

Perversing the ideological fantasy:

An ethics of deconstruction

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Introduction

I originally approached this paper with the predetermined intention to critique some instances of critical and screen theory as not *truly* subversive, as *pseudo-psychoanalytic*, and found myself unable to. As I searched for and read through various essays in critical and screen theory with the pre-determined intention of critiquing the work before me as 'pseudo-psychoanalytic' or 'too structuralist,' perhaps it was my self-sabotaging tendency to never finish this paper, but I found myself helplessly charitable to *every single paper*. This was a shock; being immediately critical toward papers usually comes naturally to me, and I felt genuinely ready to perform such critiques at the beginning of drafting this paper. My frustration with screen theory and other critical work aggressively subsided the moment I needed it, and I could not remember the problem I wanted to solve. *I cannot write this paper*, I thought to myself. *My argument would be hypocritical to what I claim to be writing in the interest of.*

I could not justify ascribing definitive moral statements to others' work, to be appropriated and diagnosed as either 'structuralist' or 'deconstructive.' The line between the two became very unclear and difficult to diagnose without making undue assumptions. Upon approaching those texts with the hermeneutic impulse in much of critique, I began to suspect that it reproduced the same ideological structure it intended to dismantle. As this cognitive dissonance was too great and painful for me to repress, I eventually realized it was an option for me to recognize this dissonance as possessing its own account. Though sometimes inevitable, I believe that instances of my alienation, cynicism, and anxiety in an otherwise colorful experience with critical theory, as well as difficult conflict and impasse between fellow interlocutors, stemmed from a pattern: the paranoia of "lurking" normativity in discourse, and the disavowal of one's inability to master one's own fantasies.

Propelled by Mari Ruti's work in *Distillations*, I hope to turn a Lacanian pursuit of ethics inward onto its interlocutors (which includes myself) to envision a relation to contemporary critical discourse that is less taxing and more revitalizing for those involved. I will begin with an explanation of the ideological fantasy as seen in Slavoj Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, to then argue how an excessively neurotic pursuit of deconstruction or 'antinormativity,' described as a "bad habit of critical theory" by Mari Ruti, despite its noble efforts, recreates the ideological fantasy. This will lead to the main problem this paper wishes to address, which is an injurious form of alienation and anxiety cultivated by the dominance of the ideological fantasy, subsisting even in deconstructive and antinormative discourse. With contributions from Bruce Fink's essay "Perversion," and Molly Rothenberg and Dennis Foster's "Introduction" in *Perversion and the Social Relation*, I will offer a rethinking of perversion as deceptively invested in the law and inadvertently efficient at distancing itself from the Other. Psychoanalyzing both the perverse and neurotic theorist, I will attempt to describe what I will argue is a *neurotic form of disavowal*, which, when undetected and proliferated, fuels the ideological fantasy and serves as the central source responsible for much of the anxiety and alienation (in the Marxist sense) associated with the noble (but very paranoid) deconstructionist's war on 'pseudo-deconstruction'.

I will then argue that neurotic disavowal can be alleviated by adopting a perverse stance toward the ideological Other and thus the ideological fantasy. I will draw from Mari Ruti's conception of the "second type of desire" and Roland Barthes' "body of bliss" to argue how an inexplicable fixation and enjoyment from an object can be considered a perverse alternative to fixating on the desire of the Other. Lastly, I will suggest that such stubborn, perverse fixations can be applied to the aesthetic dimension of discourse to supplant harmful fixations on the ideological fantasy. Evidently, this paper doesn't wish to make some claim such as

"pseudo-deconstructive normativity is around every corner, ready to sneak up on you, and here are some of the culprits I have found." My objective here is not to transcend our relation to objects as a mastery of the ideological, but to engage our subjectivities in an empirically realizable way. In other words, it is to sacrifice 'traversing' the fantasy (which is perhaps more realistically described as repressed participation), for *perverting* it.

We know all about the ideological fantasy, and yet...

Let us first define the ideological fantasy for this paper and how it uniquely applies to the deconstructive theorist. Slavoj Žižek writes in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*: "The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel." In its regular application, the ideological fantasy compels us to believe, against our better knowledge, that society may one day exist "as an organic Whole," after we solve a finite number of contingent problems.¹ For instance, a world without racism. Striving to one day free ourselves of the contingent limitations of ideology, Žižek posits that we fail to realize how our social reality, in actuality, is made up from ideology itself, that there is no "real state of things," the refusal of this being the ideological fantasy.²

The ideological fantasy as it pertains to theorists who engage in ideological discourse, then, is, despite knowing better, we still believe and hope that ideology will one day account for its own gaps; that, with enough dialectical thinking and deconstructive work, an ideology free from ideology is possible. However, knowing full well that this kind of thinking is precisely what constitutes the ideological fantasy, the deconstructive theorist undergoes a complex process of

¹ Slavoj Žižek, "How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?," in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 45.

² Žižek, "How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?," 30.

neurotic disavowal (which I will describe later in this paper), to simultaneously conceal and sustain such beliefs, bubbling beneath the theoretical language it has seemingly mastered.

Despite this knowledge, it remains necessary to first remember the meaningful potential deconstruction offers for combatting the ideological fantasy all the same. Concerned with the work of destabilizing ideology and its fantasies, deconstruction is important precisely for ethics. Deconstructionists understand that unconscious desire is not fated to complete darkness in the realm of our conscious thoughts and actions; it is the deconstructionist's noble responsibility to remain attentive to *the desire of an ideology's own framework*, to not just be subjected to it. As Mari Ruti writes in *Distillations*, this meticulous and suspicious attitude toward desire is foundational to the roots of critical theory:

"Althusser explained how we come to desire the ideological structures of dominant society; the Frankfurt School analyzed the ways in which the culture industry causes us to desire what capitalism wants us to desire; Barthes revealed the power of cultural mythologies over our psychic lives; and Foucault illustrated the manner in which biopolitical conditioning produces the parameters of our subjectivity. No wonder, then, that contemporary theory does not trust that our desire is in fact *ours*."³

Deconstructive work comes hand-in-hand with a mobilization of the political agency and awareness of subjects *as well as* deconstructed understandings of us and our others as complex subjects beyond the veil of objective sociocultural norms. These developments are largely, if not entirely, thanks to the act of suspicion, followed by the act of deconstruction. But, at what point does a relentless, uncompromising pursuit of deconstruction turn on what it originally was intended to preserve? Mari Ruti continues in "The bad habits of critical theory:"

"Progressive critical theory—defined here loosely as a combination of Lacanian psychoanalysis, continental philosophy, poststructuralism, Marxism,

³ Mari Ruti, "Why some things matter more than others: A Lacanian explanation," in *Distillations: Theory, Ethics, Affect* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 89.

cultural studies, and deconstructive feminist and queer theory—has been relentlessly dismissive of habits....

