

**On the Void:  
The Fascinating Object of Evil in *Human Remains***

*Garnet C. Butchart*

**Abstract**

What remains critical for any analysis of evil is to recognise the difference between the occurrence of a given human action and the process of its symbolisation. Only by attending to the motivating cause of the latter may we understand how the former may acquire the face of evil. This chapter examines the structure of symbolisation manifest in *Human Remains* (1998), a black and white documentary film about Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Franco, and Mussolini. Drawing from Lacanian psychoanalytic theories of the Real, the editing technique of cutting to black is interpreted as the means by which this documentary holds open the place of lack constitutive of the visual field. Symbolised by the form of the blank screen, the void-place of symbolic inscription is exposed in *Human Remains* as the object-cause of the proliferation of images of evil, the source of support for their power to fascinate as masks of social harmony.

**Key Words:** documentary, fascism, F. Franco, *Human Remains*, A. Hitler, J. Lacan, Mao T., B. Mussolini, J. Rosenblatt, J. Stalin, World War II

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At the end of his seminar on *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan draws a startling conclusion. He declares, “I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you, I mutilate you.” What Lacan has in mind is not any kind of endearing, annoying, or downright infuriating personal idiosyncrasies that distinguish one person as unique from the next. Rather, what Lacan is aiming at in his dramatic summary is something that remains the same for all of us, that to which every speaking being is forever beholden: the object that fills the central void of our desire. This object, symbolised by Lacan as *objet petit a*, appears to us in the visual field as the lure or hook that structures the relationship between the gaze and what one wishes to see. In an economy of images, *objet a* is the bait, the particular object which satisfies a particular need, but at the same time, holds out a promise for something more. Since desire is, by definition, insatiable, the function of this “more” is to fill in the lack of the “less,” to compensate for the fact that no object can ever deliver on its promise to fully satisfy. In this sense, because *objet a* breaks the promise it continues to make, whatever I look at is never what I wish to see.<sup>1</sup>

*Objet a* provides an essential clue to the fundamental paradox of the visual field; though whatever I look at is never what I wish to see, I continue to stare nonetheless. This paradox is most evident with the phe-

nomenon of “evil.” In the attempt to put a face on this phenomenon, most filmic and televisual examinations typically take recourse to gore or to caricature, either startling audiences or ultimately disappointing them with their failure to symbolise evil. Yet this failure does not deter us from looking, from wanting to see, as our desire is inevitably matched by a plethora of images. Since evil is never what it may appear to be, yet its appearances are nevertheless infinitely seductive, the therefore question remains: what supports the fascinating power of evil in contemporary visual culture? In order to answer this question, critical analysis must attend to the difference between the occurrence of a particular action and the symbolic processes through which that action acquires a meaningful place in the field of images. It is only once we examine the condition of possibility of symbolisation - a process sustained by the structural gap between an object and its symbolic identification - may we begin to understand evil in its infinite power of fascination. This chapter goes to the heart of the question of evil, drawing from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in order to examine that which sustains both Good and Evil, the hard core which supports the symbolic struggle of the one against the other.<sup>2</sup>

Central to this examination is the documentary film *Human Remains* (1998), five short narratives assembled from archival footage of Hitler, Mao, Stalin, Mussolini, and Franco. What makes this film particularly important for the analysis of evil is the omission of the very topic this film seeks to address. Unlike most visual media in which archival material



*An elderly Francisco Franco wields a home movie camera in Human Remains, Jay Rosenblatt's award-winning meditation on dictatorial evil. Copyright © 1998 Jay H. Rosenblatt. Image courtesy of the filmmaker.*

is assembled in an effort to symbolise the inner springs of human malice, the imagery in *Human Remains* in no way appears metonymic for this phenomenon. The grainy footage assembled by director Jay Rosenblatt does not refer visually to the empirical evidence of “evil deeds” committed under the rule of these dictators, nor does it weigh moral incentives against those pathological. Most importantly, the sum of the images from the five narratives does not coalesce into a psychological profile of the evil dictator. Instead, each dictator appears in mundane situations: Hitler in casual conversation, Mussolini on a ski slope, Franco holding his grandchildren, Stalin sipping coffee, and Mao taking a swim. The humanising effect is chilling, though not on account of any specific image.

Equally mundane is the film’s audio content, biographical information that leaves the political and historical significance of each dictator unspoken. Narrated in a voice-over from each dictator’s private diaries, Hitler confesses to the audience, “I could never resist chocolate éclairs.” Mussolini tells us, “I had five children, two lions, and a monkey.” Stalin recalls, “I loved to smoke more than anything else, except maybe drinking.” Franco admits, “I said the rosary daily but could never forgive my enemies.” Mao puts it simply, “I had one testicle.” As the biographical voice-over remains coolly removed in its detailing of superficial minutiae, and the content of the flickering images appear neutral or vaguely comical at best, the deadly consequences of dictatorial rule are left entirely open. *Human Remains* provides no authorial narrative to draw parallels amongst the different figures, and there is no moralising statement, implicit or otherwise, to be taken from the audio-visual content. In short, while Hitler, Mao, Stalin, Mussolini, and Franco appear to be its subject, the question of evil is omitted from *Human Remains*.

