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COVID-19: Approaching the In-Human

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COVID-19: Approaching the In-Human

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“... *humani nihil a me alienum puto* (nothing human is alien to me)”¹

What the COVID-19 pandemic serves to reveal is the inherent limitations and contradictions of a symbolic order that must now be perceived via an “impossible subjectivity”²: what this essay will refer to as the “in-human.” Indeed, this in-human perspective transpires not through our fetishization of the virus, as some form of justification for humanity’s impact on the world,³ but from a position of *impossibility* that renders “the whole situation *into* which we are included.”⁴ It is on this basis that the virus confers a confrontation with the Real: an antagonism steered by the isolation of an “impossible phenomenon,” grounded in a certain level of “disengagement” that obliges us to “perceive reality as it were viewed from outside.”⁵ Importantly, this “view from outside” does not—and now, cannot—avoid our engagement with the impossible, but must instead be rendered via a form of approachment that conceives of the “virus” as an in-human phenomenon that *is* our universal condition. The following sections will serve to clarify this in-human approach.

COVID-19: An Uncanny Alien Presence

When considered under the guise of the Real, the “coronavirus,” as well as viruses in general, pose a number of contentions. Not conceived as living beings due to their

failure to reproduce without a host, viruses replicate by invading other host cells. Viruses are therefore parasitic, relying upon more complex forms of life which they inhabit and infect. To this extent, viruses are grounded in a certain “law”;⁶ they “are a kind of living dead ... a kind of zero-level life” from which life exists “at its most stupid level of repetition and multiplication.”⁷

We can thus conceive of viruses via Brousse’s reference to the Freudian *Unheimliche*, a term which, though untranslatable, refers to the uncanny.⁸ Consequently, whereas “For Žižek, what is genuinely ‘other’ is ... an *uncanny* inhumanity universally present within us,”⁹ for the virus, it is this *uncanny* inhumanity which universally frames our understanding of the “in.” Notably, my use of the hyphenated “in-human” deliberately plays upon the virus as an *in*-human entity: one that is not human, but which exists *within* the human—an essential form which is dialectically exposed in our relations to/with the coronavirus. In effect, the virus reflects an impossible antagonism, which uncannily avers what is both interior and exterior to the human. It is this “impossibility” which remains a “necessary condition for the possibility of the human that is simultaneously its impossibility.”¹⁰ What this Real impossibility exposes is that “essential alien” which resides within the “inhuman core of the human.”¹¹

This in-human dimension is given further clarification in Tsakos’s understanding of the uncanny as it pertains to Goffman’s work on stigma.¹² By commenting upon the various ways in which forms of stigmatization “refe[r] to deeply discrediting and humiliating characteristics,” Tsakos notes how “unwanted forms of diversity” help to both delineate and demarcate the unwanted, stigmatized individual. Neither “natural nor inherent,” it is through the process of stigmatization that “the individual becomes ‘inhuman.’”¹³ Yet, what the national lockdowns reveal is

how such forms of stigmatization now turn upon the subject: “the pandemic has turned every subject into a potential carrier of death.”¹⁴ It is against this background that “Stigmatization, self-marginalization and self-exclusion are hence practices, that now concern the daily lives of all subjects.”¹⁵ The importance of this inversion is that it helps to draw attention to the fact that this “inhuman Other” is *ourselves*.¹⁶

Ultimately, we can begin to bring together these interweaving strands in order to elaborate upon the theoretical and ethico-political demands they confer. In part, these demands propose a “new fragility” in our discourses on the virus as well as in our capacity to deal with the Real. Indeed, rather than “use corona to herald a Golden Era,” Verbeke asserts that “We should use this crisis to understand how fragile the human being is and to look for ways to cope with this fragility.”¹⁷ It is this fragility which is echoed in how the COVID-19 pandemic denaturalizes the elementary coordinates of our social, economic, and political lives, while also laying bare the antagonisms, inconsistencies, and contradictions that underscore our national and transnational state structures. In the US, such a contradiction has been noted by McGowan.¹⁸ Here, the contradiction between capitalism and the state—that is, their obscured non-alignment—was enacted in Trump’s reluctance to declare a state of emergency: a declaration that would ultimately arrest the (obscene) logic of capital accumulation, by prioritizing the collective over the (neoliberal) individual. Instead, what the COVID-19 pandemic “makes clear [is] that we are collective creatures no matter how much the logic of capital insists that we are isolated monads, even if concern for the collective in this case requires total isolation.”¹⁹

