

IF ONE HAS THE FLOOR, DOES ONE ALSO NEED TO DANCE?  
TOPOLOGY, CHOREOLOGY, AND THE STRUCTURE  
OF DIGITAL SPACE

MARKO VUČKOVIĆ

**M**arcello Vitali-Rosati offers texts of rarely paralleled clarity on what can be termed “applied ontology.” The project seeks to theorize the structure of digital space—long assumed to have an unstructured, oceanic topography—as instead having a specific ontological architecture. That architecture is, according to him, one which involves not a *choreography*, which implies a mapping of objects in space and so an opposition between space and object—but more properly a *choreology*, a space which is identical to the objects “dancing” in it. And it is this dancing of digital space which opens the pathways of the subject not simply dancing with, but altering, directing, leading, even controlling such a dance. In a different metaphorical key, equally serviceable, this implies a subject which is both a product, an architecture, but also an architect: a producer or a co-creator of (digital) space.

Why this discussion is important should quickly come to light. What is revealed in the digital age in a direct and immediate way—scarcely developed and rarely glimpsed in previous times—is not the addition of a separate but interacting world of immaterial/imaginative objects and relations in parallel with the world of material objects and relations. Instead, it is more properly a world which is, in a sense, always its own (impossible) inside. It is a world which, apropos the set-theoretical paradoxes, acts as a set which contains all sets as members—containing even the sets which do not contain themselves. This

characterization, loose as it is for the moment, allows for a passage away from an ontology of substances and their attributes, toward a (meta)ontology of substantive predication emphasizing plurality and multiplicity (Vitali-Rosati and Larrue, *Media Do Not Exist: Performativity and Mediating Conjunctures* 61ff.).

An illustration will help. For this, think of the motif from the phenomenal dark comedy film, *Good Bye, Lenin!* (Becker and Lichtenberg), which explores the ironic structure of desire in the communist GDR. Alex Kerner lives with his mother and sister in East Berlin at the cusp of the collapse of the Union. Treading in the path of their politburo luminary mother, Christiane, Alex's sister, Ariane, is a promising economics student at the city university, while Alex is your random "everyman," a somewhat deadbeat social activist caught taking an active role in a freedom of the press protest. The chief complaint metonymically present in this protest, and in the lives of the main characters, is the inability of the communist government to provide the fulfilment of its citizens' desires. The irony can be seen best with Alex and Ariane, who, in their quest for participating in bringing about a political framework capable of delivering the objects associated with their desire (blue jeans, pornography, new music) end up in a situation which stifles their desires far more than before. Alex ends up leading a life practically identical to that of his old, now defunct, life in East Berlin: he is not only hilariously stuck in a simulation of his former communist oppression (he must re-create East Germany in his mother's apartment, whose heart is too unstable after a collapse to "handle" the collapse of the republic she has interpellated herself in), but also pursues a moving and highly energized, yet monogamous love interest which is at one and the same time conventional (he could have accessed this selfsame relationship in the GDR) and at odds with the radicality of his desire (for pornography, for a repudiation of these very norms of convention). In short, under the new regime of capital, Alex is robbed of his symbolic excuse for mediocrity, and ends up further behind in relation to his "potential" than before. His sister Ariane ends up in the role of a Burger King cashier in full, humiliating costume, in clear contrast to the

upwardly mobile position as economics student with a powerful and deeply connected mother in the GDR government.

The irony here, to be fully appreciated, must be seen in its properly ontological dimension: the desire they sought to liberate from its external impediment in communist stagnation has been simultaneously both present to them all along and yet is now further from fruition. The structure of their space, in short, is digital in the very way Vitali-Rosati claims: the forbidden “inside” of citizens’ desire in the GDR, unable to find its complementary object in the outside world, is relocated as an externalized, unfulfillable demand to enjoy accompanied by its impossible, fleeting object. It reconfigures their desire such that, now, in contrast to the communist oppression, their desire is barred from the inside. The only way “out” for Alex or Ariane is now “in” the very social-symbolic networks (in capital) that repeat their desire’s ossification under communism: via substantial predication, the ability to be the product, but now also producer, of the very networks they are embedded in. The film for its part ends with this ambition dramatically unfulfilled. Nevertheless, the configuration of Alex and Ariane’s social positioning is consistent with what Vitali-Rosati calls “the surface of contact between the inside and the outside” (Vitali-Rosati, *The Chiasm as a Virtual: A Non-concept in Merleau-Ponty’s Work (with a Coda on Theatre)* 289).<sup>1</sup>

The present paper will argue that this ontological picture is *almost* just right. This is vital for the discussion of digital spaces and for the desires it demands, promises, sustains, and frustrates, today. We have said goodbye to Lenin, yes, but not to the “spirit” of Lenin, as Slavoj Žižek once entertainingly remarked (Žižek, *Repeating Lenin*). There is indeed, as Žižek says, a formal—but **not** substantive—feature to be recovered here. My thesis then is twofold. First, that there is something wrong with the form of Vitali-Rosati’s case: that the inside-outside structure he theorizes is a little too heavy on the “inside,” foreclosing a genuinely transcendent subject. And second, that there is something wrong with the content of Vitali-Rosati’s case: that—to borrow the immensely expressive formal schema of Lacan’s Discourses—it implies a hysterical social-symbolic link which fore-

closes the very transcendence necessary to transfer the subject from its role as product of digital space into the role of genuine producer. Vitali-Rosati says his system can get this done; I will argue that it cannot, but I will do so while accepting his conclusions about *how* the emancipatory process in the digital context might look as it develops.

What follows is a discussion in three parts. The first part is what follows in this section here, namely a groundwork for establishing theoretical commonalities and substantive touchpoints between Vitali-Rosati's position and the one I will seek to defend in the third part below. The second part, which I call the "first moment," is my attempt to reconstruct Vitali-Rosati's dual thesis, starting with the masterful "The Writer is the Architect" (Vitali-Rosati, *The Writer is the Architect: Editorialization and the Production of Digital Space*) while supplementing these thesis components with a discussion of his other, complimentary texts available in English. And third, in the "final moment," I will provide a critique by way of a repositioning of his case: the corrective will take place as a shift from the (all too) immanent subject available in his writings to a subject capable of accessing a genuine "outside" from which to co-construct digital space *with remainder*—without that construction being tainted with and swallowed up by the traces of the subject's position as purely immanent product of that space. The upshot of my critique is not to question Vitali-Rosati's helpful conclusions about how to manage digital space to ensure a radical vision of public domain and open access (Vitali-Rosati, *On Editorialization: Structuring Space and Authority in the Digital Age* 86-103). I rather question the ability of his "choreological" system to deliver these goods root and branch (Vitali-Rosati, *The Writer is the Architect: Editorialization and the Production of Digital Space* 16ff.). Before that, two pieces of groundwork should be addressed in the form of shared presuppositions.