...it has been so thoroughly suspicious of the proclivity of ideas to congeal into rigid, lifeless configurations that it has rejected everything systemic and centralized, that is, everything that smacks of the habitual...

...a paranoid hermeneutics of suspicion: an interpretative practice that distrusts the surface of things, actively digs for hegemonic intent, and flees from all surprises because the worst that could happen would be for the critic to be duped by ideology."⁴

Ruti critiques radical antinormativity's notion that "all efforts at subjective recentering should be discouraged, that, indeed, the more thoroughly pulverized the subject gets, the more 'ethical' it will be."⁵ She writes that the Nietzschean paranoia that "so-called truths are merely metaphors that have become habitual, that have managed to camouflage their fictitious origins," haunts critical theorists to the point that they are willing to take extensive means to remain as antinormative as possible, perhaps to the point that it begins to unwittingly collapse back into normativity.⁶

Seething at the work of 'de facto structuralists' posing as otherwise and panicking at the prospect of all efforts collapsing back into structuralism, of encountering the horrific realization that all our work was pseudo-deconstruction all along—the paranoid fear of falling victim to a stealthy and perverted ideological fantasy becomes, to the deconstructive theorist, yet another 'illusion' which binds us deeper to it. In the midst of these noble and deconstructive pursuits, a familiar picture returns to us; a desire for the *ultimate* recognition: the ideological object mastered; no more problems to be had in sight. It seems that no matter how many times over we manage to master the ideological fantasy in language or knowledge, its primordial grasp on us stays intact all the same. Theorists know all about the ideological fantasy, and yet, the ideological

⁴ Mari Ruti, "The Bad Habits of Critical Theory" in *Distillations: Theory, Ethics, Affect* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

fantasy still remains rife and undetected, albeit in a slightly more complex manner. Perhaps this is an answer to the question Ruti poses in "The bad habits of critical theory": "Why do we want to kill the subject?"⁷ Having become so advanced in the work of deconstruction, theorists seem to have arrived at the conclusion that the only solution to the ideological fantasy would be to 'obliterate' its cause – the subject itself.

Ironically, the most noble efforts in antinormative ethics end up taking a normative form, in which the subject of desire is the contingent stain, and a paranoia of anything infiltrated with this desire, becomes the ideal standard. To turn Lacanian ethics onto its own interlocutors; coinciding with unprecedented developments in antinormative ethics is an abnormally high level of anxiety. This seems counterintuitive: shouldn't advancement in Lacanian ethics result in *lower* levels of anxiety? In her chapter, "Why is there so much anxiety?" Ruti writes that nothing seems to "fully explain the phenomenon of extreme levels of anxiety among individuals who are not subject to system inequalities or uncertain about their ability to pay the bills."⁸ Ruti goes on to examine how the capitalist fantasy provokes an excessive amount of anxiety for the modern day subject; moving in a slightly different direction, my goal for this paper is to examine how the ideological fantasy does so for the modern day theorist.

Thus, the main problem and exigence of this paper is the anxiety and alienation that results from a paranoid pursuit of deconstruction in contemporary discourse, resulting in ironically *unethical* effects for its interlocutors. Take, for instance, Chidi from *The Good Place*, an ethics professor who is ironically still sent to hell for the amount of suffering and stress he inflicted onto himself and others under the reins of endless, neurotic ethical discourse.

"Eleanor: But wait, why is Chidi here?"

⁷ Ibid., 60.

⁸ Ruti, "Why some things matter more than others," 118.

Chidi: Well, uh... there's something you don't know about me. I read an article saying that growing almonds was bad for the environment, and yet I continued to use almond milk in my coffee...

Michael: No, dingus! You hurt everyone in your life with your rigidity and your indecisiveness.

Chidi: Oh, fork! You're right. Every friend, every girlfriend was driven nuts because I couldn't do anything. I missed my mom's back surgery because I had already promised my landlord's nephew that I would help him figure out his new phone. I made everyone miserable."⁹

As yet another manifestation of the ideological fantasy in the heart of the discipline who knows it best, I posit that the inability to 'see through' the illusion of freedom Žižek describes in the ideological fantasy is directly related to a neurotic fixation on the desire of the Other. In the next sections, I will attempt to describe the relation between this neurotic fixation on the Other and its subsequent anxiety as it pertains to the ideological fantasy.

Rethinking perversion (Who desires the law?)

It might be tempting to ascribe moral judgements to perversion as a whole, but truly, neuroticism is not a 'neutral' or 'more ethical' libidinal economy, and I warn against such assumptions when trying to grapple with deconstruction and ethics. Certainly perversion and ethical violations can be closely associated, but, as Rothenberg and Foster write in *Perversion and the Social Relation*, "resistance to the law might not be the only way of going wrong."¹⁰ For instance, think about the potency of the neurotic paranoia behind antisemitism. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt describes one of the most prominent Nazi war criminals, Adolf Eichmann, who eventually committed suicide after his Jewish heritage was revealed:

⁹ "Michael's Gambit," season 1, episode 13, directed by Michael Schur, written by Michael Schur, aired January 19, 2017, on NBC, in *The Good Place*.