It is in our attempts to lay bare this contradiction that the in-human subject is averred. That is, what is evident in both the above discussion, and McGowan’s commentary, is the strange coincidence of opposites which the in-human exposes—an

exposition that carries with it an important “ethical implication.”²⁰ This implication can be read in an explicitly Hegelian mode: “it is impossible for an individual to act without reference to the universal” and “Without an investment in the universal, the individual would not act at all.”²¹ Nowhere is this investment more evident than in the calls for self-isolation: individual acts completed on behalf of the collective.

Certainly, it is against such an investment that Conservative criticisms (both in the UK and the US) have tended to fall. In a move resembling Thatcher’s “there is no society,”²² Conservative attempts to fixate the virus with some form of enemy—be it immigrants, China, or the virus itself—echo Zupančič’s account of how Thatcher’s attacks against the welfare state remained, at their heart, attacks against social forms of solidarity and, more importantly, love.²³ For Zupančič, forms of social welfare serve as “a depersonalized love for one’s neighbor.”²⁴ Thus, in our social relations, love for the other can only ever be “impersonal” and it is at this level that we encounter the Lacanian contention “that even at its most personal the love for your neighbor always involves a depersonalized, ‘inhuman’ dimension, stripped of ordinary feelings.”²⁵ This in-human dimension can, in the case of COVID-19, present a certain political sensibility, from which the potential for self-destruction not only constitutes our very understanding of humanity but also prescribes our capacity to create a new united humanity in its stead.²⁶

Confronting the Real, Approaching the In-Human

If the COVID-19 pandemic serves as an event in the Real, then in what ways does such an event help to envision new forms of unity, conceived from the in-human? To help answer this question, it is important to remember that it is the Real which reveals

the traumatic “inhuman” as “the bone in the throat of every ontology.”²⁷ For Zupančič, the Real bears witness to the “impossibility/contradiction of being,” so that “in order to speak of ‘being *qua* being,’ one has to amputate something in being that is not being.”²⁸ Accordingly, while “the Real is *that* which ontology has to cut off,”²⁹ or “amputate,” it is also *that* which remains “the very cause or obstacle that distorts our view on reality, that prevents our direct access to it.”³⁰ Ultimately, therefore, this access is circumscribed by the subject, whose very perspective requires their inscription *in* reality.³¹

What COVID-19 presents, however, *is* such a perspective; an impossible inscription and in-human dimension that is not only being shaped and re-shaped in the socio-symbolic field, but also laying bare the inherent limits and antagonisms that this field relies upon: the arguments for/against universal income; the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) for key workers; the need for national health services; the clear disparity between those who work from home and those for whom poverty is worse than contracting the disease itself. These limits should not necessarily be transgressed, as argued by Agamben,³² but rather can be used to shed light on the ways in which the virus reveals “our own self-limitations”;³³ limitations that remain intimately tied to the social and which can only be approached through the collective.

Indeed, in his initial assessments of the COVID-19 pandemic, Žižek pays due attention to Latour’s concern that our understandings of the virus require an imbricated assemblage that emphasizes our human/non-human entanglements as well as our economic, political, and ideological predicaments.³⁴ According to Latour, “the sudden and painful realization that the classical definition of society—humans among themselves—makes no sense. The state of society depends at every moment on the

associations between many actors, most of whom do not have human forms.”³⁵

Following this account, Žižek asserts:

... coronavirus is not an exception or a disturbing intrusion, it is a particular version of a virus that was operative beneath the threshold of our perception for decades. Viruses and bacteria are ever present, sometimes even with a crucial positive function (our digestion works only through the bacteria in our stomach). ... “Assemblage” means that one has to make a step further here towards a kind of flat ontology and recognize how these different levels can interact at the same ... level: viruses as actants are mediated by our productive activities, by our cultural tastes, by our social commerce. ... The epidemic is a mixture in which natural, economic and cultural processes are inextricably bound together.³⁶

