

## ONE HAND CLAPPING: THE PHONEME AND THE NOTHING

Geoff Boucher

Towards the end of the difficult essay “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious,” Lacan produces an “unthinkable list” of objects (*a*) that includes, amongst the apparently heteroclitic candidates, “the phoneme, the gaze, the voice – the nothing” (Lacan, 1977: 315). While the gaze and the voice have received extensive critical commentary, the phoneme and the nothing have gone practically unnoticed. This is unfortunate, I suggest, because of the possible confusion (perhaps supported by a careless reading of Seminar XI) between the object (*a*) as an absent cause and the anamorphic object that renders the structural causality of the object (*a*) manifest. By contrast with the gaze and the voice, the phoneme and the nothing cannot be conflated with experiential phenomena, but instead materialise the fundamental function of the object (*a*) as a form of structural causality that is everywhere “present only in its effects” in the Symbolic Order.

Indeed, the apparently descriptive nature of the “voice” and the “gaze” has constituted a temptation to refer these objects to the phenomenological experience of a subject. It is in this light that critics of Lacan, such as for instance Judith Butler, persistently accuse psychoanalysis of preserving an ideal psychic interiority under the rubric of the object (*a*) (Butler, 1993: 67–91; Butler, 1997: 120–129). Butler echoes the deconstructive “standard criticism” of psychoanalysis, that the object (*a*), qua placeholder for the “imaginary phallus,” is a “transcendental signified” that founds the subject in meaning, so that this ideal interiority implies a hidden recourse to the transparent intentionality of the phenomenological subject (Butler, 1993: 76). Additionally, Butler criticises the Lacanian concept of the Real – the castration complex – as a transcendental structure that, as the non-symbolisable ground of the Symbolic Order, operates theoretically as “a truly felicitous instrument of [heteronormative, masculine] power” (Butler, 2000: 147). In other words, at

the centre of the Lacanian system stands the classical subject of representation in its phenomenological acceptance – with all of the hidden ratification of social norms that this implies – only occulted by a so-called “bar resisting signification” that is better thought of as a shield deflecting criticism.

But how can the “cut” be the transhistorical institution of culture, without being a transcendental signified? How can the notion of the subject – unlike the deconstructive “dispersed multiple subject-positions” – avoid the phenomenological resort to a transparent intentionality? And how is the object (*a*) not an ideality founding the identity of the subject? In reply to these questions, I suggest that Butler’s criticisms of psychoanalysis rely on a misunderstanding of the theoretical status of the object (*a*), which is a logically necessary consequence of Lacan’s subversion of scientific linguistics. Because the object (*a*) is not a phenomenological object but a structural “object-cause,” a theoretical object that explains the gap in signification, the nothing and the phoneme (as opposed to the gaze and the voice) are exemplary objects of inquiry. I propose to theoretically construct the object (*a*) by means of an explication of Lacan’s enigmatic allusion to the phoneme and the nothing. I contend that the phoneme is the “ur-form” of the object (*a*), whose ontological status is nothing. As the ur-form of the object (*a*) (both structurally and genetically), the phoneme exemplifies the primary function of the structural causality of the Lacanian Real within the Symbolic Order, namely, the function of the bar resisting signification between signifier and signified. As such, this object is “the least signifying of signifiers, the cut” (Lacan, 1989: 3 June 1959). At the same time, the phoneme functions to enable linguistic reference to the object in desire as the absent cause of signification.