In order to make sense of this glaring omission, one could certainly dwell on the title of the film. “Human remains” might simply refer to the unspoken remainder of genocidal destruction: the remains of the deceased lying beneath the earth. However, in order to help illuminate the question of evil in its symbolic appearance, a far more philosophically compelling interpretation of this film can be developed in terms of the Lacanian notion that “the symbol kills.”<sup>3</sup>

### 1. *Caput Mortuum: Remains of the Real*

To remain means: not to disappear, thus, to presence.

-Martin Heidegger<sup>4</sup>

Psychoanalytic theory tells us there is a strict difference between “reality” and the “Real.” On the one hand, there is the realm we know and experience through systems of meaning and signification, called the Symbolic order. On the other hand, there is the realm anterior to the intervention of signifying systems, the realm external to language, called the order of the Real.<sup>5</sup> While these two orders remain intimately connected, the Real is an undifferentiated realm without laws, norms, or separate regions; it is unified, harmonious, and complete. It is through the Symbolic that the

Real becomes structured or progressively filtered, drawn over time into symbols, ciphers, and words used to represent it. For example, the existence of contrasting structures (nature/culture), social conventions (kinship rules), and norms of acceptable behaviour are a result of the Symbolic order cutting into the Real, carving it up into identifiable categories with distinguishable entities. Sliced up into words and symbols, the Real is reduced by the Symbolic; it is annihilated, cancelled out, laid to rest.<sup>6</sup>

Cancelling out the Real, the Symbolic thereby creates reality, the realm named by language as that which we come to know and talk about through the words, ciphers, and symbols of our particular language group. For example, we begin to think about the world and our place within it only through symbolic means; we are given names that distinguish us, we are subject to written laws and discursive social codes through which behaviour is managed, we are inscribed with signifiers which designate our gender, race, class, and so on. In short, the Symbolic order structures our perception of reality. The key point about this schema is that while we use signifying systems to refer to the world, signifiers themselves refer not to phenomena but to other signifiers.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, according to Lacan, insofar as language does not reflect the world, but constitutes it, the symbol murders the thing; what cannot be symbolised is not part of reality, what cannot be grasped through a chain of signifiers simply does not exist.<sup>8</sup>

The Real ceases to exist in reality in the sense that the Symbolic has no name for it "as such." This is to say that while the Real is progressively filtered by the Symbolic, it nevertheless resists complete symbolisation, resists full integration into any system of classification. The failure of the Symbolic to completely integrate the Real in its production of reality therefore means that something forever remains, a residuum or bi-product of symbolisation standing outside of or beyond the purview of representation. It is in this sense that Lacan says the Real "ex-sists," sticks out as meaningless from the point of view of language, stands apart from what can as yet be put into words.<sup>9</sup> As Slavoj Žižek famously puts it, "the Real is the rock upon which every attempt at symbolisation stumbles, the hard core which remains the same in all possible worlds (symbolic universes)."<sup>10</sup> Since the Real persists alongside the Symbolic, present and yet inaccessible from the point of view of any system of representation, something is therefore always absent, forever missing or lacking within the Symbolic order. This remainder is given many names in Lacan's conceptual framework: *agalma*, the Freudian Thing, surplus jouissance, the lost object, the desire of the Other, cause of desire, subject, and *objet petit a*.

Absent in reality, the remainder of the Real thereby functions as a structuring void or gravitational centre around which the Symbolic circles.<sup>11</sup> Despite its apparent absence, however, this remainder is not simply invisible. Rather, in its resistance to symbolisation, the Real presents itself as a gap or void in the signifying chain, a symbolic impossibility that the chain is forced to avoid. It is in this sense that Lacan says the remains of the Real appear most fully in the form of "nothing," of what is pushed aside or left out of a signifying chain, what he calls the *caput mortuum* of the signifier. Since the process of signification involves the inscription of

one signifier in the place of another within the signifying chain, the *caput mortuum* - that which is excluded from the chain - determines the very structure of the chain; there must be an outside of the chain for there to be anything inside it.<sup>12</sup> A signifying chain therefore never ceases to inscribe the *caput mortuum*, forming around them as a rule of logic; the remains of the symbolic process are carried along the chain as external-internal cause of its unfolding. As that which remains to be symbolised, the Real in this way appears as the truth of a signifying chain, the void in the chain that stands out as the unspeakable thing missing from the chain in its evasion of what cannot be put into words. It is the thing that, in Žižek's words, "persists only as failed, missed, in a shadow, dissolves itself as soon as we try to grasp it in its positive nature."<sup>13</sup> In short, the Real recurs to reality, haunting the appearance of the symbol in its murder of the thing.

