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Lacan, Deleuze, and the Consequences of Formalism

There is a particular use of formalism in Deleuze and Lacan, essentially counterpoised to the thought of the signifier's adequate sense, but nevertheless decisive, for both, in witnessing its possible passage to a truth. This use of formalism is, as I shall argue, continuous both with twentieth-century developments of the attempt to found mathematics on a purely logical writing and with the original sense of "form" (*eidos*) as the thinkable unity of "one over many," with which Plato sought to capture the possible contact of thought with what is real in itself. It is to be distinguished, on the other hand, from any exterior translation of natural language into formal symbolism or, conversely, the simple "application" of fixed formal-symbolic calculi to an already constituted field. It is also not simply a matter of "structuralism." For before the "structuralist" reference to natural languages as systems of arbitrarily or conventionally posited differences lie, as its conditions of possibility and the grounds of its coherence, the problems to which formalism answers for both Deleuze and Lacan: those (for instance) of the *totality* of possible signification, the structure and genesis of the *possible* sense of signs, and the topological *position* from which these conditions can themselves be assayed. Thus rather than a simple regimentation or application of formal systems of signification, the use of formalism in Deleuze and Lacan involves finding the possible passage of signification to its specific limit: the place where, formalizing the limits of its own mimetic or representational capacities, formalism itself marks, at its own impasse, a new possible inscription of truth. At this place, as I shall argue, it also witnesses the constitution of linguistic sense, the first entry of something like a "one" into a world of otherwise pure multiplicity, and thereby the point, beyond possible representation, of thought's possible contact with being in itself.

In the following, I present this use of formalism, as it is developed most centrally in Lacan's seminars *XVII*, *XIX*, and *XX*, and in Deleuze's works of roughly the same period, especially his 1968 doctoral thesis, *Difference and Repetition*, and the closely related 1969 *The Logic of Sense*. This is not to prejudice, or presumptively exclude, the different or differently articulated positions that both thinkers would take with respect to formalism before or after the period I consider here. Nor do I treat here the problems of the complex biographical and critical relationship between the two themselves, problems which are further complicated in Deleuze's writings with Guattari beginning in 1972. I simply attempt, here, to extract a specific use of formalism which is held in common by Deleuze and Lacan at *one* stage of their itineraries, and which remains useful, as I shall argue, in confronting central problems of thought and action today. In the last section, I distinguish this from other contemporary uses of formalism in the wake of Deleuze and Lacan, specifically ones which either miss the specific level on which formalism here bears witness to this passage of the real by substituting for it a direct ontologization of mathematics, or relapse to what is essentially a *pre*-formal thought of the logic of contradiction under the mandate of a (post-)structuralist renewal of the Hegelian dialectic.

Real, Imaginary, Symbolic

In seminar XX, in the context of a discussion of the specific capacity of psychoanalytic discourse to produce a possible signification of truth, Lacan briefly clarifies the use mathematical formalization, in relation to what he writes as the object-cause of desire ('*a*'), the "barred" subject (\$), the Other (A) and the phallic function (Φ), in allowing the 'very articulation of analysis' as such:

This is where the real distinguishes itself. The real can only be inscribed on the basis of an impasse of formalization. That is why I thought I could provide a model of it using mathematical formalization, inasmuch as it is the most advanced elaboration we have by which to produce signifierness. The mathematical formalization of signifierness runs counter to meaning – I almost said "*à contre-sens*." In our times, philosophers of mathematics say "it means nothing" concerning mathematics, even when they are mathematicians themselves, like Russell.

And yet, compared to a philosophy that culminates in Hegel's discourse – a plenitude of contrasts dialecticized in the idea of an historical progression, which, it must be said, nothing substantiates for us – can't the formalization of mathematical logic, which is based only on writing (l'écrit), serve us in the analytic process, in that what invisibly holds (reticent) bodies is designated therein?...

