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ETHICS BETWEEN PASSIVITY AND TRANSGRESSION: LEVINAS, LACAN, AND VON TRIER

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What does the Levinasian ethical imperative mean for us now, in our post-secular society of late capitalism? What is the nature of the ethical decision: the thoughtless obligation to the other, characterized by passivity and suspense, or, on the contrary, the transgression of this passivity through active decision? These questions and the alternative between passivity and transgression refer to different ethical contexts - Levinasian and Lacanian ethics, which I would like to discuss in my paper. As the title of Sarah Harassym's book implies (Harassym 1998), the encounter between Levinasian and Lacanian ethics is always the missed encounter, the missed date. However, these two thinkers do encounter each other indirectly in concrete ethical situations, for example, in the situations of Lars von Trier's films. I have chosen von Trier's films not only because they reveal ethically ambivalent and controversial ideas, but also because these questions are addressed to female heroines. I think it is not accidental that for Levinas as well as for Lacan the theme of femininity forms the limit of their ethical systems, beyond which ethical decisions are dissolved into the mist of secrecy. The feminist philosophers like Luce Irigaray radically opposed the Levinasian call to think of femininity as otherness *par excellence*, which exists in the mode of secret, hiding, modesty, and sliding away from light. (Irigaray 1991: 1993) Lacan was also under the constant attack of feminists because he refused to conceptualize the feminine *jouissance*, and

discuss it in terms of discourse and knowledge. In other words, the Levinasian as well as the Lacanian ethical universes operate on the condition that they conceptualize femininity as the external limit of their universes, and that they put femininity beyond the limit of knowledge and discourse. Having in mind this exclusion, I hope that examples from von Trier's films will enable us to reconstruct the situation in which these two notions of ethics do encounter each other and in which the feminine is empowered into the position of the ethical subject.

ETHICS BETWEEN DIFFERENCE AND UNIVERSALITY

I would like to start by introducing Levinasian and Lacanian ethics as two competing positions. It is already commonplace to say that Levinas initiated a new line of thought, which takes as its background not the autonomy of the rational subject but the relationship between the subject and the other. According to Levinas, the relationship with the other cannot be regulated by the principles of knowledge; it is intrinsically unpredictable and anarchic. Levinasian ethics is structured around the difference of the other, which, as Levinas insists, is irreducible: it cannot be reduced to one's expectations or become the theme of one's reflections. The other's difference is nothing other than the interval of time, the dimension of temporality: metaphysical subjectivity used to reduce temporality to the 'living present'; the thinking of the other, on the contrary, reinvents time, because the other appears either in the future or in the past, but never in the present moment.

Of course, we can ask if it is possible to think of Levinasian ideas in this pure form, without taking into consideration the subsequent interpretations of his ethics. Here I have in mind first of all the interpretation of Jacques Derrida, which stresses not so much the philosophical and theological, but the political implications of Levinas's ethics. We can say that for Derrida the undecidability of every ethical situation is a sign that we are in the field of the ethical. Every decision to decide is to a more or less extent violent, while it reduces the otherness of the Other. Derrida and his followers reach a paradoxical conclusion that the undecidability of ethical judgment is the necessary condition of ethics in general. As Richard Beardsworth points out, "The very impossibility of judgment is its possibility since, if the judgment were possible, and an account of the law were possible, there would be no need to judge in the first place, and therefore there would be no judgments." (Beardsworth 1996: 40) In other words, the realm of the ethical is conceptually and primordially suspended, because every decision or action would discriminate against other decisions or actions, and, moreover, would be violent in respect to all unaccomplished possibilities.