Importantly, such subversion does not profess a recourse to “naïve realism,”³⁷ nor does it propose a conception of humanity which is simply part of “nature.” Instead:

We can see now the truly subversive potential of the notion of assemblage: it becomes apparent when we apply it to a constellation that includes humans, but can be seen from an “inhuman” standpoint, so that humans appear as just one among a variety of actants.³⁸

In drawing out this subversive potential, Žižek counters a realist approach to reality—which describes the world *outside* the subject—with our subjective capacity to *locate* and *view* “ourselves [as] part of the world.”³⁹ It is here that Žižek makes his defense for subjectivity, made, in part, on the contention that in order to ascertain such a complex and intricate assemblage, then the adoption of an “‘inhuman view,’ from which we can (partially, at least) grasp the assemblage of actants of which we are part,” is required.⁴⁰ This posits a “realism” that not only “include[s] us in the reality we are describing,” but which also “include[s] describing ourselves ‘from the outside,’ independently of ourselves, as if we are observing ourselves through inhuman eyes.”⁴¹ Importantly, “What this inclusion-of-ourselves amounts to is,” as

Žižek contests, “something much more uncanny, a radical shift in the subjective attitude by means of which we become strangers to ourselves.”⁴²

The significance of this “inhuman” dimension helps redirect attention to the need for an understanding of the human that is predicated upon the “radical discord” that forever underscores our partial access to the assemblages that *we* form.⁴³ Such discord is laid bare by the fact that, while the virus “confronts us with something previously thought to be the impossible,”⁴⁴ its *actuality* presents a confrontation with the Real that both avers but also demands the impossible. It is on this ground that COVID-19 offers a possible impossibility— “the properly in-human subject.”⁴⁵

COVID-19 and the In-Human Subject

In an attempt to give some form of response to the current crisis, Žižek asserts that: “Our reaction to all of this, what we should do, should also be the impossible—what appears impossible within the coordinates of the existing world order.”⁴⁶ One way of approaching and achieving such impossibility is by conceiving of the virus as an opportunity to engage with the possibility of the in-human view. As noted, the adoption of this term goes some way to tracing the inherent contradictions that the virus (re)presents, as well as the partial engagements it exposes. That is, while “the virus is a foreign body, a body in the sense of an element, that invades the human body from the outside and causes this body to become sick,”⁴⁷ it nevertheless has no body; it remains a thing that cannot effectively be symbolized, and thus maintains a traumatic, uncanny presence that haunts our symbolic fictions and day-to-day realities.

However, it is from this perspective that the virus presents a “violent abstraction from one’s particularity that defines subject,” predicated on a Real actuality that “enables us to adopt the view on reality in which humans are one among objects.”⁴⁸ It is on this basis that the coronavirus’s *in*-human existence prescribes an *in*-human view that can only be approached when the wider social, political, and economic impact of the virus is brought alongside the fact that our subjective viewpoint is marked by an unseen presence (coronavirus) that reduces the subject to a mere “biological” apparatus. The horror which underscores this reduction emanates in the realization that humans are simple actants whose thoughts and experiences are available to a parasitic being. Yet, it is the virus which renders such thoughts and experiences *present* through the self-negating limitations that constitute both the subject and society.

Importantly, it is from this self-negating limitation that the political efficacy of the *in*-human can be obtained. It is there, within the limits which transpire in our reliance upon science, and its capacity to curtail and prevent the virus, but also in the very ways in which this reliance reveals the fact that “in science ... there is no big Other, no subject on which we can fully rely, who can be unequivocally presumed to know.”⁴⁹ Instead, “one has to gather the strength to view the world with an inhuman eye, in all its cruel indifference and meaninglessness, with no big Other as the ultimate guarantee of a higher order or meaning.”⁵⁰