That is why I do not believe that it was in vain that I eventually came up with the inscriptions (l'écriture) *a*, the \$ of the signifier, A, and Φ . Their very writing constitutes a medium (support) that goes beyond speech, without going beyond language's actual effects. Its value lies in centering the symbolic, on the condition of knowing how to use it, for what? To retain (retiner) a congruous truth – not the truth that claims to be whole, but that of the half-telling (mi-dire), the truth that is borne out by guarding against going as far as avowal, which would be the worst, the truth that becomes guarded starting with (dès) the cause of desire.¹

Lacan here exploits the crucial distinction among three "orders" or "registers" – those of the "real," the "imaginary," and the "symbolic," which he had long propounded as irreducibly essential to understanding, not only the genesis, etiology and development of the individual subject or psyche, but also the whole problematic field of the relations of being, truth, language, and sense in which it constitutively takes root and finds its specific existence.² If the "real", in the discourse devoted to the articulation of this field, can have the value of a primary mode of being, existence, or truth, it can do so nevertheless only insofar as it also operates essentially as

¹ Lacan, Jacques, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge 1972–73 (Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX)*. Trans. Bruce Fink. (New York: Norton & Co., 1999 [1973]), p. 93.

² There are important changes and developments (which I pass over here) in Lacan's sense of the "real", as well as its relations to the other two orders, over the course of his career. For a helpful recent account, see Eyers, Tom, *Lacan and the Concept of the 'Real'* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

an obscure underside and constitutive limit, itself positively articulated only in the problems and impasses of the other two orders of the imaginary and symbolic. For Lacan, the “imaginary” picks out the realm of the representational doubling characteristic of the (accurate or inaccurate) image, and the essential place of fantasy that this doubling engenders, including essentially (though not exclusively) the fantasy that sustains the imaginary production of the ego or “I”, insofar as it is thought as having any kind of substantial existence. The “symbolic”, by contrast, is the order of the specific structural functioning of language and signs, without essential reference to any preexisting representational or mimetic meaning: here, following a decisive motif of Saussure’s structuralism, the only articulation is provided by systems of differences, lacking in themselves the value of positive terms.

Yet if the real is thus sharply distinguished from either of the other two orders, and accordingly admits neither of imaginary representation nor of symbolic articulation within a linguistic system of differences, then how is an inscription of it – a writing *of* the real that maintains, as Lacan says, the possible speaking of a truth – possible nevertheless? Here, Lacan’s formulation is precise. His motto – that the ‘real can only be inscribed on the basis of an impasse of formalization’ – does not say that the real *cannot* be written in any way at all. But neither does it say that it can be *simply* or *directly* inscribed, for instance by means of a directly representational or symbolism, or by means of the resources of an already given natural language. Rather, it is to be written *only* by means of a formalization that articulates, in the specific mode of impasse, the essential capture of bodies in symbolic language, wherein the symbolic itself encounters the resistance of the material which would nevertheless withdraw from complete signification by it. The role of formalism, thought in this way, is specifically to *model* the real, without resemblance, by formally capturing the character of what Lacan calls ‘signifierness:’ the pure character of signs *as such* insofar as they can indeed touch on such a real, without (yet) being able to capture it completely or convey from it an adequate sense. This point of possible contact that is to be modelled is, indeed, basically independent of (and at first, entirely without) meaning, at least if meaning is construed as the adequate sense of a sign, or of any combination thereof. Rather, as Lacan says, it is exactly because formalization here operates *without* sense, as an operation of symbolization that ‘means nothing’, that it can model just this phenomenon of the real’s capture in the symbolic, by passing to its own specific limit of impasse.

This precise use of formalism at the limits of possible signification should be sharply distinguished from the simple inscription of any signifier *within* an already constituted natural language or conventional symbolic order. As Lacan says, it is not a matter of symbolic differentiation, but rather of ‘centering the symbolic’ itself and as such, of indicating the structural place, necessary to *any* language, from which any signification is, as such, alone possible. And this centering is carried out, not in order to attain this or that symbolizing effect, but rather in order to maintain a truth, the kind of truth to which a subject itself essentially constituted by its lacking or barred relationship to signification can nevertheless aspire. The particular mathemes that Lacan creates and schematizes within his characterization of the

analytic discourse ($\$$, a , etc.) are themselves situated in the structural and topological place of this truth in order to articulate the discourse that attempts to intervene at it. The formal articulation of their relationships, both in the “analyst’s discourse” and in the other three discourses of the hysteric, the university, and the master which Lacan distinguishes from it starting in *Seminar XVII*, serve to indicate the structural or topological possibilities of the situation of a subject in relation to knowledge, signification as such, and this specific truth.