#### GROUNDWORK: FIRST PRESUPPOSITION

**V**itali-Rosati puts together an elegant case as to why the virtual ontology he terms "metaontology" must be viewed as a

symbolic system privileging space as its central ontological component. Space is, in his terms, “a dynamic structure that unfolds like a melody played by several different actors—people’s actions, infrastructures, speech,” with its accompanying irreducible ontological multiplicities. This is to be contrasted with the systems privileging the equivocity or pure incommensurability of time with respect to space in the Bergsonian key of duration and simultaneity (Vitali-Rosati, *The Writer is the Architect: Editorialization and the Production of Digital Space* 5). Bergson’s system, if correct, would imply a vitalist ontology which denies an irreducible multiplicity of ontologies, opting instead for an ontology of the “One” as universalized lived experience. To show this is wrongheaded Vitali-Rosati must show that space is itself a structure which negotiates with and internalizes time, which bakes in time as a constitutive and operational element, and in so doing would short circuit Bergson’s insistence of a unified ontological field under the rubric of duration or lived time. The specific mode Vitali-Rosati employs to generate this result will be discussed in the “First moment” below.

For now, my point is to claim that this analysis should be endorsed because it is confirmable through independent argumentative pathways. Take the following argument as illustrative. Let’s continue to victimize Bergson out of Vitali-Rosati’s list of time-privileging philosophers. And let’s take it for granted that Bergson has in mind to argue that it is time, not space, which provides the fundamental dimension from which to interpret the subject (Bergson 104, 236). Then via *reductio* we are left with the following challenge: if time is the privileged dimension from which to interpret the nature of the subject and time is exclusively divided between duration (lived time) and simultaneity (clock time), then it must be asked what the *difference* between duration and simultaneity are. If time is the privileged axis, then the difference should appeal to a category referring to time, as either simultaneous (punctiliar) or durational (extended).

Yet this turns out to entail a dilemma for Bergson: if the difference between duration and simultaneity is cashed out in terms of simultaneity, then it is space which is inadvertently and illicitly privileged—since space would be needed to mark the “two” of simultane-

ity, as in, one and the same time, two places. And the difference can't be cashed out in terms of duration either, since this too ends up privileging space as the mediating term: duration can negate the duration-simultaneity opposition only by externalizing the lived experience of time (as duration) as a spatialized "map" of time as clock measurement more proper to simultaneity (Pickstock 90f., Note 108). But now we would be right back at the issue of simultaneity mediating the difference, which we have seen it cannot. Thus, it turns out that it is space that mediates this difference, and that time cannot supply the content of its own minimal difference with itself (O'Connor 21).

To put this simply, there is an inconsistency between dividing a term exclusively and exhaustively (at the same time and in the same way) such that Bergson cannot appeal to both to characterize his fundamental ontology. Either duration and simultaneity are not exclusive divisions, in which case there is a third category regulating the production and differentiation of both; or else they are exclusive but at the price of not being exhaustive, calling for a mediating term which is compatible with both. In either case the answer is that *space* is the left-out term regulating both duration and simultaneity.<sup>2</sup> In this Vitali-Rosati and the perspective of critique here are in complete alignment.

#### GROUNDWORK: SECOND PRESUPPOSITION

I need to spell out one final and important commonality, which lays out the theoretical basis for both the exposition of Vitali-Rosati's ontology of the subject and my subsequent critique. It has been pointed out in genealogical studies of the term "subject" that recognizable philosophical articulations of subject-hood focus on an interplay between one or more of the following three thematic components: that of subjectness, of subjectivity, and of subjection (Balibar, Cassin and Libera 1070). The interplay allows for a glimpse into the history of the term and the place Vitali-Rosati locates his notion of subjectivity in his metaontology. The first notion—of subjectness—draws on the Greek ὑποκειμένον and connects the notion of the logical subject (the subject whose negation is the predicate) with

the corporeal subject (the substance whose negation is the accident) into a continuous ontological amalgam of the subject as guaranteed correlation between its being/ existence and its logical properties, as a substantive subject stitched to the predicated subject. The second—of subjectivity—draws on the Kantian rereading of the subject which reads a conflict where *hypokeimonon* sees cooperation, between the predicative and substantial components of the term (Balibar, Cassin and Libera 1081f.). This notion relocates the subject in the transcendental, a priori negative, field, decoupling the link between the subject's status as substance and the subject's status as signifier. The third notion—that of subjection—extends between strata in the social hierarchy the corresponding conflict within the transcendental subject in the second sense (Balibar, Cassin and Libera 1083, 1085). The lack of fit between the corporeal subject and the logical subject is projected outwards as the locus of sociocultural and institutional tension between subject and State. The subject here, like one of earth's minerals, is forged in the pressure resulting from the interplay of these forces.

This third and final sense touches on the point between the theoretical commitments between Vitali-Rosati and the position describing and critiquing his ontology the sections to follow. Both see the subject in this dual position as produced and producer. Vitali-Rosati's digital metaontology presents this complex dialectical interplay between symbolic to social (and back) as an ontological-political link which realizes the negation of the Kantian transcendental as the negative a priori (the "first" negation), bringing about the self-intersecting surface architecture of the subject as surface of contact between inside and outside (Vitali-Rosati, *The Chiasm as a Virtual: A Non-concept in Merleau-Ponty's Work (with a Coda on Theatre)* 286). The subject, as a "fold" in this surface, negotiates its boundary position between being (via subjection) a product of the intersection of social-symbolic surfaces and being (via transference) a producer of this space, too (Bruno 201f.). Tracing this root to its branches will be the methodological strategy in the discussion to follow.