¹⁰ Molly Rothenberg and Dennis Foster, "Introduction: Beneath the Skin: Perversion and Social Analysis," in *Perversion and the Social Relation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 1

“The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together.”¹¹

The antisemite, as well as much of racism, does not operate from perversion or sadism, but rather from paranoia and rage of the supposedly perverse, secret, and “dirty enjoyment” of the Jew, desperately seeking "justice for those whom the Jews exploit" by any means possible. I say all this to mean that, oftentimes, it is the *neurotic* fantasy, *not* the perverse one, which has the ability to incur the most harm. Furthermore, it is often the late-stage neurotic fantasy's *adoption* of perverse disavowal that facilitates the most violence and damage in our world. As Rothenberg and Foster write, "in failing to recognize that the perverse retains its power to sustain social relations, we not only risk missing the jouissance that binds us to others, but we also risk falling prey to the far more dangerous political injunction that we lose ourselves in the cause."¹² With this in mind, this section aims to examine the deceptive characteristics of perversion, as well as what avenues perversion might open up for a discourse which currently finds itself operating at a largely neurotic scale.

One of the best essays I have ever read on perversion is “Perversion” by Bruce Fink. Clinical perversion is often a result of the law (the Father's "No!") failing to cement itself in childhood to develop one’s grounded sense of subjectivity in relation to their Other. For example, maybe you had an extremely perverse maternal figure in your life with no other parental authority to mediate her enjoyment. As a result, Fink writes, although alienation or "primal repression, a splitting into unconscious and conscious," occurs, *separation* from the Other never

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 276.

¹² Rothenberg and Foster, “Introduction,” 13–14.

does for the pervert, making them particularly vulnerable to an overwhelming influx of jouissance.¹³ Thus the traumatized pervert roots its desire *specifically* in transgressing the law.

Bruce Fink writes in *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*:

"What appears from the outside to be a no-holds-barred pursuit of satisfaction by the pervert himself is, in fact, a defense of sorts: the attempt to bring into being a law that restrains the pervert's jouissance, that bridles or checks him on the road to jouissance (Seminar X, February 27, 1963). The pervert's will to jouissance (pursuit of satisfaction) encounters its limit in a law of his own making—a law he makes the Other lay down, stipulate, mandate..."¹⁴

Fink's keen insight here reveals that the pervert is performatively but *not* empirically involved in the production of unmediated jouissance. The pervert explicitly and consciously refuses their subjection to the law precisely because it struggles to be subject to it and needs to place limits on its jouissance. True perversion doesn't *disregard* the law as if it is some nuisance; it *needs* to prop up the law that failed to present itself sufficiently in childhood. It looks over to the law *while* transgressing. They transgress *for* the law, not for their Other. It is here again that we find the pervert's libidinal investment placed *away* from the Other, in contrast to the neurotic.

Fink writes:

"The pervert does not say to himself, 'I'm doing all of this in order to be able to complete my own separation, my own castration; I've got to manage to make the Other exist and get the law pronounced!' Instead, he conceives of himself quite differently: as the object ready and willing to do anything to give the Other pleasure in masochism, as the instrument of the Other's anxiety in sadism, and so on."¹⁵

We tend to think that perverts enjoy endlessly and lavishly because that is what they loudly proclaim. However, this is a deceptive move. Bruce Fink writes about the "trap" that many psychoanalysts fall into when analyzing perverts, of thinking that the pervert "must be

¹³ Bruce Fink, "Perversion," in *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 170.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 192

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

getting an awful lot more satisfaction in life."¹⁶ But, oftentimes, the enjoyment belongs to the *paranoiac*, who 'gets off' on every semblance of reality seeming to affirm their fantasies. When it comes to living up to their reputations in practice, in many ways perverts are even more neurotic than neurotics, neurotics even more perverse than perverts. Perhaps those who we might consider perverts as cultural phenomenons might be *colloquially* perverse: they enjoy things with no shame because they are ignorant to the true consequences of their actions. But it is with ignorance, *not* perversion, that comes the absence of shame. Psychoanalytic perversion isn't just ignorance: it's knowing *full well* the ethical consequences and implications of one's actions, and then proceeding to derive their pleasure *precisely* from transgressing the law. It's not that perverts don't have shame; it's that the thing that is supposed to be their "shame" is only a shell of shame that appropriates the "real" shame of neurotics. Their true shame is elsewhere, and often much more repressed than neurotic shame.

Despite the way it might seem, the perverse sexuality is not truly perverse through and through. Similarly to the neurotic, the pervert, in its own convoluted way, is concerned with protecting itself from the Other's jouissance. This is another way in which we ought to rethink perversion and the moral judgements we ascribe to it. Concerned with the mediation of "evil" jouissance, and as we will discover next, deeply concerned with the law, stereotypes of a simplistic, enjoying pervert-object fall through, replaced by a deceptively complex subject.¹⁷ Deceptively, the true activity of perversion is not endless indulgence, but rather a stylization of one's terrifying shame. What does this mean for this paper, and why do I emphasize this? My suggestion here is that a rethinking of perversion as it orients itself to the law and its desire opens up ethical avenues realistically adoptable by *all* subjects regardless of their libidinal economy.

¹⁶ Ibid., 180.

¹⁷ Lacan once referred to it in Seminar VII as "my evil jouissance."