### *Alienation: the nothing*

The “cut” between Symbolic and Real refers us to the Saussurean thesis of the arbitrary character of the sign, which Lacan interprets in terms of the impossibility of any direct reflection of somatic need in the discourse of the speakingbeing. It is the arbitrary character of the sign that introduces a distinction between need and demand: responding to the somatic impulse of a corporeal need, the speakingbeing must articulate its request for satisfaction as a demand to the other, thereby submitting its need to the “defiles of the signifier”. Following Saussure’s celebrated hypothesis of the differential character of the sign, however, the signs employed by the speakingbeing are entirely reducible to their formal properties as a network of differential

marks, lacking positive signification or substance. The structural matrix of the sign therefore slices the “too, too solid flesh” of the speakingbeing into the alternation of presence and absence characteristic of its relational network. Indeed, most radically, the presence of the sign implies the absence of the thing, so that the entry of the speakingbeing into language necessarily involves its mortification/disappearance in the signifying chain. The natural body is divided within the differential network, becoming a signifying corpse that is reduced to the nothingness of insubstantial diacritical relations and animated only by the Symbolic Order. Of course, the ontological status of the subject as “nothing,” a lack of being or “want-to-be,” is by now a commonplace of Lacanian theory, and as the syntax of Lacan’s sentence (above) indicates, the nothing is not merely another item, but the very “substance” of which “the phoneme, the gaze, the voice” are specifications. The major difference between materialist psychoanalysis and idealist deconstruction, however, concerns not the signifying operation, but that for psychoanalysis, this does not happen without remainder. And the really surprising thing is that this remainder is neither a material leftover, a body part excised from the signifying chain, nor a spiritual ideality, a reserve of psychic interiority exempted from the decentring movement of language.

In the entry into language, the speakingbeing loses its “ineffable singular existence” because it lacks a proper signifier. Indeed, the arbitrary character of the sign entails the recognition of the radically auto-referential nature of language, so that any signification only refers to another signification (Lacan, 1977: 150). But Lacan’s subversion of scientific linguistics really begins from his rejection of “the illusion that the signifier answers to the function of representing the signified” (Lacan, 1977: 150). Breaking the necessary link between signifier and signified involves radicalising Saussure’s hypothesis of value, according to which the diacritical determination of the signification of a term is contextually decided with reference to what a term is not. The alternation of absence and presence in the differential elements of a language implies that the value of a signifier is null taken alone – only by means of a detour through the entire field of signification can the meaning of a term be conferred. But the limit of this process is the determination of the term by means of all of the rest of the signifiers of a language – Saussure’s synchrony – which would finally fix the meaning of the chain of signification and assign to every term its signified. Lacan’s radical proposal is that since the presence of any signifier entails the absence of its opposite, the presence of all of the signifiers – necessary to finally fix the chain – implies the absence of a final signifier. This lacking, phallic signifier “without signified” is “intended to designate as a whole the effects of the signified in that the signifier

conditions them by its presence” (Lacan, 1977: 285). So the signifying corpse has something missing – a signifier, not a body part or ideal interiority – and this is the key to the remainder from the signifying operation.

Lacan’s hypothesis of the phallic signifier and the postulate of a bar resisting signification are all corollaries to his thesis of the primacy of the signifier, according to which the signifier does not represent the signified, but only refers to another signifier, in a “signifying chain” that is in principle limitless. Certainly, this is the transhistorical institution of all culture, a “law of culture” or Symbolic Law – for how can there be culture without signification? – but as an “instrument of power” this is surely (to use the terminology of speech act theory) *infelicitous*, since it causes the signifier to misfire. Indeed, the evanescence of meaning (its transitory and provisional character) implied by this line of argument destroys every effort to locate the function of language in the representation of reality or the incarnation of ideality. The absent phallic signifier therefore cannot be the same as the “transcendental signified” that deconstruction critiques. The transcendental signified is a presence that founds the self-identical subject in transparent meaning, whereas, on Lacan’s account, it is precisely the absence of the phallic signifier that enables meaning to provisionally emerge at all. Instead of the transparent subject certain of its self-present intentionality, Lacan’s radical demotivation of the signifier – which is equivalent to the postulate of a bar that resists signification – results in radical semantic uncertainty and the division of the subject. Let us consider these consequences for a moment.