Returning to our discussion of *Human Remains*, if we look carefully at the visual content of this film we will notice the recurrence of a blank screen, a repetition throughout the film of the editing technique of cutting to black. While this technique typically functions in mainstream film and video as a kind of mediator to allow for visual continuity between scenes, the serialisation of the cut to black in *Human Remains* may be read as the appearance of the Real. In short, what recurs between sequences in the form of the blank screen is akin to the Real in its resistance to representation, the shadow of the symbol in its cinematic manifestation.

As we have seen, the Lacanian Real is defined by the coincidence of contradictory determinates. Žižek summarises the contradictory status of the Real when he says that, "as a starting point, as a basis, [the Real] is a positive fullness without lack; as a product, a leftover of symbolisation, it is, in contrast, the void, the emptiness created, encircled by the symbolic structure."<sup>14</sup> In the language of psychoanalysis, the place around which a network of signifiers accumulates is "void" in the sense that this place must necessarily remain empty in order for a signifying chain to work, in order for signifiers to be combined or linked in a meaningful way.<sup>15</sup> The editing technique of cutting to black demonstrates the paradoxical character of the Real, a negativity that has the positive function of enabling and structuring the consistency of any symbolic chain. With this psychoanalytic notion in mind, we can read the recurrence of the blank screen in *Human Remains* not only with a view to the archival content that fills the screen, but more importantly, with a view to the condition of possibility for any image of evil whatsoever.

If attention were not drawn to the blank screen as part of the cinematic chain, we would certainly overlook it. However, while audiences may indeed see the cut to black once it is pointed out as part of the audiovisual content, the blank screen itself is not an image; it is not a sign for something else. Rather, it is precisely the place of ex-sistence of the *caput mortuum*, a void in the cinematic chain as it beats around the bush of what cannot be symbolised. The blank screen is what Lacanian psychoanalytic theory would call "the place of the lack of an image," an impasse in the Symbolic order which is structurally constitutive of all symbolic processes. Exhibiting the coincidence of contradictory determinates, the blank screen

in *Human Remains* therefore plays the fundamental role of exposing or holding open the place around which its images accumulate. What this film demonstrates is the basic structuralist principle that in the visual field, the presence of any image is structurally determined by a fundamental lack or absence, the void-place of inscription at which the process of symbolisation opens.

By holding open the place of this void, by refusing to fill it with predictably startling or gruesome images, the question of evil is addressed in *Human Remains* explicitly by omission. While images of genocidal dictators may appear unsettling in themselves, such an omission reveals something philosophically more acute; namely, that no matter the actions one may have committed, humans remain irrelevant to the spectral supplement of symbolisation, to the void that persists behind every attempt to make sense of those actions, to restore symbolic order. *Human Remains* demonstrates how the symbolisation of evil gains its support not from any specific evildoer, not from the actions of a Hitler, a Mao, a Stalin or any other notorious figure. Rather, what structurally supports the appearance of these images in the visual field is the place of the lack of an image, the absence of an image that allows for the presence of all others.

While the notion of the Lacanian Real exhibited by the editing technique of cutting to a blank screen may go a long way to explain the condition of possibility for the symbolisation of evil, it does not, however, go far enough to explain the persistence of such images in contemporary visual culture. Specifically, the question remains as to how images of these dictators, immediately recognisable in their repetition and infinite reproduction, continue to hold the power to fascinate. We must now turn to examine how images of evil persist in contemporary visual culture as paradoxical objects of our deepest desire.

## 2. “That’s Not It!”: The Fascinating Object of Evil

It is precisely for this reason that vampires are not part of our reality: they exist only as “returns of the Real.”

-Slavoj Žižek<sup>16</sup>

Let us consider the second aspect of Lacan’s notion of the deathly effect of symbolisation, the notion that “this death constitutes in the subject the externalisation of his desire.” Here, Lacan accounts for the entry of the subject into the Symbolic, an entry which, briefly put, entails a fundamental loss. This is the loss of the Real object, what Lacan variously calls *das Ding*, the Thing, the (m)other, a loss that renders one’s identity forever incomplete. According to psychoanalytic theory, this loss or lack of the Real is the precondition of “drive” in the subject, the aim of which is always both the attainment of an object (to fill the lack), as well as a gain in satisfaction (to become whole again). Insofar as the loss incurred by the subject in its entry into the Symbolic is not a given, but rather, is an effect of signification - an effect of the symbolisation of the Real - we can understand Lacan’s notion of the externalisation of desire to mean that desire is

forever marked by the search for a lost (Real) object, something unattainable which compels the subject to search for it again and again. In this way, the remainder of the Real persists in the Symbolic in the form of a cause.<sup>17</sup>

As discussed above, while the Real cannot exist - can never be fully symbolised, remains an absence in reality - it nevertheless ex-sists as a kind of irritation, a cause which produces a series of structural effects in the subject, including slips of the tongue, compulsive repetitions, displacements, and so on. Since the Real is cancelled out or laid to rest by the Symbolic - the separation of the object from the symbol that takes its place - it is henceforth the indivisible remainder or leftover of this process which becomes "the driving force of the subject's desire, insofar as the object he attains will never be It (the Thing itself)."<sup>18</sup> As mentioned above in the introductory paragraph, Lacan calls this remainder the object-cause of desire, symbolising it *objet petit a*, the Real object in its separation from the subject.