Of course, we are tempted to ask if this passivity and suspense, implicated by Levinasian ethics and Derridian interpretations, do not open the doors to another evil, which is more terrifying than the “reduction of otherness”. The French philosopher Alain Badiou points out that the undecidability of the ethical or political situation in fact liberates us from the necessity to make a decision and intellectually justifies the status quo. As Peter Hallward notes in his introduction to the essays of Alain Badiou, “radical difference is a matter of ethical indifference. The ethical decision *holds true* only if it is indifferent to differences.” (Hallward 2001: xxxvi) In other words, Badiou abandons the ‘ethics of difference’ and proposes what he calls the ‘truth event’, the engagement in an ethical act. The same position is adopted by Slavoj Žižek, who tries to reconstruct the Lacanian notion of the ethical act, of actual intervention into reality. According to Lacan, the ethical act redefines the contours of reality, re-shapes the definition of the Good. So on the ethical map we can see the clear opposition between Levinasian ethics, which is based on difference and suspension of an ethical act, and Lacanian ethics, which asserts the ethics of an act and is indifferent to differences. But is this opposition between the undecidable suspense and the impetuous necessity to decide so clear and strict? Does Levinasian ethics necessarily prevent one from acting, or making a decision, and does not Lacanian psychoanalysis reveal the uncanny abyss of the subject’s primordial passivity, which keeps the subject always withdrawn?

SUBSTITUTION AND INTERPASSIVITY

In order to answer these questions, let’s take a closer look at Levinas’ notions of passivity and substitution. Levinas defines the subject by not relying on the subject’s capacity of thinking or judgment, but according to the subject’s relationship with the other. Instead of being *subjectum*, subjectivity is substitution, the hostage of the other. For Levinas substitution is the ethical itself; only by being the other, by taking the place of the other can one enter an ethical relationship. What consequences do this ethical imperative have for the subject? How far can we go in taking the responsibility for the other, suffering for the other, or, on the contrary, enjoying its pleasures? Does substitution have the same implications for different genders? Is there any limit, where the Levinasian subject withdraws, saying, for example, that in this situation s/he cannot substitute him/herself, diverge from him/herself, but feels the need to redefine his/her position?

What precisely does substitution mean for Levinas? “Substitution is conceived as the state of being hostage... Substitution is not to be conceived actively, as an initiative, but as this materiality and this passive condition.”

(Lingis 1991: xxiii) Levinas describes substitution as an absolute passivity of the self: “Far from being recognized in the freedom of consciousness, which loses itself and finds itself again, (...) the responsibility for the other, the responsibility in obsession, suggests an absolute passivity of a self that has never been able to diverge from itself, to then enter into its limits, and identify itself by recognizing itself in its past”. (Levinas 1991: 114) Moreover, this passivity turns into an absolute dissolution of the self and, of course, raises the question as to why this dissolution still holds the name of the ‘ethical subject’. Levinas points out this contradiction as well: “In this substitution, in which identity is inverted, this passivity more passive still than the passivity conjoined with action, beyond the inert passivity of the designated, the self is absolved of itself. Is this freedom?” (Levinas 1991: 115)

Here we can start formulating the preliminary questions: What content does the Levinasian notion of passivity contain? Why is it precisely passivity, which opens the experience of the ethical itself? If this passivity is meaningless, as Levinas says, if it is passivity as *non-sense*, can we still interpret it as an ethical activity? Lacanian psychoanalysis reveals the same experience of an inert, meaningless passivity in the visual register: it is the experience of being under the Other’s gaze. Lacan speaks of the experience of the gaze as something “to which I am subjected”, so that we may even speak about the “annihilation of the subject”. As Charles Shepherdson points out, “in the experience of the gaze, my perception is revealed in its fundamental passivity – not a passivity understood as the familiar opposite of ‘activity’, (...) but a more fundamental, more primordial passivity, on the basis of which both passivity and activity are possible”. (Shepherdson 1997: 82) Levinas also mentions this sort of passivity, but tries to make a clear difference between the two: “It is a passivity that is not reducible to exposure to another’s gaze.” (Levinas 1991: 72) That means that for Levinas the Other has a paralyzing power even if this Other is not watching or observing; this is not surprising if we remember that the Other appears for Levinas through the face, which is considered as being omnipresent.