## FIRST MOMENT: CO-CONSTRUCTION

### Space (is structured)

Concerning his metaontology, Vitali-Rosati is clear that the first step to recognizing the character of space's structure is to recognize before all else that (digital) space *is* structured. He is spectacularly successful in this line of argument. Since the chiasm emerges as the theoretical structure mediating the difference between inside and outside—characteristic of any space—Vitali-Rosati can motivate the thesis that the external components of a space regulating its boundaries and operations—“values, practices, technologies, and infrastructure” (Vitali-Rosati, *The Writer is the Architect: Editorialization and the Production of Digital Space* 8)—are not purely external, but show up in the internal and private sectors of that space as constitutive and formative features. “Digital space,” he puts it, “is a well-structured material space” (Vitali-Rosati, *On Editorialization: Structuring Space and Authority in the Digital Age* 7).

Vitali-Rosati's argument is not circular but approaches this conclusion from empirical observation. The illustration he cites, sufficient to prove this part of his case, could not be more faithful to the experiences of those whose formative experiences took place in the digital age. The inside-outside surface brings the “bedroom”—what is somehow still a euphemism for an activity which has long since ceased to be exclusively practiced there, if it ever was so confined—into the shared space of commerce and public interaction (Vitali-Rosati, *Pornspace* 308f.). This observation plays on the same situation with the desire of the characters of Alex and Ariane (from *Good Bye, Lenin!*), how it encountered a new “bar,” a new series of internal prohibitions under capital which were (interpreted as) merely external in the commune. This internalization of structure is what Vitali-Rosati has in mind in the digital world, and pornography is his graphic example. It is in pornography where a privileged vantage for the strict and nonnegotiable *structure* of digital space is encountered: pornography, far from being a space full of the plasticity of the pure flux is rather a space of rigidly ossified objects and relations (Vitali-Rosati, *Pornspace* 312, 317).



This component of his case must be endorsed unequivocally; space has *a* structure. But how does he get to *the* structure?

#### Τόπος and χορός: two structures of space

We have already introduced the chiasm. This is of course Vitali-Rosati's answer to the above question. However, the path he takes to get there has not yet been traced, and it is worth doing so. We have already seen from the "first presupposition" above that space is the basic ontological axis of being. To parse out the specific character of space's structure, Vitali-Rosati turns to two Greek terms to supply a differential between alternative choices. These are given under two rubrics of the relationship the form of space has with its objects, namely τόπος (*topos*) and χορός (*choros*). The former signifies topical location or differential position of objects in a grid or mappable plane. The latter is a performance, a festive dance implying round, circular motion (Vitali-Rosati, *The Writer is the Architect: Editorialization and the Production of Digital Space* 6).

If both have a logic, then the topological space, according to Vitali-Rosati, is a static space which is *given*, already fully in place when objects are introduced into it. The *choreological* space, by contrast, is not given but "produced," a dynamic situation in which objects do not get introduced but co-construct the space itself. The logic of the "first presupposition" must be repeated here. According to how he has set things up, choreology, but not topology, offers the authentic space of second negation, since the opposition between object and vector in space is undercut in the choreological option alone.

I will later wonder whether Vitali-Rosati has topology all wrong, but for now we follow his lead in the dance.

#### Χορός as the choice between these structures

Choreological space is identical to the structure of the "chiasm" or of "metaontology" as previously described. The point Vitali-Rosati has in mind here is to motivate the idea that topology fails to offer the concepts needed to articulate the co-production of space by objects characterizing not just the digital age—although best visible

there—but also of ontology as such. He is less successful in this charge, but I will leave that until the “final moment” below.

The point for now is to deepen this discussion of the chiasm—the “how” of space—to discern its relationship with being—the “what” of space. And for this the logic of the *choros* is vital, namely that objects are not given “to” space and have relations “in” space, but that space itself is identical to the surface of dancing objects as such—that the relations of objects is itself the space in which these relations play out. To shift to the metaphorical key in my title, this is to say that, for choreology, there is no opposition between dance floor and dance; there is only the dance, which constructs its own “floor,” its own coordinates of unfolding, as the floor in turn helps configure the dance. Vitali-Rosati explains this in terms of an irreducible multiplicity of spaces: the “core principle” of the chiasm “is that Being is always the result of a mediation process. [This] implies an original multiplicity of Beings, and therefore a multiplicity of ontologies” (Vitali-Rosati and Larrue, *Media Do Not Exist: Performativity and Mediating Conjectures* 63). The chiasm as such is the “nothing-being” which traces the surface of dance/ dance floor (Vitali-Rosati, *The Chiasm as a Virtual: A Non-concept in Merleau-Ponty’s Work (with a Coda on Theatre)* 289).

The upshot of this deepening is to recognize the relationship Vitali-Rosati sees between the chiasm and transcendence. For him, the chiasm represents the space entirely enclosed in the inside-outside surface, a surface with no depth. The question, though, is not whether there is something wrong with this a zero-thickness surface, but whether, as Samo Tomšič points out, what is to be done about “the surplus produced by the manipulation” of this manifold (Tomšič, *Psychoanalysis and Antiphilosophy: the case of Jacques Lacan* 99).<sup>[^3]</sup> The idea of surplus has already been introduced without being named. It is the minimal gap between something and itself which is revealed in the passage from the first negation (which secures an oppositional pair) and the second negation, which introduces a space which negates the opposition itself, opening up a third option which is not limited by the boundaries of its components: the surplus is the “very precondition” of space (Kordela 105) because it draws the

boundary between inside and outside itself, is itself “boundary” as surface of contact—just as Vitali-Rosati claims it is.[<sup>4</sup>]

Notice however that, for Vitali-Rosati’s choreology, this surplus cannot produce an exception to the virtual field as he describes it. This is precisely because this space already maximally includes as an immanent feature the objects and relations which configure its architecture, and constitutively excludes any objects or relations which in principle do not “fit” as synergistic, co-constructive features of the dancing manifold. This is why the choreological space is “non-representational,” so “cannot be interpreted using a truth-based model” (Vitali-Rosati, *On Editorialization: Structuring Space and Authority in the Digital Age* 8). This foreclosure of a truth-principle commits Vitali-Rosati to the thesis that the virtual field is a space with maximized scope with no “windows,” no limits to its scope and no exceptions to its immanent frame (Falque 37). It is a space that in principle forecloses the transcendent[<sup>5</sup>] and so offers, as I will complain later, “no way out.”