According to the Lacanian theory of desire, while we may attain the essential objects that satisfy our need (Real objects such as food, warmth, and shelter), we can attain no object that will ever satisfy our demand. Demand is the articulation of need in linguistic terms, as messages exchanged between subjects. Binding subjects into a symbolic economy, demand is therefore insatiable; one demanded object is replaced by another ad infinitum without satisfaction because "that's not it!" The object demanded can never be attained because "it" is never a Real object; the object of demand is always the demand for something else, the next thing the other can give, as proof of their love.<sup>19</sup> Desire can thus be defined, in Alenka Zupančič's words, as "the pure form of demand, that which remains of demand when all the particular objects (or 'contents') that may come to satisfy it are removed."<sup>20</sup> Aiming at an object to satisfy our demand, what remains once we have attained that object is the Real object of desire: *objet a*, the unrepresentable lack that causes our desire to begin with.

The crucial point about Lacan's theory of desire, it is worth repeating, is that desire designates a state of non-satisfaction. The object which promises satisfaction is therefore always paradoxical; it is the lack of the Real, *objet a* as cause of desire. This is to say that, in this process, "the moment the subject attains the object she demands, the *objet a* appears, as a marker of that which the subject still 'has not got' or does not have - and this itself constitutes the genuine object of desire."<sup>21</sup> In other words, it is the process of searching itself that produces the (lost) object that causes the search to begin with.<sup>22</sup> As Lacan puts it: "'That's not it!' means that, in the desire of every demand, there is but the request for *objet a*."<sup>23</sup> As the void around which desire circulates, *objet a* can thus be understood as a void that has acquired a form, a form without content, the pure leftover of symbolisation which fascinates us in virtue of its glaring absence, causes our desire for it to be put into words.<sup>24</sup>

Returning to our discussion of images of evil, the best example of the desiring-effect of *objet a* can be found in the mainstream genre of horror films. Despite the endless variety of shadowy figures lurking in the

darkness, ghastly characterisations of the non-dead, and demonic possessions amidst apparent tranquility, virtually all such depictions appear somehow inadequate, somewhat incomplete. Regardless of the advances in imaging technology, lighting, sound, and makeup, even the most artistically creative images rarely meet our expectations. Why? Because there is always something missing; the horrifying figures, clearly apparent or merely alluded to, are never quite it. However, it is precisely on account of this failure, a failure to fully represent that which resists complete symbolisation, that the horror film will captivate audiences. For it is the paradoxical status of *objet a*, the double function of lack in the Symbolic order, which stands as the object-cause of desire; at one and the same time, there remains something which is impossible to represent, and this impossibility causes our desire for it, for that very thing which can never be had.

In *Human Remains*, the object-cause of desire is demonstrated by the recurring technique of cutting to black. In this film, the moment we attain an image of each dictator - images which have historically appeared in visual culture as metonymic for evil - the cut to black recurs, marking what we have not yet obtained, what cannot be obtained, cannot be fully represented. Despite the plenitude of images of Hitler, Stalin, Franco, Mao, and Mussolini, this technique demonstrates that, in the field of images, we will never find what we really desire: a signifier that can properly represent Evil, an image to which we can refer, once and for all, "That's it! This is Evil!" Since every image of evil is "not it" - not the Thing, the Real object, the universal concept - what we are always left with is the remains of symbolisation, *objet a* both as marker of that which we have not got and, at the same time, cause of our fundamental desire for it.

Cinematically, the form without content acquired by *objet a* is the blank screen. It is the negativity or leftover that literally remains if all the positive content of the film were to be subtracted. With regard to the underlying message of the film, the key point to recognise is that the positive content of *Human Remains* (the strikingly trivial archival footage, making no mention of genocidal regimes) is only second in importance to the negative content (the place of the lack of an image, *objet a*, the blank screen). By privileging the negative over the positive content, the major contribution this film makes to our understanding of evil is that while images of ruthless dictators consistently appear in contemporary visual culture, their endless reproduction in no way explains our apparently insatiable appetite for them. It is in response to this question - why images of notorious dictators remain infinitely fascinating - that *Human Remains* goes a long way in providing a clue. Through repeated cuts to a blank screen, the remainder of every image in this film is exposed as the pure form of demand, *objet a*, the lack that drives our desire for more of the same, images which inevitably break their promise to satisfy.