My goal, then, is to draw out how the deceptive underpinnings of the pervert's relation to the Other, points toward a worthwhile reconsideration of how we should approach deconstructive work as subjects of the ideological fantasy. Speaking to the adoptability of perversion, it is important to note that all subjects have interlocking perverse and neurotic elements; no one is the perfect image of a 'neurotic' or 'pervert' through and through. I wish to bring up a moment in *The Pleasure of the Text* where Roland Barthes describes something he calls the *historical subject*:

"for it is at the conclusion of a very complex of biographical, historical, sociological, neurotic elements...that I control the contradictory interplay of (cultural) pleasure and (non-cultural) bliss, and that I write myself as a subject at present out of place, arriving too soon or too late...anachronic subject, adrift".¹⁸

Barthes' description of the historical subject is significant because it resists a simplistic understanding of the psychoanalytic subject as idealistic or normative. The contingent labels of "perverse" and "neurotic" are often used in discourse to paradoxically gesture at some innate truth of human sexuality, but Barthes intentionally frames it the subject the *historical subject*, in which their imperfections and failure to grasp the subject reveal an opportunity to precede existing notions of the libidinal economy. In other words, no subject is without both perverse and neurotic, cultural and noncultural, intelligible and unintelligible elements, all of which engage in a "contradictory interplay" to form the psychoanalytic subject, aesthetic and historical. I say all this to mean, we can use historical developments in psychoanalysis to develop a reasonably concrete, reasonably fluid understanding of perversion, to ultimately recognize and intuit where it may settle into the parts of our subjectivity we can access (for as deconstructionists we know that we are not doomed to complete darkness from our unconscious desire). I will try my best to write in a manner that conveys what a perverse and neurotic logic 'feels like,' as well as give an

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 62–63.

empirical account of this as it applies to critical discourse in the section, 'Subjectivity at the level of the signifier.'

My analysis of perversion and neuroticism will center around each subject's relation to the law and the Other, in which bringing up the law necessitates bringing up disavowal. In her book, *Disavowal*, Alenka Zupancic recites the formula of: "I know well, but all the same..." in which disavowal is not a denial of facts but "gladly announc[ing] knowing all about them," operating from a "perverse form of reason."¹⁹ Although disavowal is typically reserved for describing the pervert who refuses the law, I contend in this section that the paranoid fantasy of 'pseudo-deconstruction' takes a form of *neurotic disavowal*. Disavowal can be simplified for both neurosis and perversion similarly: "I know very well that it's true, but still I refuse it," in which this act of refusal is itself the source of one's pleasure; the difference between perverse and neurotic disavowal is the *object* of their refusal. If perverse disavowal is a refusal of the law and identification with the Other, then neurotic disavowal is a *refusal of the Other and identification with the law*. Although these two conceptions of disavowal seem to be opposites, they actually have the same exact dual function: 1) refusal as a means of avoiding a traumatic encounter with their own shameful libidinal investment in the fantasy, and 2) refusal as a mediated means of sustaining the pleasure of the fantasy.

Although perverse disavowal is not an 'ethical' maneuver either, it is easy to spot and thus 'can't get very far' on its own (that is, without a neurotic fantasy underpinning it – many seemingly perverse campaigns are often concealing a very neurotic fantasy), so to speak. It is also often a source of relief for neurotics to avoid encountering their own libidinal investments; we prefer to fixate on the individual who shouts "I HATE JEWS AND I'M NOT AFRAID TO SAY IT! WE NEED ANOTHER HOLOCAUST!" as opposed to examining our own libidinal

¹⁹ Alenka Zupancič, "Perverse Disavowal and the Rhetoric of the End," *Filozofski Vestnik* 43, no. 2 (2022): 94.

investments in the antisemitic fantasy. On the other hand, neurotic disavowal, which is more complex, often goes undetected and thus is more capable of progressing itself within the fantasy. My suggestion of 'perverting the ideological fantasy,' then, is not to adopt perverse *disavowal* (identification with explicit transgression), but rather to redirect our libidinal investments from the Other to the law (via a counterintuitive identification *with* the Other).

Let us conceive of the law and the Other specifically for the contemporary theorist's ideological fantasy. The law of the father responsible for castration exists in the deconstructionist's fantasy as a "No! You are not allowed to infect and corrupt your work with seductive images and metaphors which are so shamelessly distorted; you are not to interpret and write from that disgusting gluttony of yours; you are not to relate to the object of inquiry on the skewed basis of pleasure and satisfaction with no regard for the horrific danger of believing false truths or committing pseudo-deconstruction; I won't allow it." The role of the mOther, then, might be some promissory and perfect object which "knows" the secret key to mastering ideology, and elicits a gaze onto her subject who desperately longs to know what she knows. This description of the Other in the case of the ideological fantasy, waits for the theorist to "come and find out," promising wholeness once the secret to ideology has been achieved, to which immense enjoyment for both the subject and the Other is implied. This is ironic; the neurotic's refusal of their desire is *in the interest of their desire*.

Following our understanding of perversion as illuminated by Fink, the pervert unconsciously wishes for the father to castrate it into a subject of desire, as, despite what the pervert loudly proclaims it wants, the unrelenting pulsing of an Žižekian 'undead organ without a body' for the plain purpose of satisfaction, or a genuine reunion with the primordial mOther, is, in reality, a kind of horrific violence beyond comprehension, similar to what Fink describes an

"uncontrollable invasion of jouissance": "The body, which has been for the most part rid of jouissance, is suddenly inundated with it, invaded by it. It comes back with a vengeance, we might say, for the psychotic may well experience it as an attack, an invasion, or forcible entry."²⁰ This is precisely what the perverse economy is designed to avoid. On the other hand, the neurotic unconsciously wishes for the Other to desire it in an unlawful manner, echoing, "You're not like the other ones. I prefer you in the bad way," because an existence consisting purely of the law is the pulsing of an undead organ all the same. In some ways, the neurotic, who often cannot even speak of its disavowal, disavows more genuinely than the performative refusal of the pervert.

The pervert disavows the law of the father, while the neurotic disavows the desire of the mOther. The pervert identifies with the side of the mOther because of its unconscious need for the father to reinstate it as a subject of desire, while the neurotic identifies with the side of the father because of its unconscious desire for the mOther. So, the formula of disavowal being "I know very well that it's true, but still I refuse it," is followed by a more deeply buried, "I refuse it because I secretly wish for it to be true," followed by an even more deeply buried, "I *need* it to be true for me, my greatest fear is that it is *not* true, but seeking it consciously is far too violent and dangerous for me; my unconscious needs to ensure it maintains a grasp on me without my direct involvement."