Nothing escapes the virtual fold, and nothing gets in. This foreclosure is Vitali-Rosati’s thesis concerning the surplus: that it cannot be an exception, that everything is “already there” in the manifold, that one can co-construct the dance but never in principle set oneself as an exception to it, containing a remnant unaffected by the chiasmic flux. Vitali-Rosati thus provides a picture of ontology as an inconsistent and open space but does so at the expense of being able to make room for counterexamples to his own proposals concerning the structure of the virtual.

## FINAL MOMENT: CRITIQUE

### What is...

I spoke of revolution just now. Famously Lenin asked the question, *Что делать?*, “what does one do?” or “what is to be done?” and got, from the standpoint of history, almost exactly where he began. It is in fact even a question of whether Lenin was able to implement—or even envision—a genuinely revolutionary economy (Paxton). We can

thus ask, in the spirit of this inquiry, what is to be done about the minimal difference between Lenin and himself: or, rather more generally, help pin down exactly what is to be done about what I called Vitali-Rosati's *almost* satisfactory ontology.

The issue at hand, as I see it, is whether there is any space of a priori negativity—any genuine opposition or authentic disruption—available in digital space which can serve as a (transcending) exception to the pure immanence of the chiasm. I think there is, and for that the following argument is instrumental. Marshall McLuhan famously offered the distinction between “hot” and “cold” media among other things meant to classify the pathways of interaction between the subject and the new digital manifolds (McLuhan 22-31). The difference is cashed out between high-resolution content which resists creative and co-constructive input from its viewers due to the fine-grained information embedded in the presentation (hot)—and low-resolution content which invites creative completion by its viewers (cold). A Marvel flick is hot; a Dungeons & Dragons oral narration game is cold. In the former there is “nothing left to the imagination,” the viewer is purely passive and is formed by the text—and in the latter there is plenty left to allow the viewer to meaningfully and actively participate to co-construct the text.

Now what is striking is that the minimal difference between something and itself, between what I said was the difference between a signifier and its subject, is something which must be pushed to its radical limit. To do so will eventually expose what's missing from the chiasm. What I mean here is that *in a signifier* there is a minimal difference between it as corporeal marking and itself as logical subject. This difference should be cashed out in terms of McLuhan's distinction: a term, say “Lenin,” is a relatively hot form of media—it is univocal in meaning, invites little participation, functions in predictable ways in sentences, evokes similar social effects in polite conversation, etc. Yet any of its component letters, say the “L,” is itself cold, as cold as can be—the shape of the markings is deeply ambiguous and can be seen as a sort of visual amphiboly.[^6]

This minimal difference is spectacularly exploited in the internal logic of Lacan's "Discourses," where the social link structuring a space is explored (Žižek, *Can One Exit from The Capitalist Discourse Without Becoming a Saint?*). Recall here that space, as Vitali-Rosati puts it, includes the entire inside-outside package of objects and relations, the "values, practices, technologies, and infrastructure" as Vitali-Rosati says. Lacan's Discourses offer a network of ways in which this space's symbolic/ theoretical structure produces effects in its social/ practical operation. To formalize this, the discourses appeal to a (clockwise) rotating matrix of four symbols in the form of an ordered quadruple ( $\$, a, S_1, S_2$ ). Notice immediately that these symbols are cold in McLuhan's sense: they are deeply ambiguous, featuring shapes which are not only complexly and amphibolously related to the concepts they symbolize but also rich in conceptual and imaginative association taken as markings on a surface in themselves.

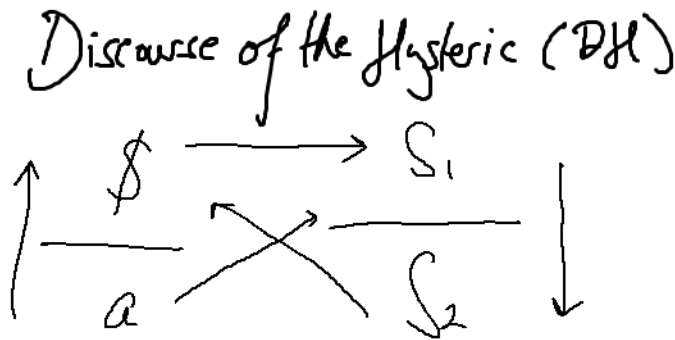
The symbols signify the subject ( $\$$ ), the master-signifier ( $S_1$ ), the knowledge system ( $S_2$ ), and the surplus ( $a$ ). We have said what the  $\$$  is, the subject. And the  $a$  is the surplus.  $S_1$  is what can be called a linchpin symbol, guaranteeing the (artificial) completeness and consistency of a system of knowledge,  $S_2$ . The master-signifier,  $S_1$ , for a racist like Oswald Spengler (say), is the mystical notion of the "blood" of a people, the "expression of existence... [the] life history of ripening and withering, its deep relation to the creative acts, the myths and the cults of the same Culture" (Spengler 101). "Blood" for Spengler provides (what is supposed to be) a belief which affects all other beliefs contained in the system, yet which cannot be affected retroactively by the network of beliefs available to the expressive capacity of that system. The signifier is "master."

Of course,  $S_1$  appears in non-racist systems of thought too, even in allegedly revolutionary ones; we will see how this works with Vitali-Rosati in a moment.

And the symbols are in a matrix of four fixed places, clockwise from the top-left (the II-quadrant in a coordinate plane): (1) agent, (2) other, (3) loss, (4) truth (Bruno 114ff.). The agent is the "positive" pair in

an opposition, any opposition. The truth is the signifier connecting the agent's subject (as logical subject) to its correspondence with external reality. The other is the agent's first negation, the oppositional member in the ordered pair of (positive claim, negation). The loss is what is lost, quite literally, what cannot be recovered in the schema and must be forfeited to accept the hypothesis under investigation.