The signifiers that articulate the discourses are not in themselves mathematical, though: why, then, is specifically *mathematical* formalization privileged here, in Lacan’s statement from *Seminar XX*, as alone granting access – the only kind of access we can have – to the specific writing of the real, and thereby to the only possible passage of the signifier to its truth? The answer is to be found in the universal and integral character of mathematical signification, which is, as a writing, capable of being transmitted without loss, regardless of the particular natural language one speaks, or of the particular meanings it makes available.³ It is only as such a writing, separated from natural languages and indeed from any specifically constituted linguistic system, that mathematical formalism can capture formally the structural constitution of *any* such system, and thereby formulate, even if only at the point of impasse, the constitutive dynamics of its possible contact with being as it is in itself. This contact is, again, not to be thought in terms of mimetic representation or similarity, and neither is it to be specified by means of the limitation or articulation of an already existent conceptual generality of sense. It is rather to be indicated by the precise means of a formalization bearing the universality and integrality of mathematics in treating the pure structure and dynamics of the signifier as such, and thereby alone capable of bearing theoretical witness to the fragile possibility of its conveyance of a truth.

It is in view of the same constitutive and formally indicated relationship of signifierness as such to the Real, beyond or before representational adequacy or conventionally constituted sense, that Deleuze, in his 1967 manifesto ‘How do we Recognize Structuralism?’, identifies the radical novelty of the structuralist project, then shared by theorists as diverse as Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Althusser, and Lacan himself. He begins by considering how existing projects have been determined, almost without exception, by the dual of the real and the imaginary, thereby confining themselves to the unilinear and oscillatory dialectic of the true or false image and its accurate or inaccurate representation of what is, without yet bringing the “third” dimension of the symbolic as such fully into view:

We are used to, almost conditioned to a certain distinction or correlation between the real and the imaginary. All of our thought maintains a dialectical play between these two

³ ‘Mathematical formalization is our goal, our ideal. Why? Because it alone is *matheme*, in other words, it alone is capable of being integrally transmitted. Mathematical formalization consists of what is written, but it only subsists if I employ, in presenting it, the language (*langue*) I make use of.’ (Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, p. 119).

notions. Even when classical philosophy speaks of pure intelligence or understanding, it is still a matter of a faculty defined by its aptitude to grasp the depths of the real (*le réel en son fond*), the real “in truth,” the real as such, in opposition to, but also in relation to the power of imagination....

The first criterion of structuralism, however, is the discovery and recognition of a third order, a third regime: that of the symbolic. The refusal to confuse the symbolic with the imaginary, as much as with the real, constitutes the first dimension of structuralism.

For Deleuze, the importance of Lacan’s introduction of the third order of the symbolic, and with it the proper definition of structuralism, lies in the way that it offers to clarify the actually deeper structural and formal underpinnings of the dual between the real and the imaginary that has formed the analytic and critical horizon of earlier theoretical projects. Even psychoanalysis, with Freud, continues to presuppose this bipolar principle, opposing the real effectivity of the reality principle to the imaginary one of the pleasure principle. With Lacan’s discovery of the symbolic, however, the underpinnings of these relationships are revealed by means of an elaboration that takes on the value of a demonstration of their actual structural genesis:

We already had many fathers in psychoanalysis: first of all, a real father, but also father-images. And all our dramas occurred in the strained relationship between the real and the imaginary. Jacques Lacan discovers a third, more fundamental father, a symbolic father or Name-of-the-Father. Not just the real and the imaginary, but their relations, and the disturbances of these relations, must be thought as the limit of a process in which they constitute themselves in relation to the symbolic. In Lacan’s work, in the work of the other structuralists as well, the symbolic as element of the structure constitutes the principle of a genesis: structure is incarnated in realities and images according to determinable series. Moreover, the structure constitutes series by incarnating itself, but is not derived from them since it is deeper, being the substratum both for the strata of the real and for the heights [ceils] of imagination.⁴

By contrast with what are supposed as the given elements of the real or their (accurate or inaccurate) doubling in the imaginary, the elements of the symbolic have, for Deleuze ‘neither extrinsic designation, nor intrinsic signification.’⁵ They are not to be defined either by pointing to such pre-existing realities as they might designate, or to the ‘imaginary or conceptual contents which [they] would implicate.’⁶ What is left when these aspects of designation and implication are removed is merely their “topological” and “relational” sense, a sense that is, Deleuze says, ‘necessarily and uniquely “positional”’.⁷ Here, in particular, the investigation of individuals and

⁴ Deleuze, Gilles, ‘How do we recognize structuralism?’ in *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953–74* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004 [1967]), pp. 171-172.

⁵ Deleuze, ‘How do we recognize structuralism?’, p. 173.

⁶ Deleuze, ‘How do we recognize structuralism?’, p. 173.