The neurotic subject refuses to acknowledge that it unconsciously desires to know what the mOther knows, that it unconsciously desires for the mOther to have skewed desires, and the strongest refusal of all - its secret wish to be *that* for the mOther; to be her object of enjoyment. I would even go so far as to argue that this elusive 'secret' to mastering ideology for a 'perfected ethics,' which the mOther's promissory gaze harbors, is, in fact, a thinly concealed trope,

²⁰ Fink, Bruce. "Psychosis." In *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997, 97.

dominated not by the law, but by *corruption and enjoyment*. This is certainly not to say that neurotic deconstructionists do not care deeply about ethics, but rather that a certain fixation on an ultimate form of ethics is evidently bound up with their own desire and thus their own ethical implications. When examined more closely, the neurotic fixation on triumphing beyond the ideological fantasy, via abstinence and suspicion, operates on a logic which *collapses* the ideological fantasy and its supposed opposite, pure deconstruction. The mOther, who silently offers the theorist *the* elusive solution to deconstructing the ideological fantasy in the most supremely subversive manner, is nothing but a recreation of the ideological fantasy under a new face and name. When all the layers of disavowal and repression dissolve, the picture becomes clear and slightly destabilizing: the true neurotic fears an entirely uncorrupted discourse with no satisfaction; the neurotic desires corruption. The true pervert fears an entirely corrupted discourse with all the satisfaction; the pervert desires the law.

A more empowering relation to the Other

The aim of deconstruction is often to identify and extinguish the warping effect of desire from its own framework. Understandably, this is in the interest of maintaining as rigorous and genuine a conception of ethics as possible. Yet, Mari Ruti recalls Lacan's suggestion that, there is "no such thing as desire wholly divorced from its social environment," but rather that there are "degrees of freedom and unfreedom," wherein the task of psychoanalysis as a "practice of ethics" is to grant subjects the ability to maintain "a critical distance from the desire of the Other."²¹ By redirecting the object of our libidinal investments, I argue that this distance from the Other becomes less of a predetermined fixation (which might only strengthen the grip that the Other has on us) and more of an aftereffect. Thus, a deconstructive pursuit of ethics, in addition to

²¹ Ruti, "Why some things matter more than others," 106-107.

minimizing any undetected warping effects of desire, ought to also recognize that a neurotic pursuit of pulverizing and disavowing one's own desire is an exercise of its own form of desire. My emphasis is the relevance of this 'freedom' and 'unfreedom' in deconstructive ethics, not just from one's 'warped' desires, but from a fixation on the image of 'achieved freedom from warped desire' *as its own form of desire*.

Stubborn desires. My argument in this subsection is that a neurotic fixation on pursuing deconstruction finds itself wrapped up with the desire of the Other and inadvertently strengthens the logic of the ideological fantasy, this neurotic proximity to the desire of the Other being responsible for the subject's excessive anxiety. My goal is to reframe perversion as an alternative relation to the Other, and as a method of desire with liberatory effects from this anxiety. Addressing the "extreme levels of anxiety" in subjects despite many of these individuals being "well-off Western subjects" with no objective source of instability in their life, Ruti differentiates "true" or "stubborn" desire from the desire of the Other, and offers up this true, stubborn desire as a remedy to our injurious anxiety.²² Ruti quotes Lacan in *Seminar VIII* on the, counterintuitively, pacifying potential of "true" desire:

'a "slight lifting of anxiety...occurs every time the subject's desire is truly at work...If anxiety is what I told you it is, a relationship that props up desire where the object is lacking, then by inverting the terms, we see that desire is a remedy for anxiety...Anyone who is slightly neurotic knows as much about it as you do, if not even more. The support found in desire, as awkward as desire may be given all the guilt that accompanies it, is still much easier to maintain than the position of anxiety"(370)...As Lacan explains, when the subject's desire is "truly at work," anxiety is alleviated'²³

I wish to connect perversion with Ruti's formulation of the "stubborn" desire which distinguishes itself from the desire of the Other, in which the pervert's stubborn desire and

²² Ibid., 118.

²³ Ibid., 123-124.

fixation is on the law itself. My reciprocal implication, then, is that an excessively paranoid pursuit of the law (in relentless hopes of achieving a 'perfected' ethics) backfires on itself because such a neurotic orientation operates from the desire of the Other. To clarify—I am working with two main terms here: 1) the law of the father, and 2) the desire of the mOther.²⁴ Let me return to contrasting neurotic and perverse relations to the Other. Fink references Lacan on the neurotic and pervert both consciously proclaim: "The neurotic says, 'The Other must not get off on me!' while certain perverts seem to say, 'Let the Other get off on me!' 'Let me become the instrument of the Other's jouissance' (Ecrits, 823/320)."²⁵ The difference here is perversion's identification with the Other.

Identification with the Other. The neurotic, who insists that the Other "must not get off on me!" identifies with the law (and is thus unconsciously libidinally invested in the Other); the pervert, who insists, "let the Other get off on me!" identifies with the Other (and is thus unconsciously libidinally invested in the law). My argument is that a perverse identification *with* the Other counterintuitively offers a liberatory distance *from* it. Both neurotic and perverse economies are inevitably bound up with their own desire; discourse can never be bleached to the point of infathomable perfection; what becomes relevant for an ethics of discourse *and* a discourse of ethics, then, is not reducing desire, but reducing anxiety.

A more neurotic relationship to the law insists on the neutrality of their Other, disavowing the traumatic existence of their enjoyment, which, in turn, only grants it a much higher status than the pervert. To refuse is to desire; the sacrifice that the neurotic refuses, is to let go of the possibility that a 'truly' subversive ideology free from the 'corruption' of one's own

²⁴ When I say 'law,' I invoke the implications of the law of the father; when I say 'Other,' it invokes the implications of the desire of the mOther. I don't wish to constantly say father and mOther, though, because oftentimes the role of the law and the desire of the Other, despite stemming back to the psychoanalytic father and mother figure, have little to nothing to do with one's actual father and mother in one's active experience.