There are five such discourses; each captures a configuration of the social space in a way homologous to the structure of the symbolic system implied in the formalization. Right now, I focus on one, the Discourse of the Hysteric (DH) (Žižek, *Can One Exit from The Capitalist Discourse Without Becoming a Saint?* 49of.). Let me now draw what the DH looks like and then parse it out—draw it to emphasize the “cold” ambiguity of the shapes and the minimal difference between the variables and the written architecture of their symbols themselves:



The arrows indicate the direction of inference, how to pass from one position to the next in the circulation. Let's place Vitali-Rosati's system into this, what we have (because he has) variously called metaontology/ choreology/ the chiasm/ the virtual. What will guarantee the accuracy of this reading will be an a posteriori fit between Vitali-Rosati's system as already described and the outcome here. Only some hidden inferences will now be able to be made. It does

not matter in which order I list these in what follows, since these are meant to be in circulation; the same structure will be made clear if we follow the patterns suggested by the formula.

The agent of Vitali-Rosati's metaontology is the subject, understood in its (subjugated) role as the surface of contact between social institutions and an individual's "inner" space of subjectivity. For Vitali-Rosati this is the agent as subject who is in the unique position of co-producing space as architect, his positive claim (Vitali-Rosati, *The Writer is the Architect: Editorialization and the Production of Digital Space* 18). It is the subject who is the "agent," the architect, of change.

The truth (behind the subject) for Vitali-Rosati is the factor which I have not encountered him mentioning, but fits exactly into his system where it ought to: he mentions that it is Deleuze who aboriginally sees the virtual in its authentic, chiasmic structure (Vitali-Rosati, *The Chiasm as a Virtual: A Non-concept in Merleau-Ponty's Work (with a Coda on Theatre)* 286). We can infer then that for Vitali-Rosati, as it is for Deleuze, at least in his late period, is the so-called "body without organs" (Deleuze and Guattari 9-15). The body without organs, as Alenka Zupančič says, is for Deleuze "in itself the real scene of emancipation," the pre-symbolic object which has erased the minimal difference (between it and itself) and has absorbed all surplus into its foam (Zupančič 177f.). This makes sense of Vitali-Rosati's position: the chiasm is this space of "no-escape," which structurally guarantees its own ontological exhaustivity. The body without organs cannot have an exception associated with it because it is itself beyond opposition, so beyond negation, and so beyond exception. This makes sense also of why Vitali-Rosati says the chiasm is not truth-functional: the body without organs, as with the virtual, is beyond all opposition and so is by entailment also beyond the truth-falsity opposition. It is a "truth" which is no-truth, or rather, pre-truth.

The other for Vitali-Rosati is the first negation of the agent, which is the chiasm. Because the master-signifier,  $S_1$ , is positioned here in DH, this means that the other—the space of negation of the chiasm—is the symbol which guarantees the chiasm's exhaustiveness.

The other here is the system of privatized oppression in the digital space which makes the subject a passive product of the institutional structuring (Vitali-Rosati, *The Writer is the Architect: Editorialization and the Production of Digital Space* 5). This, recall, is the negation of the chiasm only insofar as the behemoth of privatization represents a “shade” in the spectrum of public and private space within the chiasm: “I propose that the public and the private be placed on a continuum rather than in a discrete opposition to one another” (Vitali-Rosati, *On Editorialization: Structuring Space and Authority in the Digital Age* 94). This makes sense not only of Vitali-Rosati’s ontology of the pure multiple, but also of the notion of body without organs as the “truth” beyond all opposition as the corresponding “reality” to the chiasm.

Let’s pause for a moment and re-visualize the formalization by substituting Vitali-Rosati’s tenets for the variables in DH. This will allow us to see the final variable,  $S_2$ , in its position of loss in the chiasmic ontology. I will replace the variables with short descriptions, written by hand.<sup>[^7]</sup> The other markings, such as the arrows, are left out for clarity:

Vitali-Rosati's Metaontology:

<u>the subject as agent for change</u>	<u>the chiasm as inside-outside surface</u>
body without organs; the material reality beyond antagonistic opposition	the system of knowledge — the institutions controlling digital space

This allows us to visually process the position of loss in Vitali-Rosati’s schema. What is in the position of loss in DH is the system of knowledge itself, or  $S_2$ . Now an implicit inference needs to be pulled



out, which is obvious but full of surprises. It is that—obviously—no individual subject is in possession of the exhaustive, maximal scope of knowledge contained in any system at least as expressive as those natural-language systems of knowledge found in human communities.  $S_2$  is therefore not a glimpse into what a particular member of a discursive community knows or can “prove,” but rather is an admission that it is the other who really knows (Lacan 230ff.). This implies, further, that there is something “missing” from the subject who knows according to  $S_2$ , that what is missing is this maximal scope of knowledge which only the other can know.

Now I want to piggyback on this to make two claims by way of critique of Vitali-Rosati’s overall project, at least in the sample of texts surveyed in this study. The first is that I want to motivate the thesis that there is real, authentic, genuine opposition between the subject and its other. Recall that it is opposition, that is negativity, as such which is foreclosed in the chiasm, denied having anything more than an apparent presence in the manifold. The second is to point out that it is right at this juncture where Vitali-Rosti’s system breaks down. The system of knowledge characterizing digital space is controlled, or at least in the position to be controlled, by institutions (as he admits). And it is these institutions which encourage the passivity of the subject—the continuity between privately owned and public domain digitality—which stands in the position of the other (top-right) in Vitali-Rosati’s DH configuration. Since it is this inside-outside continuum, the chiasm, which stands in this position, it is the chiasm which is the “other” who knows what the individual subject cannot. Now here’s the rub: if it is the system of knowledge,  $S_2$ , which is lost, then it is precisely the continuum of privatization/public domain digital architecture which is lost, forfeited, in Vitali-Rosati’s theory. But insofar as the privatized sphere is a metonymic part of the continuum—which is the oppressive factor within the chiasmic structure of digital space—and it is this system which is “lost,” then according to Vitali-Rosati’s own insights *there must be no oppression*.

This is the import of the “hysterical” discourse: that it alters the very system of knowledge by producing a claim to know the conditions of oppression and, in so doing, internalizes those conditions of oppression into the very subject who seeks to be liberated from it (Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan* 208f.). For Vitali-Rosati, this means that the chiasm has anticipated the exhaustive nature of virtual transformation, composition, and division characterizing digital space and prevented, ahead of time, any possibility of escape or exemption or refusal. The subject, for Vitali-Rosati, is one which can co-construct digital space only from a position already radically subjugated—“produced”—by the very institutions it seeks to change. The word “radical” here is key, since there is for Vitali-Rosati no remnant left over in the subject which resists the status of product and so acts only from and through the position it is placed in by the “powers that be.”