⁷ Deleuze, ‘How do we recognize structuralism?’, p. 174

subjects cedes to the investigation of the ‘topological and structural space’ defined by the system of their relations; in this way, structuralism points to a ‘new transcendental philosophy, in which the sites prevail over whatever occupies them.’⁸ This structural combination of elements that do not in themselves have signification provides the basis for a new understanding of the origin and genesis of *sense*: here, therefore, sense is no longer understood as founded on an originally conventional designation or a basic imaginary reduplication, but rather as produced as a secondary effect in the recombination of places in the structure.⁹ The study of the relationships of structure, and of the basis of sense it indicates, provides the possibility, as Deleuze argues, for a transformation of the guiding principles and units of analysis for fields as diverse as psychology, economics, mythology, sociology, and history. And in each case, the topic of the analysis is not the particularity of a specific empirical domain – for instance a particular language or culture – but rather the elaboration of the formal and universal characteristics and relations that determine structurality as such by demonstrating and determining its points of articulation, differential and reciprocal relations, and singular points of differentiation and possible transformation.

These relations are accessible, if at all, only to a mathematical formalism which defines and articulates them on the level of the structural problems posed by each field. Deleuze makes reference in particular to the differential calculus as a ‘pure logic of relations’.¹⁰ Here, specific points of relation, differentiation and inflection characteristic of particular empirical domains are themselves formalized, at a higher level, in terms of the pure mathematics of differential relations as such, yielding a non-specific and overarching theory of variations and differences. This use of mathematical formalism thus has immediate application to the clarification of structure as a ‘multiplicity of virtual coexistence’.¹¹ Its point is not to make a metaphorical or analogical use of mathemes or concepts drawn from mathematical *praxis*, but directly to *use* mathematics in the determination of the structurality of structure as it is realized or “incarnated” in each domain:

The question, “Is there structure in any domain whatsoever?,” must be specified in the following way: in a given domain, can one uncover symbolic elements, differential relations and singular points which are proper to it? Symbolic elements are incarnated in the real beings and objects of the domain considered; the differential relations are actualized in real relations between these beings; the singularities are so many places in the structure, which distributes the imaginary attitudes or roles of the beings or objects that come to occupy them.

⁸ Deleuze, ‘How do we recognize structuralism?’, p. 174.

⁹ Deleuze, ‘How do we recognize structuralism?’, p. 175.

¹⁰ Deleuze, ‘How do we recognize structuralism?’, p. 176.

¹¹ Deleuze, ‘How do we recognize structuralism?’, p. 179..

It is not a matter of mathematical metaphors. In each domain, one must find elements, relationships, and points.¹²

In this way, the modeling that mathematical formalization provides allows for the articulation of the general and universal structural relationships and differences that find their particular configurations in the real, imaginary, and symbolic elements and relations constitutive of any specific structural domain. It is this sense that, for Deleuze as for Lacan, mathematical formalization alone can elicit the underlying and determining real that is proper to structure as such, and thereby maintain the truth that is thinkable in it.

Paradox and Impasse

Both Deleuze and Lacan thus appeal to mathematical formalism, in its integral transmissibility, its structural universality, and its essential meaninglessness to capture the more general relationships that permit an understanding of structure as such with reference to a wide variety of domains, or articulate the position from which the real of structure works within these domains to achieve its specific effects. But beyond this, Deleuze and Lacan also both invoke a specific *way* of using logical-mathematical formalism to elicit the real of structure in itself. It can be specified as the *reflexive* use of formalism with respect to *itself* and up to its own specific *limit*, in order to elicit the precise point where it demonstrates in the form of *impasse* or *paradox* its own relationship to whatever irreducibly resists it. This use turns on the introduction of formally demonstrable structures of limit-paradox, aporia, and the necessary limitation of regular procedures of deduction or decision at the limits of language and at the basis of sense. As we shall see, the requirement that the real be inscribed *only* in these forms itself results from a positional commitment which Lacan repeatedly announces on behalf of the analyst's position, and which also determines the thoroughgoing immanence of Deleuze's critical thought to the field in which it intervenes. This is the axiom of the *non-existence of a metalanguage*, or of the radical impossibility of a simply exterior position with respect to the total constitutive logic of signification and its possible sense, from which the connection of language and being could be unproblematically assured.