Though Žižek has endeavored to perceive the COVID-19 pandemic as a resounding call for “communal” forms of transnational organization, such a “reinvented Communism” can begin with the *in*-human perspective;⁵¹ indeed, one that encourages a realization that “emancipates us from the falsity of capitalist subjectivity.”⁵² For McGowan, this emancipation “forces us to regard ourselves from

the standpoint of the collective and to put our individual pecuniary interests aside.”⁵³ Here, McGowan’s comments can be read in light of the Lacanian “pure subject”: “the Cartesian cogito which is to be strictly distinguished from any kind of humanism, from the ‘wealth of personality.’”⁵⁴ It is here that the “*Cogito* is the subject reduced to a pure impersonal punctuality of a void, a crack in the texture of reality; as such, it is not a pure subject without objectivity—it is sustained by a paradoxical object which positivizes a lack, what Lacan called *objet a*.”⁵⁵

While capitalism serves to present this object via the surplus of desire,⁵⁶ it is from the radical negativity (the void, crack, absence) of the subject that such an in-human view can be achieved. In confronting the Real—*our in-human core*—and by acknowledging the inherent limitations of both the subject and society, we can begin to use the pandemic as an opportunity to forge new “self-limitations” grounded in new political and philosophical orientations.⁵⁷

To this end, what remains significant is how an appreciation of the in-human can offer an “orientation” to present circumstances that requires one to perceive the “impossible” from a fundamental re-orientation of both the subject and society.⁵⁸ Echoing Zupančič’s comments on the process of psychoanalysis, it is from this impossible perspective that our knowledge and very being is shifted.⁵⁹ It is in developing this shift, via the in-human perspective, that such knowledge can be made.

Author Bio

Jack Black is a Senior Lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University. His research interests examine the interlinkages between culture and media studies, with particular attention given to cultural representation and ideology. Drawing upon “traditional” media

forms as well as television and film studies, Jack's published research has appeared in a variety of international peer review journals, providing an interdisciplinary approach to the study of politics and power in both the media and popular culture. His forthcoming publication *Race, Racism and Political Correctness in Comedy – A Psychoanalytic Exploration* (Routledge) critically considers the importance of comedy in challenging and redefining our relations to race and racism through the lens of political correctness. By engaging with the social and cultural tensions inherent to our understandings of political correctness, he argues that comedy can subversively redefine our approach to “PC Debates,” free speech and the representation of “identity politics.”

Notes

¹ This quotation is attributed to the Roman African playwright, Publius Terentius Afer (Terence), from his play, *Heauton Timorumenos* (The Self-Tormentor).

² Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2020), 266.

³ George Monbiot, “COVID-19 is nature’s wake-up call to complacent civilization,” *The Guardian*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/25/covid-19-is-natures-wake-up-call-to-complacent-civilisation>.

⁴ Žižek, *Failed Absolute*, 267, italics added.

⁵ Ibid., 336-337.

⁶ Marcus André Vieira, “Notes on Desire and Isolation,” *Lacanian Review Online*, April 27, 2020, <http://www.thelacanianreviews.com/notes-on-desire-and-isolation/>.

⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York, NY: OR Books, 2020), 78-79.

⁸ See Marie-Hélène Brousse, “Empty City,” *Lacanian Review Online*, April 16, 2020, <http://www.thelacanianreviews.com/empty-city/>.

⁹ Joshua Delpech-Ramey, “Sublime Comedy: On the Inhuman Rights of Clowns,” *SubStance* 39, no. 2 (2010): 137.

¹⁰ Erik Vogt, “S/Citing the Camp,” in *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben’s Homo Sacer*, ed. Andrew Norris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 93.

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*. Vol. 2 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 177.

¹² Argyris Tsakos, “Stigmatization,” *Lacanian Review Online*, April 21, 2020, <http://www.thelacanianreviews.com/stigmatization/>. See also Goffman, Erving, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2009).

¹³ Tsakos, “Stigmatization.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Žižek, *Failed Absolute*, 36.

¹⁷ Evi Verbeke, “Corona – Eros is not the answer,” *Lacanian Review Online*, March 28, 2020, <http://www.thelacanianreviews.com/corona-eros-is-not-the-answer/>.

¹⁸ Todd McGowan, “State of Emergency? Bring it On!,” *The Philosophical Salon*, April 30, 2020, <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/state-of-emergency-bring-it-on/>.