Notice also from the first thematic diagram of DH that the arrow from loss does not travel horizontally to the left to the position of truth; the loss is truly lost, forfeited. The arrow from the loss is instead directed diagonally toward the agent, which “fills” in the loss, being left with the burden of replacing the loss. But here the agent—the subject, for Vitali-Rosati—fills in the inexistence of oppression with its revolutionary activity; only now, the revolution is transformed (degraded?) into resistance for its own sake, because there is nothing—literally—to revolt against. There is, in short, no ontological antagonist in this story.

An illustration from fiction may help clarify the problem associated with Vitali-Rosati’s no-escape solution. Brian Moore’s phenomenal novella *Catholics*, first published in 1972, explains the circularity affecting an institution which internalizes its own space of revolutionary permutation (Moore). In this alternative future, the Catholic Church is freshly rebounding after a fourth Vatican council which has secularized the church such that that its entire ecclesial, theological, and sacramental life has been eliminated in favour of a series of formalistic practices of “spirituality” which—the narrative indicates—is preparing the Church for its definitive merger with the institutions of (pantheistic) Buddhism.

The dilemma facing the traditionalist monks is homologous to the no-way-out of the chiasm: they cannot revolt against the (fictional) Vatican IV changes—however objectionable they would really be if they had been made—without ceasing to be members of the Catholic Church, precisely because it is the Church itself which makes those changes. Against this, the return to traditionalist practice (the Latin liturgy, the direction the priest faces during divine services, espousing a “high” sacramental theology, etc.) even if it is “Catholic” in some symbolic sense homologous to historical practice, still counts as abandoning the universal church. But, according to the traditionalists, so is staying with them, given Vatican IV. Hence the no way out.

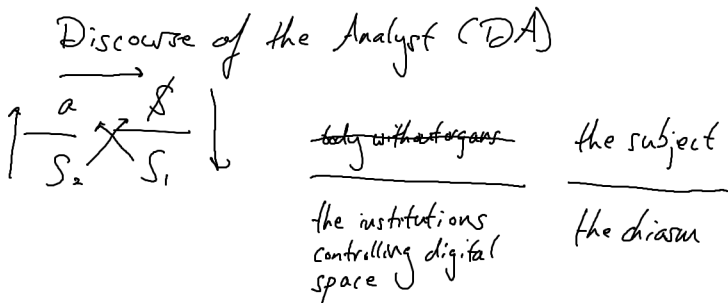
The main axis of thematic and theoretical struggle in this book—treated in explicit parallel with the dramatic conflicts unfolding in the plot—is that even a final stronghold of traditionalist Catholic practices practiced by monks and their abbot (in an inaccessible monastery called Muck in the remote Irish isles) is unable to provide an exception to the system-wide internalization of (historically) non-Catholic practices into the life of the church. In the very last frame of the story, the abbot, Father O’Malley, who has ironically long since lost his faith in both the existence of God and in the theological and sacramental authenticity of Catholic practice, says that “prayer is the only miracle... If our words become prayer, God will come.” The rub here is that O’Malley *cannot* pray, because when he does, as the narrator informs us, he “enters null. He would never come back. In null” (Moore 108).

This must be interpreted as O’Malley’s admission of the final and inescapable immanence characterizing the traditionalist position at large: the *ecstasis* (standing-out, escape) of the subject out of the immanent and into God (in traditional Catholic doctrine of sacramental participation) is blocked in favour of a metonymic and self-folding immanence which secures ahead of time the inclusion of all objects and relations in its maximal domain (pantheism).<sup>[8]</sup> Prayer is the only miracle, but one cannot pray, so there are no miracles. And so it is with Vitali-Rosati’s subject: it can “pray”—pray for a shift of media goods and services to the public domain, for a distribution of wealth

and equalization of power imbalance, for a reconfiguration of financial incentive, for a revolution in institutional practice, or for a grass-roots change in mass psychology—but this attempt (cuing O'Malley) will fail to deliver the miracle. It cannot act, because the “sacramental” exception, the surplus which really, truly escapes the chiasmic fold, is foreclosed in the “null,” never to come back from there.

...to be done?

With tongue in cheek, I want to propose a return to the mode of traditionalist “catholic” intervention: I want to propose a shift to a mode of discourse capable of recovering the field of negativity, of authentic antagonism, of “miracle.” To do so I will turn to the Discourse of the Analyst (DA), constructed via a single clockwise turn of each symbol. It places the variable of surplus (*a*) into the position of agent. And it places the variable of the chiasm, into the position of loss. Here is the shift that is needed to correct the immanentization of the subject under the chiasm, and why we must see the chiasm, as Samo Tomšič does, as a “fold” in Lacan’s more simple, more expressive, and more explanatorily powerful system (Tomšič, Baroque Structuralism: Deleuze, Lacan and the Critique of Linguistics 131). DA is written out as follows:



I read this as follows: the surplus being in the position of agent allows for “the means of production of that which eventually realizes

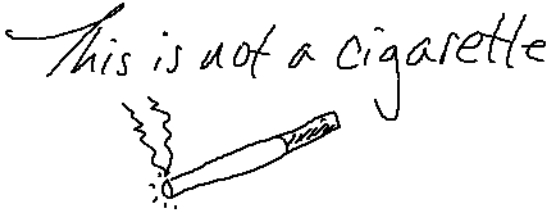
this ‘emancipation’” at the level of the signifier (Zupančič 177f.). From a Lacanian standpoint this is not achieved via a body without organs, because this generated signifier is not beyond opposition. I have therefore rendered it ~~body without organs~~. Rather, for Lacan, acting from the standpoint of exception (to the system) is the vantage capable of achieving change—whether it is empirically successful at a given historical moment. The truth this agency generates is the (ironic) elevation of the exception to the “normal” life of the institution itself. On the surface this is a contradiction in terms, but its logic must be seen in its superposition between Vitali-Rosati’s claim that digital space is maximally inclusive and the (mutually incompatible) claim that nevertheless, there is an exception to this space—that is, the subject who secures a place as a remnant, a leftover (Brillaud 247ff.).