In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze analyses propositions, in each of their essential functions of indexical denotation, expressive manifestation, and conceptual signification, as resting on a series of closely related original paradoxes of seriality or presupposition. These paradoxes in fact constitute, as Deleuze argues, of the underlying fourth stratum or phenomenon of sense itself, which is at the structuring basis of all of the other phenomena of propositional language. At this structurally foundational level, each of the paradoxes demonstrates an essential and undecidable

¹² Deleuze, 'How do we recognize structuralism?', p. 177.

oscillation between an *infinite foundational regress* and an *unknowable point of foundation* which, if assumed as real, is demonstrably elusive to any positive intra-systematic inscription.

First, there is a paradox of *logical or conceptual inference*, given originally by Lewis Carroll in 1895.¹³ Rule-governed logical inference to a conclusion, which articulates the conceptual meaning of propositions and their terms, presupposes the applicability of more general logical or inferential rules. But then the particular way these rules themselves must apparently be licensed by further premises, which must themselves be introduced explicitly to the argument. The application of these premises will depend on further premises, and so forth. The infinite regress can only be blocked by the assumption of an absolute and necessarily unstated point of the automatic or self-licensing applicability of logical rules themselves.

Second, there is a formally similar paradox of *denotation or naming*.¹⁴ The assumption that each name, in order to perform its designative function, must be endowed with a sense or meaning, necessarily invokes the question of the name for *this* sense, and hence of a further sense for the second name, and so forth. Once again, the infinite regress that results can only be blocked by the assumption of a kind of absolute point of assured correspondence or identity between names and their sense, a point at which it is no longer possible to ask for the sense of a name since the name simply names itself.

Finally, given these two structures, there is the third structural paradox of the necessary infinite *alternation* of signifier and signified, whereby each new signifier itself becomes a possible signified, and thus engenders the necessity of another distinct signifier, and so forth.¹⁵ Again, the regress can only be avoided by the positing of an absolute point of fixed correspondence between signifier and signified, a kind of absolute signifier that already is its own signified, and which thus captures the total structural order of signification and forecloses its necessary regress only by paradoxically signifying itself.

The structural necessity of such a paradoxical place for any formal characterization of sense points, according to Deleuze, to the necessary existence of certain 'paradoxical elements' in any structurally constituted language. These are elements which, rendering undecidable the oppositions between signifier and signified, denotation and denoted, and rule and instance, paradoxically capture the total structure of a signifying system and focus it at a singular, precise point. Closely related to what Lévi-Strauss termed the 'floating signifier', such 'paradoxical entities' are decisive for the formal theory of sense because of the way they themselves reflect,

¹³ Deleuze, Gilles, *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994 [1968]), p. 16. Interestingly, the paradox is also used by Quine decisively to criticize Carnap's conventional picture of logic and linguistic rules: see Quine, W. V., 'Truth by convention', in *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1966 [1936]). For some discussion, see Livingston, Paul M., *The Politics of Logic: Badiou, Wittgenstein, and the Consequences of Formalism* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 88-89 The original source is Carroll, Lewis, 'What the tortoise said to Achilles', *Mind* 1895 4:14, pp. 278-80.

¹⁴ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, pp. 28-31.

¹⁵ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, pp. 36-38.

without resolution, the essentially paradoxical structure of the totality of signification at a determined point within it. In particular, it is characteristic of the paradoxical entity, according to Deleuze, that it circulate endlessly between the two parallel series of signifiers and signifieds, and thereby assures, beyond any assumption of mirroring, parallelism, or term-by-term correspondence, the only relationship these two series can have. Making reference to Lacan's treatment of the structural effectivity of just such an element in his 1955 seminar on Poe's 'The Purloined Letter', Deleuze characterizes the paradoxical element as:

...at once word and thing, name and object, sense and *denotatum*, expression and designation, etc. It guarantees, therefore, the convergence of the two series which it traverses, but precisely on the condition that it makes them endlessly diverge. It has the property of being always displaced in relation to itself. If the terms of each series are relatively displaced, *in relation to one another*, it is primarily because they have in themselves an *absolute* place; but this absolute place is always determined by the terms' distance from this element which is always displaced, in the two series, *in relation to itself*. We must say that the paradoxical entity is never where we look for it, and conversely that we never find it where it is. As Lacan says, *it fails to observe its place (elle manqué à sa place)*. It also fails to observe its own identity, resemblance, equilibrium, and origin... It behooves it, therefore, to be in excess in the one series which it constitutes as signifying, and lacking in the other which it constitutes as signified: split apart, incomplete by nature or in relation to itself. Its excess always refers to its own lack, and conversely, its lack always refers to its excess.¹⁶