1. For Butler, “the phallus, as a privileged signifier ... appears to control the significations that it produces” (Butler, 1993: 76). For Lacan, by contrast, the lacking phallic signifier creates a “barrier resisting signification, which implies the “incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier” (Lacan, 1977: 149, 154). This fundamental opacity in the signifier-signified relation – the “duplicity” of the signifier – means that the signified is not the foundation of the signification, but its vanishing effect. The signifier, Lacan contends, “always anticipates meaning by unfolding its dimension before it,” forcing us to concede that “... it is in the chain of the signifier that the meaning ‘insists’ but that none of its elements ‘consists’ in the signification of which it is at the moment capable” (Lacan, 1977: 153). Indeed, this semantic uncertainty results in a complex polyvalence, because the connotations of signifiers remain suspended in the possible meaning of every sentence (Fink, 2004: 90–91; Lacan, 1977: 151). The absence of the phallic signifier means that there is no fixed synchronic correspondence between signifier and signified, because the meaning of the chain of signification remains open to the effects of a subsequent punctuation.

2. The Lacanian conclusion is that the entry into language has the effect of the subjective division of the speakingbeing. To see why, consider the transparent and self-identical classical subject for whom reflexive nomination constitutes both self-representation and auto-signification. For the Lacanian subject, by contrast, the shifter “I” refers only to a supplementary chain of signifiers (for instance, “Hamlet the Dane”) that, because the final signifier is lacking, cannot be the final, “proper name” of the speakingbeing. The shifter “I” in the statement designates the subject of the enunciation, but fails to signify it, missing it in the alienated “me” of an imaginary identity (Lacan, 1977: 298). For the Lacanian subject, therefore, naming becomes the problematic site of an inherent impossibility and the very mechanism for the instigation of desire qua lack, or want-to-be.

Perhaps the deconstructionist might reply that Lacan’s theory of the evanescence of signification threatens the volatilization of meaning and a consequence evaporation of reference. Yet, following the logic that led Lacan to posit a phallic signifier, a synchronic order (a context for the determination of the value of the chain of signification) provisionally emerges from diachrony. This happens only on the condition that one element of the signifying chain act as a meaningless element, excepted from the flow of discourse. This is a corollary to the hypothesis of the phallic signifier: the element that enables meaning – the anchoring point – holds the place of the non-signifying absent element. The Lacanian distinction between “signifyingness” [*signifiance*] and signification is critical in this connection, because the anchoring of signifyingness to signification involves the action of the signifier in the subject. While signification describes the emergence of meaning from the signifying chain, signifyingness, the automatism of the operations of language is non-referential and meaningless. The primacy of the signifier implies the separation of connotation and denotation, so that Lacan discusses signifyingness in terms of the rhetorical tropes of metaphor and metonymy (Fink, 2004: 91–101). Lacan’s formula for metonymy indicates the maintenance of the resistance to signification in the diachronic syntagma of the combination of signifiers. The formula for metaphor, by contrast, designates the crossing of the bar resisting signification in the synchronic paradigm of the selection of signifiers. For instance, the substitution of /sheaf/ for /Booz/, while meaningless within the binary oppositions of the linguistic code, nonetheless generates meaning through this signifying substitution. But if signification emerges from signifyingness, then this is equivalent to the crossing of the “bar resisting signification” – which implies the transitory production of both meaning and reference.

Lacan’s conclusion is illustrated in “The Agency of the Letter,” where the signification of the signifying couplet /Gentlemen/ and /Ladies/ is not