Notice there is passage from the position of truth diagonally to the position of other. This means that it is by means of self-inconsistent institutions (regulating virtual space) which passes into the subject, in the position of the other. But recall that for Vitali-Rosati, too, it is the subject (in itself) who is oppressed, antagonized by the institutions controlling digital space which subjugate it and “produce” it. At any given moment a positive claim can have several negations: the other of the surplus is the subject in the DA schema, but the other of the subject in itself is its *oppression*.<sup>[9]</sup> This means that the other in the DA schema can be traced to the axis of subjugation and of production within the subject—that the other of the agent of change is the very aspect of the subject’s being which is crafted and designed by the institutional modes of domination.

And notice what is lost: it is the chiasm. This makes perfect sense, since it is the chiasm which, as we established previously, prevents the subject from standing out (ec-stasis) of the manifold in the position of genuine exception.

I think we need to accept this loss with open arms on ontological grounds. Markus Gabriel has expressed what I have called the loss of the chiasm in a lasting and memorable way which spotlights the significance of abandoning it as the correct account of being (Gabriel

119). Consider the famous 1929 painting by René Magritte: *La Trahison des Images*. Modifying it to express a more popular past time, we can render that image thus:



Gabriel points out that the very associations and inferences which compel us to say that no, in fact, this is not a cigarette (but rather an image of one) should compel us to say that no, in fact, that is not a sentence *but only an image of one*. Gabriel's point is that the image of a cigarette does not create the ontological object of a cigarette, and that this relation must be admitted for language, too: the image of a sentence neither creates a sentence, nor its meaning, nor its social effect, nor its speaker. For that, we must have subjects which extend beyond the plane of the letter, which stand in genuine opposition to the text. I therefore want to claim that Vitali-Rosati gets it exactly backward: it is the chiasm which is generated by the hybrid space of the virtual field, not vice versa. Put another way, I want to say that *the opposition is primary*, meaning that the fictive standpoint which fantasizes about a space beyond or before opposition (such as the body without organs or its metonymic projection in the chiasm) is itself a "moment," a fold in the surface of a topological field which is not constrained by that fantasy.

To render this point in the key of my title: if one has the floor then no, in fact, one does not also need to dance—the floor and the dancers

are *given*. But, I claim, there is no “myth”<sup>[10]</sup> associated with this given: one must have *something*—a floor and a dancer, say—to have a dance; and it is only after this that the virtual architecture (re)configures the space as a hybrid, virtual feast. What Vitali-Rosati further misses in missing this is that the topology which he dismisses already includes the discursive social link.<sup>[11]</sup> Vitali-Rosati only sees one half of this claim, the construction of the empirical by means of the (theoretical) chiasm. But it is the chiasm which is one of the products of this space; it is never one of its producers.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

To return to an earlier moment of the piece, I suggested in the “first presupposition” that there is a constitutive incompatibility between claiming exhaustivity and exclusivity of division when it came to critiquing Bergson’s temporal, vitalist ontology. I am suggesting here, as a closing comment to the piece, that Vitali-Rosati commits this same fallacy, only in reverse. Let’s call it the “fallacy of decomposition,” and say that Vitali-Rosati attempts to provide an exhaustive subdivision of fundamental ontology in the chiasm (as inside-outside) while in the same breath maintaining that only that which is postulated by the chiasm is admissible, that is, that there is no exception to this space. This is a claim to exclusivity, and needs to be marked as central to the failure of this ontology: what is left out of consideration is exactly what the difference between the subject and the institution is *in the chiasm*. Given Vitali-Rosati’s system, there is no difference, and that is why it fails to carve out a space of ontological power for the advancement of the subject beyond its status as product in the virtual.

I really must emphasize my indebtedness to Vitali-Rosati for thinking through the subject of digital emancipation from the standpoint of the politically subjugated citizen. All I have sought to add is the ironic distance which Barbara Cassin so aptly expresses in the ironic comment: let open access have its day, let the internet go public, if it did it would “all [be] there: free open access for all, links and indexation—all except for the algorithm itself” (Cassin 48). I want to short

circuit this algorithm by proposing an account of the subject as an ontological refusal to be mere product and to provide a way out to bypass the pure immanence which produces it. But for that I think the chiasm needs to be relocated away from its position as hysterical demand for a new master and into the position of just another one of the fantasies of the social space.

#### WORKS CITED

- Balibar, Étienne, Barbara Cassin and Alain de Libera. "Subject." *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*. Ed. Barbara Cassin. Trans. Steven Rendall, et al. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. 1069-1091.
- Bergson, Henri. *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. Trans. F. L. Pogson. London: George Allen & Company, Ltd., 1913.
- Brillaud, Danièle. "Appendix I: The incompleteness of the Other: on the fourth session of Lacan's Seminar D'un Autre à L'autre." Brillaud, Danièle. *Lacanian Psychoanalysis: A Clinical Casebook*. Trans. John Holland. Abingdon: Routledge, 2020. 242-250.
- Bruno, Pierre. *Lacan and Marx: The Invention of the Symptom*. Trans. John Holland. Abingdon: Routledge, 2020.
- Cassin, Barbara. *Google Me: One-Click Democracy*. Trans. Michael Syrotinski. New York City: Fordham University Press, 2018.
- David-Ménard, Monique. "The alternatives of Verneinung (Kant) and Negativität (Hegel)." *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A philosophical Lexicon*. Ed. Barbara Cassin. Trans. Steven Rendall, et al. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. 1202.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Falque, Emmanuel. *Nothing to It: Reading Freud as a Philosopher*. Trans. Robert Vallier and William L. Connelly. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020.
- Gabriel, Markus. *Fields of Sense: A New Realist Ontology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015.