To be certain, since there is no place in the established symbolic order for Hitler, Mao, Franco, Stalin, and Mussolini, images of these figures often appear with a fascinating glow. That is, because the place these dictators occupy in the Symbolic is the place of a void - which does not mean that "evil acts" are empirically impossible; rather, that society dis-

owns these figures, there is no possible return to “the way things were” - images of these dictators appear in a unique position in the visual field. In mainstream film and television, these images typically appear as what Žižek calls “sublime images,” impossible-real objects of desire, images that occupy the place of the lack of an image.<sup>25</sup> As a rule, the closer an image comes to occupying this lack in the visual field - the closer it comes to *objet a*, to filling the void in the Symbolic around which desire circulates - the greater will be the power of its fascination.<sup>26</sup>

However, the unique feature about *Human Remains* is that the place of the lack of an image remains preserved. There is no image that stands in the place of the void in the visual field, no inscription of a sublime image of Evil. Instead, the void that coincides with the appearance of any of the archival images is exposed, unconcealed, kept open in the cinematic chain. In short, the void-place of symbolic inscription around which desire circles remains unsymbolised in this film, appearing without content in the form of a blank screen.

Confronting the structure of symbolisation in this way, the fascinating object of evil is revealed in *Human Remains* as the absent cause of image production. It is in the most fundamental editing technique that the most fundamental structuring principle of the visual field is given a form without content: the absence of an image that coincides with the presence of all images, the lack that sticks out of the signifying chain, fascinating us in its glaring absence, shining through the manifestation of every image as cause of our desire for what cannot be presented. Rather than attempting to provide yet another analysis of the inner springs of human malice, an approach which serves largely to close off or fix a definitive depiction of evil, it is the return of the Real that is exposed in *Human Remains* as the source and fascinating power of these images, the shadow of the symbol haunting the appearance of every image of evil because “that’s not it!”

### 3. In You More Than You: The Subject of Evil

There is no general form of Evil, because Evil does not exist except as a judgment made, by a subject, on a situation, and on the consequences of his own actions in this situation.

-Alain Badiou<sup>27</sup>

The omission of any clear injunction against the dictators depicted in *Human Remains* has led reviewers to laud this film for its ultimate accomplishment as an exposition of “the banality of evil.”<sup>28</sup> We might be tempted to agree with such analyses, for what makes this film largely unnerving is the degree to which such an absence demands the audience to fill it in, to draw from common knowledge about these dictators and their genocidal regimes in order to inject into the narrative an ultimate conclusion. While such analyses may be convincing, they ultimately overlook the very nature of this absence and the place carefully preserved for it by the editing. Such analyses misread the absence of evil merely as an unproductive nothing, an element missing from the narrative that must be

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restored. Such interpretations therefore move too quickly, filling in as “banal” what the film so carefully attempts to keep open. For if the major impulse of this film is to leave evil unsymbolised, then its ultimate accomplishment is certainly not its depiction of the banal. Rather, by exploiting the logic of signification, *Human Remains* achieves its greatest insight by exposing how there is something in any image of evil that remains more than the image itself. To explain, we must turn to Lacan’s formulation of the “subject of the signifier.”

If there was a complete correspondence between the Real and Symbolic orders - if there was no gap between a symbol and the thing it cancels out, if every signifier corresponded necessarily to every signified - then there would be no signifying chain. A complete, unified Symbolic order would negate the need for a signifying chain insofar as everything would be as it was meant to be; there would be no difference of perspective, everyone would think in the same way, there would be no decisions to be made, and therefore, no need for intersubjective communication. The incompleteness of the Symbolic - the lack of complete correspondence between the Real and its representation - thus retains a place into which a “subject” is inscribed. This subject is not to be mistaken with the thinking being qua individual. Rather, the Lacanian subject, like the Lacanian object, has no being. It is produced through its entry into the Symbolic, the pure product of signification, that which passes between signifiers.<sup>29</sup> Lacan derives the subject of the signifier from his major structuralist insight that any signifier always appears against the background of the void of its possible absence, an absence filled out by the presence of its opposite.<sup>30</sup> It is precisely on account of this third term, the void common to the possible absence of each, that any two signifiers enter into a relation of difference, differing from each other, as well as from themselves. Since one signifier represents for another signifier a common possible absence, the subject of the signifier is precisely the void-place of this possible absence, the gap carried through a signifying chain.