²⁵ Fink, "Perversion," 192.

desire exists; the neurotic refuses to let go of an ideology free from ideology. The neurotic disavowal of "I know the ideological fantasy lies, but still..." repeatedly revitalizes the ideological fantasy by attempting to master it. The neurotic, who disavows their inability to master or rid themselves of their desire for the Other, and refuses the desire of the Other, only ends up tightening the Other's grip on them. On the other hand, the pervert disavows the law, "I know this is wrong, but still..." *in order to unconsciously strengthen the law's existence* as a way to mediate jouissance; its stubborn fixation births the law itself. The pervert's unconscious propping up of the law (the No!) grants the Other a conditional power to give it pleasure, but also grants the perverse subject power in *willing* to be subjected to it on their own terms, a method of stylizing one's shame (as opposed to disavowing it altogether). This destabilizes the No! and, in an almost comedic or lighthearted way, both protects the perverse subject from an unmediated deluge of jouissance (which Lacan once referred to in *Seminar VII* as "*my evil jouissance*") and gives them access to that mediated pleasure only a split subject could receive.

Claiming the Other's enjoyment on "one's own terms," so to speak, as opposed to disavowing it altogether, is a perverse method, a method of stylizing shame (in which Judith Butler's work on repeated performative acts becomes relevant). However, on the topic of shame: since the shame of unconsciously "indulging" in the ideological fantasy for theoretical discourse is not as nearly as socially and politically charged as, for instance, unconsciously indulging in the antisemitic fantasy, we don't find perverse disavowal's identification with explicit transgression ("FUCK THE LAW! I'M A PROUD RACIST!") as prominent. What becomes relevant to focus on, then, is not necessarily vocally expressing our shame for its pacifying effect on both ourselves and our Other in the sociopolitical sphere, but instead loosening the grip of the Other for its anxiety-relieving effect from neurotic disavowal (which certainly still involves grappling

with our shame, but perhaps not necessarily in such an explicit or vocal manner). Via an identification *with* the Other, our Other becomes not some pervasive, haunting God, but one's own creation, furthermore, *oneself*. The pervert knows there is no "ideology free from ideology" for example, and grants charity to the law (by loudly refusing it) precisely because, a) it recognizes its failure and thus wields the authority to call it into being on its own terms, and b) in a way, it *believes* in the law not as some haunting and paralyzing gaze, but rather a way to enter the social realm. To which Rothenberg and Foster write, "the resistance (or perhaps even subversion) that perversion offers to the father, to the law," may, in some cases, "promise freedom."²⁶

As opposed to traversal. Why do I propose *perversing* instead of *traversing* the fantasy? As Žižek writes, knowledge is certainly not on the side of the ideological fantasy's illusion – "They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know."²⁷ Along the same vein, *traversing*, or *realizing*, "there is no Other of the Other" does not work for the ideological fantasy because what is at stake here is not a lack of knowledge or reason but rather an inability to overcome one's obsession with mastering the ideological object (and subsequently covering up this obsession). The neurotic theorist *knows* there is no Other of the Other; but still, it acts as if it does not know. *Still*, the theorist refuses and desires the mOther who waits for the theorist to join her in the wholeness of ideology.

Traversal is certainly related to 'perversal' of the fantasy, but perversal finds itself less bound by language of the symbolic; similar to how one cannot shortcut from rim to goal in the Lacanian circuit of the drive without first circumventing the objet *a*, one cannot traverse the fantasy simply via conscious will. The alternative route of perversal does not depend on traversal

²⁶ Rothenberg and Foster, "Introduction," 2.

²⁷ Žižek, "How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?," 30.

to loosen the reins of the ideological fantasy, as it operates from its refusal of the law, not of knowledge. In many ways traversal is prone to recreating the same neurotic disavowal which insists on a mastery of the fantasy: "I know there is no Other of the Other; I know the ideological fantasy lies; I know there is no *'Finally!'* where I *'solve'* it and receive ultimate recognition." But we know that "knowing better than that," or a full comprehension of what it means to 'traverse the fantasy,' does not necessarily correlate to their actual relation to the fantasy. Oftentimes, this act of disavowal: "I know better than that," *only serves to strengthen the fantasy.*

A Žižekian might say, "well that's not *true* traversal; that's a skill issue," but I think that's still a neurotic thing to say. The inability to *traverse* the fantasy despite knowing full well what it is and how it works is a not simply a *skill* issue, but is also a *libidinal* issue; the concept of traversing the fantasy encourages symbolic cerebral stimulation, but this is not located near one's libidinal investments; it does not stir the unconscious. I'm not naive enough to think that this paper can somehow escape its own ideological confines, but I have tried to write in such a way that might trigger a familiarity of libidinal sensations, offering phrases such as, "You're not like the other ones. You are special in the *bad* way." Perhaps I have been inconsiderate to particularly neurotic readers as I have stripped them of defenses, but I felt that it was necessary for this paper; offering phrases along the lines of, "It is not the pervert who desires corruption: truly, the neurotic is the one who wishes for it." This is why cultural objects such as movies are important for deconstruction in particular and should not be eclipsed by an excessively neurotic interpretation so soon; such forms of cultural consumption have the ability to access and stimulate our subjectivity more than thinking alone can.

Subjectivity at the level of the signifier

"No need to throw out one's chest..."

— Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

I have spent the majority of this paper psychoanalyzing the neurotic and perverse subjects of the ideological fantasy quite abstractly. Here, I am interested in developing a more empirical account of perverting the ideological fantasy as it pertains to discourse, in which I draw a connection between a perverse identification with the Other and something I describe as 'subjectivity at the level of the signifier.' To begin, Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* resembles a perverse relation to the text for us to examine:

"The pleasure of the text is not necessarily of a triumphant, heroic, muscular type. No need to throw out one's chest. My pleasure can very well take the form of a drift. *Drifting* occurs whenever *I do not respect the whole*, and whenever, by dint of seeming driven about by language's illusions, seductions, and intimidations, like a cork on the waves, I remain motionless, pivoting on the *intractable* bliss that binds me to the text (to the world). Drifting occurs whenever social language, the sociolect, *fails me* (as we say: *my courage fails me*). Thus another name for drifting would be: *the Intractable*—or perhaps even: Stupidity.²⁸

Barthes goes on to describe the pleasure of the text as situating oneself at the level of the signifier: "That is the pleasure of the text: value shifted to the sumptuous rank of the signifier."²⁹ This act of suspension or refusing meaning belongs to perversion; in a simplistic sense, perverse subjects enjoy at the level of the signifier instead of progressing onto the signified. One way to describe perverting the ideological fantasy is, when engaging in any form of discourse or work, the act of pausing the hermeneutic instinct, to instead pause at the level of the signifier and begin invoking your desire *at that point*. Put simply, it is about being more intuitive without grasping for the crutch of language to precede and supplant both the perception and expression of any work, acknowledging the possibility that one's 'skewed' desire may sacrifice some 'pristine'

²⁸ Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 18-19.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

clarity or precision, and maybe even a 'perfect' conception of ethics. It is also about engaging with the aesthetic dimensions of discourse in an *autoerotic manner*, which I will explain shortly.

Comparable to Barthes' "body of bliss" is the identifying with the symptom, or the *sinthome*. In "From Symptom to *Sinthome*," Slavoj Žižek recounts the "final Lacanian definition of the end of the psychoanalytic process as "identification with the symptom" which is "a particular, 'pathological', signifying formation, a binding of enjoyment, an inert stain resisting communication and interpretation."³⁰ Žižek goes on to describe "Symptom as *sinthome*...it is a signifier as bearer of *jouis-sense*, enjoyment-in-sense."³¹ Here I make a connection between enjoying one's symptom and enjoying one's *signifier* as a perverse technique. But how is this celebration of enjoyment without meaning not antithetical to the purpose of discourse? In the most absolute sense, it certainly is. However, unlike Žižek's depiction of the *sinthome* as "filthy, nauseous enjoyment," where he compares the *sinthome* in its "pure form" to "nauseous," gaping wounds on the body, I contend that the signifier contains a resistant quality that situates itself between pure materiality of the letter and the sociosymbolic.³² Distinct from what some theorists might describe as 'operating at the level of the letter,' I would argue for a more nuanced conception of the signifier as irremediably split, the same way the split subject finds itself split between the real and the symbolic.

At this point you might ask me, how is enjoying one's 'signifier' considered an identification *with* the Other? The immediate answer might be to say that, in perversion, the Other's enjoyment is the same as the pervert's enjoyment, and thus to embrace one's own enjoyment is to identify with the Other's enjoyment. But, let's approach this from the opposite side: to refuse committing to the instability of the signifier, or to insist on progressing into

³⁰ Slavoj Žižek, "From Symptom to *Sinthome*," in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 81–84.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 84

meaning and interpretation within the seemingly safe enclosure of the symbolic realm, is to disavow any possible recognition of the Other; this is because the Other exists precisely as the opaque signifier and shameful possibility of enjoyment (everything we lacking subjects do not have). Openly enjoying amidst the opaqueness of the signifier, is to enjoy on indisputably *shameful* terms, is to enjoy *as the Other* – there is no justifying enjoyment that doesn't belong entirely to the symbolic. What results in making space for one's shame within the symbolic, is not irrevocable descendance into the depths of Sodom, but rather a pacifying effect which loosens the reins of the fantasy, equalizing the neurotic effects of lack. Returning to Barthes' historical subject:

"And this body of bliss is also my *historical subject*; for it is at the conclusion of a very complex of biographical, historical, sociological, neurotic elements....that I control the contradictory interplay of (cultural) pleasure and (non-cultural) bliss, and that I write myself as a subject at present out of place, arriving too soon or too late...anachronic subject, adrift"³³

Situating one's subjectivity at the level the signifier thus invokes historical elements and retains the split subject; in other words, we are still operating in the symbolic realm and have not descended into pure materiality or unmediated *jouissance*. And, I argue, that the pleasure of the text can be adopted as a perverse method for ideological discourse, in which the Barthesian 'body of bliss' invokes the aesthetic dimensions of discourse in a borderline *autoerotic* manner, and the socially grounded subject is simultaneously able to participate in the content of the discourse (on a different, parallel dimension). The aesthetic of discourse is full of images and signifiers perceptible to our subjectivity and often engages our desire in more ways than we realize. As I read others' work and write my own, I have realized over time that an aesthetic and gestural activity takes place for me. Of course sometimes I still write from a place of desiring the Other;

³³ Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 62-63.

both remain relevant to me as a subject. I'm hesitant to explain it as it inevitably feels different for everyone, but an aesthetics of discourse for me can be described as something along the lines of: argument as gesture or stroke, critique as tension, style or complexity as beauty. Even more concretely than that, sometimes we become inexplicably fixated on something for no apparent reason—*distinct* from paranoid obsession, it resembles more of a childlike fascination with some random and specific object, almost resembling Freudian autoeroticism. For example, I am inexplicably invested in collapsing neurosis and perversion, to the point where it might not make sense to keep doing it (but still I do it), to the point where it might become alienating for others to read and I cannot account for why. A coincidental relation to an innocuous object or image which has the ability to inexplicably pierce oneself, like Barthes' punctum for the photograph, is indeed a form of aesthetic sentiment that we should not overlook.

Mari Ruti's "second type of desire," describes a visceral stubbornness to fixate on a cherished object, and does not invoke the desire of the Other, but rather pertains to "how an entirely mundane object can become invested with special meaning;" Ruti supplies the example of a decorative string of match boxes Lacan was gifted by a friend, in which Lacan described it as, "The wholly gratuitous, proliferating, superfluous, and quasi absurd character of this collection pointed to its thingness as match box," and "'the Thing that subsists in a match box.'"³⁴ This stubborn and object oriented desire is a perverse gesture and can be adopted in discourse as a stubborn fixation (or at least emphasis) on being an aesthetic subject in discourse, on the mundanity of discourse being invested with an inexplicable, "special meaning" which might have nothing to do with the content itself, but still we insist on it and enjoy it.