- Good Bye, Lenin!* By Wolfgang Becker and Bernd Lichtenberg. Dir. Wolfgang Becker. X-Filme Creative Pool. 2003.
- Kordela, A. Kiarina. *\$urplus: Spinoza, Lacan*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan XI*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York City: W. W. Norton & Co., 1981.
- Marx, Karl. *Grunrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*. Trans. Martin Nicolaus. London: Penguin Books, 1973.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994.
- Moore, Brian. *Catholics*. New York City: Open Road Media, 2018.
- O'Connor, Patrick. *Derrida: Profanations*. London: Continuum International Publishing, 2010.
- Paxton, Steve. *Unlearning Marx: Why the Soviet Failure was a Triumph for Marx*. Alresford: John Hunt Publishing Ltd., 2021.
- Pickstock, Catherine. *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998.
- Spengler, Oswald. *The Decline of the West, Vol. I: Form and Actuality*. Trans. Charles Francis Atkinson. New York City: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926.
- The Matrix Resurrections*. By Lana Wachowski, David Mitchell and Aleksandar Hemon. Dir. Lana Wachowski. 2021.
- Tomšič, Samo. "Baroque Structuralism: Deleuze, Lacan and the Critique of Linguistics." *Lacan and Deleuze: A Disjunctive Synthesis*. Ed. Boštjan Nedoh and Andreja Zevnik. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017. 123-140.
- Tomšič, Samo. "Psychoanalysis and Antiphilosophy: the case of Jacques Lacan." *Sex and Nothing: Bridges from Psychoanalysis to Philosophy*. Ed. Alejandro Cerda-Rueda. London: Karnac Books Ltd., 2016. 81-103.
- Tomšič, Samo. *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan*. London: Verso, 2015.

- Vitali-Rosati, Marcello and Jean-Marc Larrue. *Media Do Not Exist: Performativity and Mediating Conjunctures*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2019.
- Vitali-Rosati, Marcello. *On Editorialization: Structuring Space and Authority in the Digital Age*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2018.
- Vitali-Rosati, Marcello. "Pornspace." *Médium* (2016): 306-317.
- Vitali-Rosati, Marcello. "The Chiasm as a Virtual: A Non-concept in Merleau-Ponty's Work (with a Coda on Theatre)." *Merleau-Ponty and the Art of Perception*. Ed. Duane H. Davis and William S. Hamrick. Albany: State University of New York, 2016. 279-296.
- Vitali-Rosati, Marcello. "The Writer is the Architect: Editorialization and the Production of Digital Space." 5 12 2017. *Sens public*. Online. 5 12 2023. <<https://sens-public.org/articles/1288/>>.
- Žižek, Slavoj. "Can One Exit from The Capitalist Discourse Without Becoming a Saint? ." *Crisis & Critique* (2016): 480-499.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Repeating Lenin*. Ed. Andy Blunden. 2001. 30 10 2023. <<https://www.lacan.com/replenin.htm>>.
- Zupančič, Alenka. "The Death Drive." *Lacan and Deleuze: A Disjunctive Synthesis*. Ed. Boštjan Nedo and Andreja Zevnik. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017. 163-179.

## NOTES

1. Interestingly, the dénouement of *The Matrix Resurrections* (Wachowski, Mitchell and Hemon) offers a peak into a successful attempt at this way out. I rather think the attempt isn't so successful; this argument is explored in the "final moment" below.↔
2. The "theoretical problematic" can be equivalently put into another set of terms which will be utilized in what follows. This is the application of the logic of Hegelian "negation of negation" to the inside-outside opposition, or, in the case of the virtuality of the digital world, the reality-virtuality opposition. The so-called "first negation" generates an epistemological opposition between the negated terms, as "inside," on the one hand (as what privately happens on our screens), and "outside" on the other (as what happens in the public world at large containing the screens and their viewers). Negation taken in its "second"

sense “consists in the destruction and internal critique of the propositional form of thought that occurs when negation affects each part of the [opposition] in turn, thereby critiquing the abstract hypothesis of their separation” and should thus be seen in its full ontological import (David-Ménard 1202). What survives this negating of the negation, to put it squarely, leaves us with the properly ontological hypothesis explaining the nature of the explananda at hand: it is the “underlying” reality supporting the space between the opposing terms, consistent with each individually and able to explain their difference. This is why space ends up being the privileged ontological dimension of the present age, because it is the category which survives the application of the logic of negation to itself in its second sense (Vitali-Rosati, *The Writer is the Architect: Editorialization and the Production of Digital Space* 6). [<sup>3</sup>]: It is this surplus which I am connecting with transcendence in the ordinary sense of the term—as a feature which “transcends” the limits of the relations that leave it out. Later I will make clear how surplus is to be connected to a genuine “outside,” since I will describe systems which re-absorb it into its immanent frame. Here I will say that the surplus is not structured as *exception*—and the surplus which is I will call genuinely transcendent. [<sup>4</sup>]: Note 2 touches on this. [<sup>5</sup>]: I am getting this language from Pierre Bruno (Bruno 22). This work will be my implicit background for claiming that the subject has a remnant which transcends the deadlock of the symbolic—or, in the key here, of the virtual. [<sup>6</sup>]: Trying to decipher old handwriting sometimes feels like a forensics puzzle. This is a moment of this form of amphiboly I allude to. This will be taken advantage of in the main text in a moment. [<sup>7</sup>]: I also tried not to edit these images: relative lack of forethought in design, slip ups in scale, and messiness in lettering is kept in my initial attempts at writing. This is also a part of my method. [<sup>8</sup>]: Notice from the example that it is not a matter of whether there is a change taking place—clearly the Catholic Church is being changed in Moore’s novel. It is also not a matter of whether the “people” are changing the church—that is also made clear in the structure of the narrative. The example might therefore furnish evidence for Vitali-Rosati’s thesis. However, it is rather that in *Catholics* there is no other option except for Catholicism, and that’s my point: to stay is to abandon the church, and yet to go is to abandon the church. But then there’s no difference between staying and going: the institutional church has ceased to be a domain with definitive specificity such that one can properly identify it to rebel against it. And so it is with the chiasm, I claim. [<sup>9</sup>]: A spectacular moment in Marx’s *Grundrisse* touches

on this: “The real *not-capital* is *labour*” (Marx 274). [<sup>10</sup>]: I am playing on the famous “myth of the given” here which I claim my account bypasses. [<sup>11</sup>]: That Lacan’s discourses are constructed through empirical observation grants more credence to the point, that the social-symbolic is a system which is itself in superposition between the empirical and the theoretical (Bruno 114).↔