¹⁹ Ibid. Notably, McGowan adds “Although Trump’s ultimate goal is undoubtedly saving capitalist society, the fact that he must act to save lives at the expense of capital reveals the underlying tension between the state and capital. It is incumbent upon us to push the tension to its breaking point in the months and years that follow.”

²⁰ Žižek, *Failed Absolute*, 361.

²¹ Todd McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019), 180. McGowan adds: “Acting is having recourse to the universal and abandoning one’s private self. Hegel’s point [... in the Phenomenology of Spirit] is that individuals cannot act as pure individuals. In the moment of the act, one partakes in the whole by acting rather than remaining idle in one’s particularity.” This is echoed by Flisfeder, when he asserts: “... the individual is only guaranteed its existence insofar as we create the conditions for the existence of society. If we kill society, so, too, does the individual go the way of the dodo egg. If you kick at society, you kill the individual. The fight for the interests of society, however, helps preserve the individual” (“Social Distancing”).

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- ²² Margaret Thatcher, “Interview for Women’s Own (‘no such thing as society’),” *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, September, 23, 1987, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>
- ²³ Alenka Zupančič, “Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself?!” *Problemi International* 3, no. 3 (2019): 100.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Žižek, *Pandemic!*, 105; see also Zupančič, “Love Thy Neighbor.”
- ²⁷ Alenka Zupančič, *What is Sex?* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2017), 44.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid., italics added.
- ³⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing* (London, UK: Verso, 2012), 907.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Giorgio Agamben, “The Invention of an Epidemic,” *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, February, 26, 2020, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>.
- ³³ Matthew Flisfeder, “Social Distancing and its Discontents,” *The Philosophical Salon*, May 7, 2020, <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/social-distancing-and-its-discontents/>.
- ³⁴ Žižek, *Pandemic!*, 110.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 111.
- ³⁶ Žižek, *Pandemic!*, 115-117. It is important to note here that Žižek is not promoting a flat ontology, but, rather, seeking to draw attention to the “gap” *within* ontology and its “radical discord.” For more on this, see Žižek, *Failed Absolute*, 354-372; for a discussion on flat ontology and Žižek’s work see, Jack Black and Jim Cherrington, “‘Nature doesn’t care that we’re there’: Re-Symbolizing Nature’s ‘Natural’ Contingency,” *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 14, no. 1 (2020): 6-8.
- ³⁷ Žižek, *Failed Absolute*, 362.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 361.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 362.
- ⁴⁰ Žižek, *Pandemic!*, 117.
- ⁴¹ Žižek, *Failed Absolute*, 362.
- ⁴² Ibid., 162.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 354.
- ⁴⁴ Žižek, *Pandemic!*, 85.

⁴⁵ Žižek, *Failed Absolute*, 154.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

⁴⁷ Natalie Wülfing, “Corona and then Time / Jouissance / Desire,” *Lacanian Review Online*, April 4, 2020, <http://www.thelacanianreviews.com/corona-and-then-time-jouissance-desire/>.

⁴⁸ Žižek, *Failed Absolute*, 375.

⁴⁹ Žižek, *Pandemic!*, 125.

⁵⁰ Žižek, *Failed Absolute*, 410.

⁵¹ Žižek, *Pandemic!*, 95-106.

⁵² McGowan, “State of Emergency.”

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Žižek, *Failed Absolute*, 363.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁵⁶ McGowan, “State of Emergency.” Žižek extends this critique: “It is only in capitalism that the object that sustains the subject, the subject’s objectal counterpart, appears as what it is, not the ultimate object of desire awaiting us out of our reach but the objectal form of the surplus itself, an elusive virtual entity which gives body to the excess over any determinate object, and which can as such sustain the subject at its purest, the empty Cartesian *cogito*.” (*Failed Absolute*, 363).

⁵⁷ Flisfeder, “Social Distancing.”

⁵⁸ Žižek, *Failed Absolute*, 351-372.

⁵⁹ Cassandra B. Seltman, “Too Much of Not Enough,” *LA Review of Books*, March 9, 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/too-much-of-not-enough-an-interview-with-alenka-zupančič/>.