We have already suspected that a discourse which is purely discourse is impossible to achieve. So why do we write? Contrary to what Žižek writes in *Surplus Enjoyment*, not all

³⁴ Ruti, "Why some things matter more than others," 111-112.

critique must exist as a relentless critique of critique.³⁵ When something rings in one as disturbingly interesting, as embarrassingly fascinating for perhaps embarrassing and contingent factors, this sign of shame and a need to secretly sublimate this energy into ideological discourse, is a sign that shouldn't be overlooked; nor is it an inconvenience or obstacle to an otherwise 'purer' practice of theory. This is precisely where we reside as subjects, and where ideological discourse can find itself full of color and energy; this direction *toward* confronting and making space for (not just indulging in) our shame and pleasure is to identify with the Other.

Deceptively, the true activity of perversion is not endless indulgence, but rather a stylization of this terrible shame, of our terrible stains, a method which I posit as pacifying, as opposed to binding us deeper into the ideological fantasy via disavowal of the Other's enjoyment. Even as interlocutors in ideological discourse and critique, we are ethically entitled to unexamined sublimations and processes in the creation of our work; we cannot be obligated to transcend our desire. And, ironically, the moment we sacrifice this possibility that such a thing exists, the less of a hold on us this desire of the Other has.

Writing is a creative and perverse gesture to begin with, and, it seems so simple now that I'm saying it, but I believe that an ethics of deconstruction requires actually *enjoying* the discourse even if this enjoyment seems irrelevant to (because of how contingent it is) or maybe even a 'stain' upon the act of discourse itself. What seems obvious when said so plainly is frequently not the case for one's unconscious desire and practice; to operate on the simple logic of, "Yes, I write because I enjoy it, and I enjoy the idea of other people reading my work and enjoying it as well." But such a simplistic description can only exist as secondary observation after a long, embodied grappling with the ideological fantasy, and is not something easily adopted upon reading and understanding its premise. Ironically, the idea of "overcoming the

³⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Surplus Enjoyment: A Guide for the Non-Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 104.

ideological fantasy" itself can be the temporary object or aim of one's fantasy in order to supply the energy needed to undertake such a task. "Traversing" the fantasy seldom looks or feels the way one might conceive of it whilst still operating under said fantasy; in many ways, perversal "traverses" the fantasy more than traversal itself can.

Conclusion

"Call it subversive or call it something else."

— Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*.³⁶

Returning to my anecdote in the introduction; I found that my inability to shake off an inconveniently stubborn charitability to every paper I intended to critique was performing its own argument of sorts, in which I was pushed realize that the exercise of ideological enjoyment is not inherently unethical; sometimes a neurotic academic needs to write a paper for the sake of ideological enjoyment the way an anxious child needs to suck their thumb to self-soothe. We know that deconstruction is important for ethics and is one of the most effective tools against the adverse effects of fantasy. But, despite this, deconstruction is not immune to said fantasies. The ideological fantasy, for deconstructionists, is unique and slightly more complex in that it functions as the fantasy to *overcome* itself; it betrays itself in form, playing out as the wish to achieve an ideology free from ideology.

Without deconstruction, we would be unable to recognize and overcome the destructive limits of the ideological fantasy. But, without fantasy, we would have no energy or motivation to deconstruct in the first place; we would no longer be subjects. A 'perverse' deconstruction sacrifices the possibility of perfected ethics or 'mastering' ideology, *which includes 'pure or perfected deconstruction'* so as to *not* sacrifice its ethical relation to this world of breathing,

³⁶ Butler, Judith. "Preface (1999)." *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2007), xxiv.

empirically split subjectivities. It cedes its role in fighting for this ultimate, noble cause, because such activity is ultimately not neutral; it is underscored by a neurotic disavowal; it is still both irremediably historical *and* ideological, no matter how much one might 'pulverize' the subject (to use Ruti's words) and, lastly, because ethics always goes both ways: its object of discourse must also apply to its own interlocutors.

At first it may seem that loosening the chokehold we have on our desire makes us more vulnerable to ideology, similar to the way overlooking capitalism as benign can manipulate our desire against us, portraying it as our own and true. But these things shouldn't be generalized; "no desire is to be trusted" only gives the paranoid fantasy what it wants. Instead of 'pulverizing the subject' into an inapplicable object as a means of 'overcoming' the ideological fantasy, perhaps we ought to reorient our desire not around the Other but around the mundanity of discourse as being invested with an inexplicable, "special meaning" which might have nothing to do with the content itself, but still we insist on it and enjoy it. This method of allowing the object to disturb discourse beyond the level of the signified, may actually grant us more space and freedom to make new gestures in ideology that we wouldn't have otherwise been able to, under the predetermined intention to make sense of what we are seeing before we know how it makes us feel, at the level of desire.

My rethinking of perversion is not simply engaging in some stereotype of the pervert transgressing the law for their own selfish, greasy satisfaction, but, rather, a kind of refusal of normative antinormativity. In other words, a neurotic form of antinormativity is not itself neutral and should be challenged when it begins to take a normative form.

As Judith Butler writes in *Gender Trouble*:

"Subversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés through their repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition

within commodity culture where 'subversion' carries market value. The effort to name the criterion for subversiveness will always fail, and ought to" (Butler, xxi).

If subversion is to be understood as the closest thing to 'overcoming' the ideological fantasy, then it can not be found in ideology, and certainly not as a static concept. Perhaps a fixation on subverting or overcoming fantasy by conscious will alone ought to be addressed with the unfamiliar reshaping and embrace of our object of disavowal. To use Judith Butler's words, "Call it subversive or call it something else."³⁷

³⁷ Butler, "Preface (1999)," xxiv.

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