For the purposes of our discussion, the key feature that must be emphasised about Lacan’s formulation of the subject is that while no signifier does not represent a subject, a subject nonetheless has no proper signifier that fully represents it. The subject “is born into the symbolic, but into a symbolic which produces its own failure.” Lacan says that a subject “fades” or disappears between signifiers, disappears because each signifier only represents it for another signifier, that is, “represents the subject badly since the very failure of a successful representation is what pushes forward this process of infinite metonymy and infinite repetition.” The subject is therefore to be understood as the pure residue of symbolisation, the left-over produced by the failure of each of its mis-representations, the irreducible remainder or surplus of the automatic functioning of the signifying chain. In short, since the subject can never be fully represented, it forever remains more than the sum of its various appearances.<sup>31</sup>

An example of this logic of the signifier is found at the beginning of the five major sections of *Human Remains*, each introduced with a black and white freeze frame of a figure appearing in negative form. Due

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to its appearance in the negative, the identity of each figure is at first indiscernible. Held for a few seconds, each negative image is then reversed, filled out or positivised, rendering the identity of the dictator immediately recognisable. Once substantiated, each freeze frame is then set in slow motion, followed by a series of images and the accompanying voice-over. This technique of introducing each dictator in negative form functions precisely to mark the absence or void-place of symbolic inscription out of which a subject emerges, in this case a "subject of evil." Positivising the negative image demonstrates the structural logic of signification, how a signifier fixes the identity of its subject only retroactively, by working backward through the signifying chain to tie its meaning down around a central point.<sup>32</sup> By seizing on the retroactive effect of signification, the introduction of each dictator in the negative is a technique to destabilise the unity perceived of any identity, demonstrating how its meaning is never fully fixed. Such a technique thereby unveils what is in you more than you: the lack constitutive of every subject, the lack that prevents the complete affirmation of every identity, binding the subject into a structure of misrecognition and misrepresentation.

Since symbolic reality is bound not by wholeness but by lack, a lack that limits the complete affirmation of any identity, the logic of the signifier has immediate political implications for social analysis. This is the central insight made by Laclau and Mouffe: namely, at the heart of any social formation is a structural discontinuity, an antagonistic core (the Real) which enables the unfolding of ideological narratives but which can never be fully absorbed by any of its signifying practices.<sup>33</sup> The possibility that "society" could appear as a unified, harmonious whole remains symbolically impossible since the complete affirmation of its identity is constitutively limited, limited by a lack that remains more than any of its symbolic forms. In precisely this sense, if the underlying message of most visual depictions of evil is, "if only these figures did not exist could we have a perfect, harmonious society," then the central insight of *Human Remains* is that society as such is impossible.

In the visual field, evil typically appears as a "fantasy figure," a figure which functions to cover up the recurrence of the Real, to give body to what can never be symbolised in an ideological effort to maintain the appearance of harmonious unity. This is why images of Hitler, Mao, and other notorious dictators must be understood much less as a matter of putting a human face on evil, and more so as fantasy figures, as masks of the limitless human capacity to commit acts beyond the imaginable. And therein lays their fascinating quality and seductive power; they are images which, in their very appearance, attempt to conceal the instability of the social order, the hard core of the Real which remains the same despite all ideological attempts to contain it in the established symbolic order. The use of mundane rather than graphic archival images in *Human Remains* confirms this, suggesting that images of such figures ultimately function to support a fantasy about the possibility of a harmonious social order, one in which the forces of human destruction are effaced. Traversing this fantasy,



*Positive and negative archival footage of Adolf Hitler in Human Remains.  
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*Human Remains* resists the moralising tendency of most depictions of the phenomenon of evil, emphasising instead how the social is necessarily pierced by contingency, destabilised by the remainder of what cannot be explained, cannot be symbolised: human atrocity, the capacity for malice. The insight is that the particularities of human action cannot be explained away, for the void-place into which a subject is inscribed necessarily remains.<sup>34</sup> Held open as the point of impossibility of any identity fully affirmed, the subject of evil of *Human Remains* suggests that, whether or not dictators exist, society is forever beholden to a structural dislocation, a fundamentally constitutive antagonism which remains more than any symbolic fantasy about the possibility of social harmony.

#### 4. Conclusion: Mao Only Dies Twice

The thing that makes a certain object or phenomenon “evil” is precisely the fact that it gives body to the ambiguity of desire and abhorrence.

-Alenka Zupančič<sup>35</sup>

The fascinating object of evil in *Human Remains* - what is in you more than you - is illustrated in positive form by the film’s only non-archival image: a shadowy figure digging a hole, an image that appears between each of the film’s five major sections. On first blush, we might take this to be an image of death, an image of a grave being dug, a void-place into which remains are buried. While this figure may well be read as a literal image of Lacan’s notion of the murder of the thing, its insertion between the film’s major sections suggests it serves the role of what Žižek calls a “vanishing mediator,” a figure through which two opposing terms are negated in the paradoxical production of something new. With respect to the opposition drawn above between the positive content of the archival footage and the negative form of the blank screen, we may read this vanishing mediator as standing between two deaths. Since “existence is granted only through the Symbolic, [and] being is supplied only by cleaving to the Real,” the represented dictators die not just once, but twice.<sup>36</sup>