at all the two signifieds, “Ladies” and “Gentlemen,” but instead the pure difference in places between signifying marks, interpreted by Lacan as “the law of urinary segregation” (Lacan, 1977: 151). For Lacan, then, the minimal signifying structure – the opposition between two signifiers – has as its signification the pure difference of the law of culture, or Symbolic Law. At the same time, the auto-referential character of language implies that the referent of this signification is this structure of self-differing itself, that is, not conceptual difference but the system of empty positions that generates a structural opposition between differential elements (Fink, 2004: 91–101). Lacan designates this as a “hole” in discourse and subsequently identifies it with the impossibility of the sexual relation. Lacan’s exploration of the logical consequences of the primacy of the signifier leads to the conclusion that the signified of this opposition – sexual difference – refers to something lost “in the Real” and not to an anterior reality. But what could this “something” be? To anticipate my argument somewhat, contrary to the deconstructive position, the Lacanian subject is not the subject of the signified: this vanishing signification (the Symbolic Law) is “signified *to* the subject” (Lacan, 1977: 200 *my italics*), not the subject-as-signified. In turn, and following from the auto-referential nature of language, what is “signified to the subject” makes reference only to “stuff” of the signification itself. It is when this “stuff” is a reflexive nomination that things become interesting, however, for then this subject, as the object of a discourse that cannot finally signify anything (determinate), cannot coincide with itself as referent of its own speech, but must recede infinitely as the retroactive effect of signifyingness. The subject of the signifier, as a subject, is the vanishing effect of the signifying operation – the place of inscription of the signifying marks – qua pure self-difference. But as the object of this discourse, it is the localisation of the impossible place of the lack, which necessarily appears as a lost *structure*. It follows that the signifying body not only lacks a final signifier (proper name), but has also lost any positivity, becoming nothing but the locus of an oppositional structure in the Real. This is why Lacan calls it a “hole” and comments that the “cut in the signifying chain verifies the structure of the subject as discontinuity in the Real” (Lacan, 1977: 299).

Surprisingly, Lacan suggests that the element that this signifying structure ultimately refers to is the phoneme, which materialises the structure of language. The phoneme, as a differential marker, is the fundamentally senseless “stuff” of the signifier, conceptualised by Lacan in terms of the “materiality” and “localisability” of the signifier. If the subject of the signifier “is” nothing but the empty location where the signifier is engaged, then this subject, considered as the object of a discourse, is only a non-signifying marker – the

phoneme. The phoneme, meanwhile, as a “letter,” namely, “that material support that concrete discourse borrows from language” (Lacan, 1977: 147), is only a diacritical marker lacking all positivity. This has to be conceptualised as a literalisation: the speakingbeing borrows the material support of its discourse from the structure of language, and in the process is “literalised,” transformed into a subjective nothingness whose ontological nullity “is” the letter itself. Lacan’s radicalisation of linguistics therefore does not *abolish* the representational and referential character of language – it *subverts* it. Language represents the divided subject whose ontological status as a lack of being is nothing and constructs the lost object of linguistic reference as a material letter.

*Separation: the phoneme*

Lacan’s theory indicates that the signifier functions autonomously as an algebraic chain, composed of a series of differential marks that have no inherent meaning, except their reciprocal positions and the combinatory through which signification proceeds. The big question is why Lacan reintroduces the subject (and its object) into the discussion of what seems to be an automatic combinatory that is fundamentally non-subjective. The key is the signifying selection that governs the emergence of a signification from the signifyingness of the chain of combinations. Despite the “automatism” of the signifier – its inherently senseless character as a meaningless string of material letters – the signifying chain does not operate according to the principle of linear causality characteristic of the natural world, but instead according to the retroactive conversion of contingency into necessity characteristic of language. No necessary mechanism regulates the selection of those markers in the slippery signifyingness which “cross the bar” and halt the sliding of signification. Instead, these are contingent events that momentarily close the gap between synchrony and diachrony, disclosing the subjective instance in the agency of the letter.

Correlatively, for Lacan, the “spark” of meaning that “springs forth” across this gap happens in the place of the subject, considered as the fundamental hypothesis of psychoanalysis. This subject only emerges in the momentary passage of signifyingness into signification, and so is temporarily signified by the signifier. “The whole signifier can only operate ... if it is present in the subject,” Lacan proposes, which leads him to suppose that “it has passed over to the level of the signified” (Lacan, 1977: 155). This ambiguous “it” is *the signifier*, not the subject: the subject only “is” in the locus of the Other as its ef-

fect when signification emerges. Lacan's proposition is clarified by his theory of the paternal metaphor, where the effect of a signifying substitution is the repressed "signified to the subject = x" of the phallus, absent "signified" of the Other (Lacan, 1977: 200) that is also the "representative of representation" (Lacan, 1977: 312). The chain of signifiers that operates in the place of the Other is opaque to the subject itself: it discovers its meaning only in the field of the Other, in the repressed "message" of its own signification, namely, the absence of the phallic signifier. Instead of the classical subject, then, founded in meaning through the transcendental signified, the divided subject (qua vanishing effect of the chain of signification) is dispossessed of mastery over language and recedes to the horizon of signification.

