the very least, the difference between the class ethe of the peasantry and the working class, both of which are informed by extremely different logics.

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