This omnipresence of the Other Levinas describes in terms of obsession and persecution. Lacan, on the contrary, asks the following question: “Is there no satisfaction in being under the gaze?” (Lacan 1978: 71) We can ask what satisfaction does Lacan have in mind? The satisfaction of making himself/herself the object of another will: “It is the subject who determines himself as object, in his encounter with the division of subjectivity”. (Lacan 1978: 168) The Lacanian subject offers himself/herself up as the object that shows itself to be missing in the Other, or, in other words, the subject substitutes himself/herself for the object which makes the Other complete. (Shepherdson 1997: 84) Here we notice that the Lacanian notion of passivity also has an ethical

dimension, while Lacan describes this substitution precisely as *sacrificial*. On the other hand, we can ask if this satisfaction, about which Lacan is speaking, cannot be detected in a Levinasian universe? Is there no satisfaction in being for the other, in the place of the other, or, more precisely, is there no satisfaction in not being?

Is this passivity just a momentary leap of obsession, the repetitive drive for satisfaction, or is it a constant condition, essential to contemporary subjectivity? Žižek interprets the condition of passivity in a very similar way, asking: “What if the fundamental experience of the human subject is not that of the self-presence, (...) but that of a primordial passivity, sentience, of responding, (...) that never acquires positive features but always remain withdrawn, the trace of its own absence?” (Žižek 2000: 664) Žižek develops this idea by introducing the notion of interpassivity,¹ which can be interpreted as the postmodern version of the notion of intersubjectivity. Žižek writes: “Far from being an excessive phenomenon which occurs only in extreme ‘pathological’ situations, interpassivity, (...) is thus the feature which defines the most elementary level, the necessary minimum, of subjectivity”. (Žižek 1997: 116) Here Žižek is quite close to Levinas’s position that the ‘original’ subjective gesture is not self-reflection or auto-affection, but primordial substitution. However, the consequences, which follow from the Levinasian idea of being a passive hostage of the other, and Žižek’s idea of interpassivity, are absolutely different. In the Levinasian universe this situation of responsibility as passivity is or should be sublimated into the ethical act, or, in other words, it is the ethical itself. Žižek interprets interpassivity as a network, as a device to transpose on to the other the inert passivity, which is primordial to the subject. “In order to be an active subject”, Žižek says, “I have to transpose on to the other the inert passivity, which contains the density of my substantial being. Transposing my very passive experience on to another is a much more uncanny phenomenon than that of being active through another: in interpassivity I am decentred in a much more radical way than I am in interactivity, since interpassivity deprives me of the very kernel of my substantial identity.” (Žižek 1997: 116) Žižek’s idea is clearly anti-Levinasian: I am passive not on behalf of the other, but the other is passive on behalf of me.

Another interesting point is that the notion of interpassivity has different implications for different genders. Both for Levinas and Lacan, as I mentioned, femininity is a conceptual limit, which puts femininity beyond knowledge and discourse. Levinas points out that “the nature of femininity is otherness” (1987: 85-88) but this is not the same otherness that has the paralysing power for the Levinasian subject, suspended under the weight of responsibility. Here

¹ For the origins of the term of interpassivity see: Žižek S. *Plague of Fantasies*. New York, London: Verso, 1997, p. 125, reference 28.