In the light of this analysis, Lacan does not hesitate to ascribe a signifying intention to the retroactive vector of the synchronic arc in the graph of desire (Lacan, 1989: 18 March 1959 and 27 May 1959). Lacan is proposing that the provisional relation between the slipping of signifyingness and the sliding of signification is created only by a subjective intention whose metaphor is the phallic signifier. The "anchoring point" established by the master signifier expresses an empty, structural – *not phenomenological* – signifying intention: hence Lacan's claim that the signifier is what represents the subject for another signifier (Lacan, 1977: 316), since the metaphor of the subject represents the subject in the metonymy of desire. The existence of a signifying intentionality in the synchronic vector of the graph of desire implies that the divided subject requests something more than the object of the demand when it speaks. The formulation of demand as a chain of signification implies its inscription beyond the other in the Other, qua "treasury of the signifier," where its registration as demand implies a supplementary signification beyond need, namely, the desire for recognition. Lacan effectively equates the desire for recognition with the intention to signify: recognition means foremost the ratification of meaning, and desire indicates in the first instance a *vouloir-dire*, a want-to-mean in the desire-to-speak. But this signification is conferred by the Other, remaining opaque to the subject, so that "the state of nescience in which man remains in relation to his desire is not so much a nescience of what he demands ... as a nescience as to where he desires" (Lacan, 1977: 312). The "ineffable singular existence" of the speakingbeing, once floated in the element of the signifier, is ineluctably lost – correlatively, the nothing that the subject has become is borne in language, and so the speech that demands recognition ineluctably stakes the existence of the subject on the reply of the Other. The speakingbeing therefore asks the Other for a guarantee that ratifies its desire for recognition and it stakes its existence qua subject in this speech.



To understand the implications of Lacan's position for the question of the object we need to turn to the duplication of the diachronic axis of the utterance in the distinction between the statement and enunciation. If the anchoring point represents a signifying intention in the metonymy of the desire for recognition, then this signifying intention is nonetheless the vanishing "signified to the subject" and so only the horizon (not the "substance") of the discourse of the speakingbeing. Equally, every statement of demand is a betrayal of enunciated desire, and the division of the subject is inescapable. It follows that everything the speakingbeing says represents the subject of desire, but that this desire is nothing determinate (it exceeds every concrete object of demand), so that the divided subject is "present" (in the modality of its absence) only in the enunciation. The (empty) desire of the subject is present, then, only as the desire of the Other: even though the linking of signifier to signified is not grounded in an extra-discursive reality, it is nonetheless anchored *for the subject* in the Real of the (presumptive) desire of the Other.

How, then, can the phoneme be an incarnation of the desire of the Other for the subject? In this instance, it is the desire of the Other for meaning that is crucial. The persistence of desire beyond demand therefore implicates every utterance, at the level of the enunciation, in the dialectics of the desire for recognition. This dialectic is instigated by the structure of language as a chain of signification in a dialogical field (ego and alter), that is triangulated by its differential structure, so that every demand entails the supplementary question of desire, "*Che Vuoi?*" – what do you want? If demand involves a signifying intentionality qua *vouloir-dire*, then the reply, by adding another signifier that interprets the demand, necessarily only inverts and amplifies the question of desire, as in the implicitly enunciated dialogue:

"What do you want?"

"No, what do *you* want?"