On the one hand, the dictators can no longer “be” insofar as their bodies have disintegrated and returned to the earth. The biographical content reassures us that, despite their notoriety, each of these figures was nevertheless all too human. Franco recalls, “I had two thirds of my stomach removed.” Stalin informs us, “I was five feet, four inches tall - shoe size eleven.” Mussolini declares, “I slept seven hours each night.” And while Hitler admits, “I had trouble with gas,” Mao confesses, “I was frequently constipated.” Each of these humans, subject to natural laws, inevitably suffered a biological death and, hence, ceases to be in the Real. On the other hand, the consequences of their dictatorial reign have found no place in the established symbolic order. While at one point, each dictator may have maintained a symbolic status conferred upon him “as if” he were acting in good conscience,<sup>37</sup> each has since incurred a symbolic debt. Since the Symbolic is the realm of laws and customs, and since the dictators committed trespasses of its law and order, their acts remain unimagin-

able from the current viewpoint of geo-political reality. Therefore, because society disowns these figures - there is no way to settle their accounts, no return to the way things were, the symbolic restoration of these figures remains impossible - these dictators have died a second, Symbolic death.

This second death, however, is paradoxical insofar as these figures endure a kind of life after death, maintaining a place in the Symbolic through the endless reproduction of their images. However, we are quick to recognise that, in *Human Remains*, the images of these dictators are not of the first order, "Here! This is our leader!" Nor are the images generated for a similar, ideological purpose, "This is the face of evil! Is this what you want?" Rather, if such images were all that was needed to produce a re-sounding "no!" to genocidal regimes, as is typically intended by the generation of images of human suffering, then images of notorious dictators would appear flat, dull, lifeless. They would kill the Thing they stand in for and their production would cease. This is to say that while images of each dictator sustained a kind of dead life during the lifetime of their referents in the Real (e.g., the lifeless portrait in Stalinist Russia), contemporary images sustain a ghostly life for these dictators in reality. Such images do not kill what they stand in for (each dictator is already dead); rather, they are granted a spectral life that haunts reality, animated by a loss of the Real in its resistance to symbolisation. Because no image is able to fully capture what it is intended to stand in for, because each will forever fail to fully integrate into a meaningful coherence the deeds committed under these dictators, such images sustain a second symbolic existence: as misrepresentations of the phenomenon of evil, representations which try to put a face once and for all on human malice but are "not it."

While the place between two deaths is at once horrific and sublime, there is no sublime image that could absolve these dictators of their symbolic debt. If the death of such figures was all that is necessary to settle their accounts - to satisfy our desire for resolution, to guarantee the end of human malice, to restore a harmonious whole - then the mere image of their corpses would suffice. The fact that such images do exist (*Human Remains* itself includes the famous, horrific footage of Mussolini and his mistress with their dead eyes open) proves that what is fascinating about such images is something more than the visible content of any image of Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Mao, or Franco. The power of these images to fascinate resides in their very failure to restore a meaningful coherence to the symbolic order, the failure to completely patch over the void that remains internal to the recurrence of their appearance. This incompleteness of the Symbolic, this failure inherent to the structure of symbolisation which causes the ghostly return of the Real, is confirmed in *Human Remains* by the voice-over accompanying the image of Mao's corpse: "I never conceded defeat. I'd lie low for a while when things turned against me, and wait - for a comeback."

To sum up, in the same way that any Western political narrative would collapse without the support of such empty signifiers as "freedom" and "democracy," images of evil would fail to fascinate if the void-place of symbolic inscription were fully blocked. In such a case, images of Mao,

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Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, and Franco would do the simple work of burying the past, of concluding the narrative on dictatorship and human atrocity, its images standing merely as markers of graves soon to be forgotten. *Human Remains*, however, works specifically against this. Through the technique of repeatedly cutting to the blank screen, this film reminds us how, on the one hand, it is indeed possible to bury the past under the ideological weight of visual imagery. On the other hand, it works to stave off any premature burial, to defer the closure of the established social order, demonstrating how it is pierced by a fundamental lack. In its omission of evil, *Human Remains* opens on to rather than closes off the question of this phenomenon, exposing rather than covering the lack that drives its symbolisation, thereby preventing any solidification of meaning around the Real object that causes our deepest fascination.

### Notes

1. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 268, 103.

2. I will use the term “symbolisation” rather than “representation” in order to distinguish the following analysis from the analytic philosophy of representation.

3. “The symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing, and this death constitutes in the subject the externalisation of his desire.” Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 104.

4. Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2001), 3.

5. Together with the Imaginary, these orders make up Lacan’s system of classification of mental processes.

6. Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995), 24.

7. Saussure’s breakthrough insight that language is a differential system - wherein the meaning of a sign is determined not in relation to the thing it refers, but rather, in its difference from other signs - plays a fundamental role in Lacan’s analytic classification of mental processes.

8. “It is the world of words that creates the world of things,” Lacan, *Écrits*, 65.

9. Lacan’s notion of “ex-sistence” is drawn from Martin Heidegger. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger provides an analysis of the structure of being, an interpretation of *Dasein*. Literally translated as “there-being,” *Dasein* presents itself as unique amongst beings, standing out as a region or clearing. Heidegger designates this standing out ontologically as ex-sistence, the standing out of the clearing of being.

10. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 169.

11. Fink, 24.

12. The key point is that this is the remainder of the *self-referential dynamic of the signifier itself*, not simply some piece of matter that the signifier was unable to integrate into the Symbolic order. Insofar as signifiers refer not to things but to other signifiers, the remainder of this process - that which the signifying chain fails to signify, namely, its cause - retroactively determines the dimension of the Thing. Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000), 191.

13. Žižek, *Sublime*, 169.

14. *Ibid.*, 170.

15. Zupančič captures the complexity of this notion in the following passage: "If it is true, on the one hand, that the lack is the inscription of an impasse or an impotence in the symbolic order, one must not forget that, on the other hand, it is at the same time the condition of this power and has, in consequence, a constitutive function for the symbolic order and for reality as well - without the lack, there is no reality. Reality is constituted in the loss of a little bit of the Real." Zupančič, 240.

16. Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991), 221.

17. Lacan, *Écrits*, 104; Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 75.

18. Zupančič, 189.

19. It is not the object that is desired so much as the desire of the other: "Man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because the first object of desire is to be recognised by the other." Lacan, *Écrits*, 58.

20. Zupančič, 18; "The only things capable of satisfying demand are generalities or absolutes (demand is demand for *everything*), which, in the end, boils down to nothing." Grosz, 63.

21. Zupančič, 18. An ad for Sprint cellular phone service brilliantly captures the desire-causing nature of this remainder, the thing that falls out of the symbolisation process, leaving a gap in the signifying chain that causes a disturbance to the subject in pursuit of its desired object. Because of this disturbing void - the fallout of information incurred over an inferior cellular network - the husband in the advertisement fails to bring home to his wife what she desires, "a movie, something old." Instead, he brings her "a monkey, with a cold." The object attained - a sick monkey - is never the object of desire because "that's not it!"

22. Žižek, *Sublime*, 160. A clear example of the lost object of the Real as cause of desire is the notion of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). What were the Iraqi WMD if not Real objects, the unsymbolisable centre of the ideological discourse that accumulated around them? In 2003, the Bush administration claimed that such weapons existed; however, despite an extensive search, they were never found. As the irritating void subsequently preventing the smooth unfolding of the ideological justification of the American-led invasion of Iraq, WMD were effectively created by the search itself, a search for a "lost object" that was

never really lost but nevertheless caused the administration's desire to find it.

23. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 126.

24. "The self-referential movement of the signifier is not that of a closed circle, but an elliptical movement around a certain void, and the *objet petit a*, as the original lost object which in a way coincides with its own loss, is precisely the embodiment of this void." Žižek, *Sublime*, 158.

25. "The Sublime is an object whose positive body is just an embodiment of Nothing." *Ibid.*, 206.

26. This is not to simply suggest that we enjoy images of genocidal dictators. Rather, because of the structure of desire, our "enjoyment" of images that occupy the place of symbolic impossibility can be pleasurable as well as perverse. Hence the unique feature of the Sublime; it is at once horrifying and fascinating.

27. Badiou cited in Christoph Cox and Molly Wallen, "On Evil: An Interview with Alain Badiou," *Cabinet 5* (Winter 2001): 72.

28. B. Ruby Rich, "Times When Less is More Profound," *New York Times*, 6 August 2000, sec. 2, p. 24; Rhys Graham, "Human Remains," *Senses of Cinema*, November 2000.

<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/cteq/00/10/human.html>.

29. As Lacan famously formulates this, "a signifier is that which represents the subject for another signifier." Lacan, *Book XI*, 207.

30. For example, the signifier "light" materialises, gives body to, or represents the absence of its opposite, an absence into which "dark" is inscribed. See Žižek, *They Know Not*, 22.

31. Zupančič, 194; Lacan, *Book XI*, 207; Mladen Dolar, "Beyond Interpellation," *Qui Parle* 6, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 1993): 86. At this point it should be clear that the Lacanian object and subject coincide.

32. Lacan calls this point the *point du capton*, "quilting point."

33. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

34. This is precisely Althusser's theory of ideology as the reproduction of the relations of production. For Althusser, the capitalist system works "all by itself" because individuals are inscribed into positions which do not disappear with the passing of any subject, but rather, remain open through an eternal process of ideological interpolation.

35. Zupančič cited in Christoph Cox, "On Evil: An Interview with Alenka Zupančič," *Cabinet 5* (Winter 2001), 75.

36. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1993), 33; Fink, 61.

37. "As if" functions as an agreed disavowal of the Real in favour of the Symbolic. Everyone knows that the emperor has no clothes, however, we proceed as if we do not know in order to prevent the entire political system from collapsing. We agree not to reveal that no one takes the ruling ideology seriously. Žižek, *Sublime*, 32.