we should refer to the claim of Luce Irigaray that in the Levinasian universe there are two levels of otherness: the otherness of the Other which means the Other as other man-son-God, whose infinity suspends the subject tying him with bonds of responsibility. We can describe this situation as ethically active passivity. And there is feminine otherness, which, withdrawn into the darkness and secret, is a passive object to be caressed, but has no position as an ethical subject. Irigaray writes: "After having been so far – or so close – in the approach to the other sex, in my view to the other, to the mystery of the other, Levinas clings on once more to this rock of patriarchy in the very place of carnal love. Although he takes pleasure in caressing, he abandons the feminine other, leaves her to sink, in particular into the darkness of a pseudoanimality, in order to return to his responsibilities in the world of men-amongst-themselves. For him, the feminine does not stand for an other to be respected in her human freedom and human identity. The feminine other is left without her own specific place. On this point, his philosophy falls radically short of ethics." (Irigaray 1991: 113) This feminine passivity, Irigaray points out, is the passivity of matter, e.g. primordial passivity, which lies before the distinction between passivity and activity. It is precisely this primordial passivity that enables Žižek to define the contemporary subjectivity as being in essence feminine: "The thesis that a man tends to act directly and to take on board his act, while a woman prefers to act by proxy, letting another do (or manipulating another into doing) it for her, may sound like the worst cliché... What, however, if this cliché nevertheless points towards the feminine status of the subject? What if the 'original' subjective gesture, the gesture constitutive of subjectivity, is not that of autonomously 'doing something', but, rather, that of the primordial substitution, of withdrawing and letting another do it for me, in my place?" (Žižek 1997: 118-119) To put it in other way, Levinas makes a distinction between the active passivity of men-amongst-themselves and the passive passivity of the feminine, while Žižek tends to define the very structure of interpassive subjectivity as being feminine. Of course, we can reject this idea, as Rosi Braidotti does, as "an anti-feminist regression" (Braidotti 2002: 54) or as some sort of 'postmodernist' misogyny, but the problem is that this model of subjectivity reappears in different contexts and is proposed as attractive contemporary ideology. Lars von Trier's films could be taken as an example of this ideology; here I would like to discuss these films in terms of the logic of passivity and substitution.

LARS VON TRIER'S FILMS AND THE LOGIC OF SUBSTITUTION

Danish film director Lars von Trier is known not only as the leader of 'Dogma', the European independent cinema movement, but also as the author of

ethically ambivalent and controversial films. Here I would like to discuss the so-called ‘Goldenheart Trilogy’ of *Breaking the Waves*, *The Idiots*, and *Dancer in the Dark*. In his interviews von Trier specified two sources of inspiration: they are the fairy tale ‘Goldenheart’ and the novel *Justine* by the Marquis de Sade. Of course, we can ask what common dimension we can find between a fairy tale and de Sade. The answer is very simple: they both seek to redefine the rules of ethical behaviour. This is why at the centre of all three of Trier’s films stands a heroine who, “with a strong belief in the voice of her heart, has the courage to go against the grain of common sense”. (Pisters 2003: 132) At first glance these films seem to reproduce all the stereotypes of feminine passivity and female sacrifice: Bess (*Breaking the Waves*) sacrifices her life for her husband’s health; after Bess dies, her husband Jan miraculously regains his ability to walk. Selma (*Dancer in the Dark*) melodramatically sacrifices herself in a desperate wish that her son literally “could see his grandsons”; she refuses to defend herself in court because it could interrupt the process of healing of her son. Karen (*The Idiots*) destroys her social and personal life in order to fulfil her group leader’s ideology and literally turns into an idiot. All three feminine figures are in the position of being substitutes of the other, being hostage of the other; their excessive goodness and responsibility for the other sublimates them into the ethical figures, in a Levinasian sense. On the other hand, this excessive goodness and obsession with the other reveals its psycho-analytical, Lacanian side: all three heroines find deep satisfaction in being the object of the other’s will – assuming the position of the object-instrument of the other’s *jouissance*. This passive, apathetic position, according to Lacan, is the position of the pervert, displacing the split, which is constitutive of subjectivity on to the other. In order to accomplish their idea of the Good, the heroines are involved in perverse relationships: prostitution (Bess), murder (Selma), and anarchism (Karen). In other words, Trier’s films push us into the ethical deadlock, where responsibility, obsession with the other appears as the obverse of the perverse *jouissance*.