Lacan describes this deadlock as the "reflexive abyss of desire" (Lacan, 1989: 20 May 1959), and points out that it only arises because of the lack in the Other (of a final signifier). The question of existence is posed in the "what do you want," because the speakingbeing as a want-to-be invokes its lack of being as the support for the question of desire. The being of the subject is necessarily the stake in dialogue, and the recognition of desire is at once the confirmation of identity and the ratification of an existence. Desire in this way posits its object in the locus of the Other, but this object is necessarily, as a stake of the subject in discourse qua want-to-be, all the being that the

subject will ever have. But the problem for the subject is that the enigmatic (non-)reply of the Other supplies no guarantee for the being of the subject: in the uncertainty of the dialogue, the subject encounters the castration of the Other, the lack of a final signifier that might ratify its identity and satisfy the desire for recognition.

Lacan's comment that "this object is the prototype of the significance of the body as that for which being is at stake" (Lacan, 1977: 301) now assumes its most profound dimension. Anxiety precedes the loss of the object, and anxiety is linked to the fact that the subject does not know what object it is for the desire of the Other (Harari, 2001: 29–56). Identification-objectification anticipates the desire of the Other for the subject by assuming a certain stance in the enunciation toward the statement. Specifically, the enunciation of desire (beyond the statement of demand) posits the object (*a*) as an intention ascribed, in the locus of the Other, to the subject. But this object that I am in the field of the Other is necessarily a (master) signifier – the signifier that the Other has for me. Therefore every identification is at the same time an objectification: the anticipation of the object that the subject is in the field of the Other is simultaneously an identification with this signifier. Only the phoneme is at once an object and a (proto-)signifier: the desire of the Other for the subject that is the referent of this signification is the signifier itself, as a material sequence of letters.

The object intended – aimed at – in the dialectic of desire is both the object in desire (the sublime object beyond the concrete demand) and its structural cause, because the retroactive character of signification necessarily posits this object as lost before the beginning of the signifying chain. It is therefore misrecognised as that part of the speakingbeing lost in the entry into language. Such an object (letter) is therefore characterised by its temporal non-coincidence – at once lost before signification and the horizon towards which every diachrony strives without ever arriving, the object (letter) never appears in the synchrony of the signifying intention. This is the deepest meaning of the claim that the object (*a*) is a structural causality in the field of signification, a disturbance present only in its effects (the leap from signifyingness to signification) that is manifest only as a "stain" of nonsense. The signifying intention that is structurally entailed by the intersection between diachrony and synchrony makes reference to a structural causality – an empty place where a minimal difference operates – in the very exception of a signifier that "anchors" the flow of discourse.

This analysis implies that the structural hole of the object (*a*) is the asymptotic referent of the sequence of master signifiers that constitute the style of the subject, whose ontological status is nothingness. As Lacan later says,

“what characterises, at the level of the signifier/signified distinction, the relation of the signified to what is there as an indispensable third, namely, the referent, is precisely the fact that the signifier always misses it. The collimator doesn’t work” (Lacan, 1998: 23). It also clarifies the status of the object as a structural causality in the Symbolic Order, because the object is correlative to an exceptional signifier “without signified”. This exception holds the place of the non-closure of the Symbolic Order and therefore indicates the impossibility of a terminus to the dialectic of recognition. The vanishing of the divided subject in the gap between enunciation and statement is therefore the construction of a reference to the object in desire by means of a moment of nonsense that punctuates the discourse of the speakingbeing. The ultimate form that this nonsense takes is the phoneme, an object (letter), that holds the place of an emptiness – not, I think, the “oooo” and “aaaa” of the famous signifying couplet, but the representation of nothing: the sound of one hand clapping.

### *References*

- Butler, Judith (1993). *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith (1997). *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Butler, Judith (2000). “Competing Universalities”. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, Eds. London and New York: Verso, 136–181.
- Fink, Bruce (2004). *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Écrits Closely*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Harari, Roberto (2001). *Lacan’s Seminar on “Anxiety”: An Introduction*. New York: The Other Press.
- Lacan, Jacques (1977). *Écrits: A Selection*. London and New York: Norton.
- Lacan, Jacques (1989). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VI: Desire and Its Interpretation. Unofficial Translation by Cormac Gallagher, PhD*. Dublin: Manuscript.
- Lacan, Jacques (1998). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore*. London and New York: Norton.