The ethical figures of Lars von Trier’s films open the bundle of questions which arise every time we enter into the realm of the ethical: how far can we go in taking responsibility for the other? At what point does excessive goodness turn into perverse enjoyment? Can we read Levinas with (or against) Lacan, analogically as Lacan and Žižek were reading Kant with (or against) de Sade?² The films do not provide any positive answer, but in fact include into the film structure both models of interpretation: the Levinasian model, according to

² For Lacan’s reading Kant with de Sade see: Lacan J. “Kant avec Sade”. In: *Écrits*. Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1966, p. 765-90; for Žižek’s account of the similarity between Kant and de Sade see: Žižek S. “Kant with (or against) Sade”. In: *The Žižek Reader*, eds. Elisabeth Wright and Edmund Wright Oxford, UK and Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1999, p. 285-301.

which the heroines' choice to be the substitute for the other is demonstrated as an act of excessive goodness (at the coroner's inquest the doctor who treated Bess testifies that the true reason of her death was her goodness), and the Lacanian model, according to which the subject is assuming the position of the object-instrument of the other's will, and turns into the pervert. This position is very close to the Sadian universe where the role of the executioner and the role of the victim are mutually interwoven. Žižek, interpreting *Breaking the Waves*, also points out the ambivalent message of the film: "Is *BW* thus not the utmost 'male chauvinist' film celebrating and elevating into a sublime act of sacrifice the role which is forcefully imposed on woman in patriarchal societies (...): Bess is completely alienated in the male phallic economy, sacrificing her *jouissance* for the sake of her crippled partner's mental masturbation." On the other hand, Žižek observes that the radical attitude of Bess "undermines the phallic economy and enters the domain of *jouissance féminine* by way of her very unconditional surrender to it". "Bess' sacrifice is unconditional (...) and this very absolute immanence undermines the phallic economy." (Žižek 1999: 208-221) So the message of the film is clearly psychotic, denying the content it tries to express.

Here we can notice that the splitting between different ethical ideologies is repeated by splitting in the visual aspect of these films. Every film is shot using different visual codes: *BW*, a melodramatic, pathetic story about love and belief is shot in pseudo-documentary, raw, 'Dogma' style, which is contrasted with romantic and kitschy stills opening every new segment of the film. *DD* is a melodramatic story, which is interrupted by purely musical imaginary scenes; *TI* is split between the static portraits of interviews and 'mad camera' shots, surveying the community of pretended idiots. Could this splitting between different visual codes be interpreted as the uncanny splitting in the ethical itself?

TRANSGRESSION AS AN ETHICAL ACT

Now it's time to ask how this ethics of substitution is revealed in the next film of von Trier – *Dogville*. Here we see the continuation of a fairy tale about the girl with a golden heart: Grace literally identifies with the Levinasian injunction "love your neighbour" and helps the inhabitants of a small town in their daily work. Grace provides a visual picture of what it means to be a hostage, in a Levinasian sense: the inhabitants get used to Grace's goodness very quickly, and start to exploit her in all aspects. If we take a look at the form of the film, we notice that it is shot in anti-'Dogma' style: the decorations are conventional, referring to the Brechtian theater. The film is full of trivial repetitions and self-evidences, which acquire their meaning only at the end, when all our

expectations are literally shot down: the end of the film is radical because, as Trier says, “the Goldenheart became a feminist”. The final shots, where Grace exterminates all human beings and burns the town, are sublimated into the pathos of Greek tragedy, resolving the eternal question of feminine excess. Grace acts as a repulsive monster, but, at the same time, her act still retains the beauty of the sublime. Here Grace reveals her closeness to her Greek ancestors - Medea, Electra, and Antigone. At the same time she poses the question: What is the nature and meaning of an ethical act?

For Lacan, the ultimate horizon of ethics is *not* the infinite responsibility for the other, but the act, which intervenes into social reality and changes the very coordinates of what is perceived as possible. Žižek points out that “The act is for him strictly correlative to the suspension of the big Other, not only in the sense of the symbolic network that forms the substance of the subject’s existence, but also in the sense of the absent originator of the ethical call, of the one who addresses us and to whom we are irreducibly indebted and/or responsible.” (Žižek 2000: 668) The ethical act means the abyss where either the undecidability, or the passivity are abandoned and transformed into a concrete decision. The act is a decision to decide, because “it still remains my (the subject’s) responsibility to translate this decision to decide into a concrete, actual intervention, to invent a new rule out of a singular situation. This is the Lacanian act in which the abyss of absolute freedom, autonomy, and responsibility coincides with an unconditional necessity.” (Žižek 2000: 668-669) Of course, we feel obliged to ask if these acts have something to do with the notion of the good: for example, is Antigone’s gesture of civil disobedience or Grace’s radical revenge compatible with any existing notion of the good? Grace gives an account of her radical act – she refuses to be ‘an example’, a particular case, which by exclusion refers to the universality of the law. This is similar to Antigone who confronts the laws of the city relying on her unique, particular situation. That means they act not simply beyond the good, but in fact redefine what counts as good. Here we come very close to the definition of transgression, which I find very inspiring: according to this definition the ethical act proper is a transgression of the legal norm. Žižek defines transgression as an act, which, in contrast to a simple criminal violation, does not simply violate the legal norm, but redefines what is a legal norm. “The moral law doesn’t follow the good – it generates a new shape of what counts as good”. (Žižek 2000: 672) However, the conceptual definition of transgression involves a certain self-contradiction: on the one hand, Lacan and Žižek argue that the experience of transgression is always traumatic and at first sight is not recognizable as an ethical act. On the other hand, Žižek and Badiou insist that this experience could be universalized, turned into a ‘truth event’, which by definition should be universal. Can we imagine a universal transgression?

Or, on the contrary, should transgression always retain something from the particular – local, sensual, gendered – situation? Interpreting transgression in this way, we are not so far from a Levinasian definition of the ethical, which is also immersed in particularity and sensuality; although it is a different kind of particularity, liberated from passivity and suspense. Such an understanding of transgression should restore a gender dimension in the ethical: it should disclose femininity from the darkness and secrecy and empower the gendered difference in the ethical realm.

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ETIKA TARP PASYVUMO IR TRANSGRESIJOS: LEVINAS,
LACANAS IR VON TRIERAS

SANTRAUKA

Straipsnyje keliamas klausimas, kokia yra etinio santykio prigimtis: ar etinis santykis reiškia besąlygišką atsakomybę Kitam, kuri virsta visišku pasyvumu bei sąstingiu, ar, priešingai, šio pasyvumo transgresiją, aktyvų pasiryžimą veikti? Ši etikos aporija tampa akivaizdi sugretinus Emmanuelio Levino ir Jacques'o Lacano etikos sampratas. Levino etinė samprata implikuoja etinio subjekto pasyvumą, bet kokį minties ir veiksmo suspendavimą; neatsitiktinai etinį santykį Levinas apibrėžia pasitelkdamas substitucijos sąvoką. Substitucija reiškia visišką subjekto pasyvumą, daug gilesnį nei tradicinė aktyvumo ir pasyvumo priešprieša. Kitaip tariant, Kito etinis reikalavimas suspenduoja subjekto laisvę, virsta savotišku paralyžiumi ir obsesija. Psichoanalizė siūlo visiškai priešingą etinio santykio modelį: Lacanas ir Žižekas etinį veiksmą suvokia kaip egzistuojančių dėsnių ir normų transgresiją, kaip beatodairišką pasiryžimą veikti. Etiką įsteigia ne begalinė atsakomybė Kitam, bet veiksmas, kuris įsiveržia į realybę ir pakeičia patį jos suvokimą. Ši etinė aporija tarp pasyvumo ir veiksmo straipsnyje analizuojama pasitelkiant danų režisieriaus Larso von Triero filmus *Prieš bangas*, *Šokėja tamsoje*, *Idiotai*. Šie filmai ne tik kelia svarbius etinius klausimus, bet jiems spręsti pasitelkia filmų herojes moteris. Tiek Levinas, tiek Lacanas vengė tyrinėti moteriškumą, kuris visuomet likdavo jų etinių teorijų paraštėse. Larsas von Trieras, priešingai, etines dilemas sprendžia moteriškumo plotmėje, atskleisdamas tiek kilnias, tiek perversyvias etinio veiksmo paskatas.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: etika, psichoanalizė, seksualinis skirtumas, substitucija, pasyvumas, transgresija.