According to Deleuze, it is only by occupying this paradoxical place with respect to the totality of signification that the paradoxical element can not only find its structural sense, but also locate the precise point of the possibility of its radical transformation. This is the point of the intra-systematic and formally locatable promise not only (as Deleuze says quoting Lévi-Strauss) of 'all art, all poetry, all mythic and aesthetic revolutions', but also (Deleuze adds) of 'all revolutions'.¹⁷

As Deleuze points out, both the structure of the paradoxical element and the systematic series of paradoxes from which it results can further be formalized by reference to the foundational paradox that historically doomed the project of a consistent logicist reduction of arithmetic, namely Russell's paradox of the set of all sets not members of themselves. In particular, the inevitable generation of a regress in each case of the serial paradoxes necessarily invokes the question of a point of totality at which the regress could be halted, for example a name that would be able to name itself, or a conceptual signification that would be able to stand for itself. The confusion of formal levels which would alone yield such a point is then formally identical to

¹⁶ Deleuze, Gilles, *The Logic of Sense*. Trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990 [1969]), pp. 40-41.

¹⁷ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 49.

the inclusion of a set within itself, and also invokes the question of the possibility of a set of all sets and accordingly (if this question is answered in the affirmative) to the contradictory Russell set itself. The paradoxicality of the paradoxical element with respect to the totality of signification that it captures is thus formally the same as that of the Russell set itself, which is a member of itself if and only if it is not.¹⁸ In this way, according to Deleuze, once we consider the possibility of an intra-systematic element that reflects the total constitution of structural sense, we must ascribe to it the contradictory properties of the Russell set: those of both referring and not referring to itself, and of thereby witnessing the necessary contradiction of any location of the basis of the total structure of signification within that structure itself.

Why, though, can both the paradoxical element and the contradictions it witnesses not be avoided by means of the formal devices that standardly preclude Russell's paradox itself within axiomatic presentations of arithmetic and set theory, namely devices of foundation, serial ordering with respect to the referential powers of language, or a hierarchy of logical types? Within these presentations, following a suggestion originally made by Russell himself, the requirement is imposed that a set can only be included within another if the second is at a structurally higher level than the first: thus, both the possibility of a set belonging to itself and the possibility of a *total* set of all sets (and with this, the possibility of the paradoxical Russell set as well) are regulatively precluded in advance. These devices of foundation and hierarchy have a legitimate employment in such axiomatic theories as can legitimately refer to an essentially *open* domain of ever-higher stratified levels with no "highest" type or *total* unification into a single total set. Conceived in terms of their implication for the structural characterization of language or languages, these devices would require, in the case of each constituted language, a "higher" or "stronger" one from the perspective of which it would be possible to assay and describe the total structure of the first; whereas the second language would then require, for its own complete description, a third, even stronger one, and so forth.¹⁹ But the reason that these devices cannot be used to preclude paradox in reference to the constitution of linguistic sense itself can be found in an axiom which Lacan repeatedly formulates, and makes a formal basis of his own consideration of the specific kind of Real which is shown at the point of the kind of formalizing impasse to which Russell's paradox witnesses. This is the axiom that 'there's no such thing as a metalanguage': there is, in other words, no *outside* perspective or position from which it would be possible, with respect to the totality of language, to assay its structure and delimit its power without contradiction.

¹⁸ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, pp. 68-69.

¹⁹ I proceed somewhat quickly and loosely here, blurring over distinctions between set-membership, referential power, and structures of logical types, and invoking in passing also the close relationship between Russell's paradox and what has been called "Tarski's paradox" of the indefinability without contradiction of a truth-predicate for a language, *L*, within that language itself, calling for (on Tarski's classical interpretation, at any rate) an open hierarchy of ever-stronger metalanguages. For a fuller and more detailed treatment of the relevant formal structures and their interrelationships, see Livingston, *The Politics of Logic*, chapter 1.

Given the radical nonexistence of such an exterior position, the formalization of the basis of sense is determined as, necessarily, the internal formalization of the paradoxical point of impasse, or the limitation of the formalism of sense with respect to the nonsense of the paradoxical element it must inscribe, in which alone can formally appear the total character of signification at a precisely signified (but necessarily absurd) point within it. As Deleuze puts the point, again drawing on Lévi-Strauss, the possibility of any positive knowledge already depends on the preexistence, and possibility of reference to, a ‘virtual totality of langue or language’, a ‘completeness of [the] signifier’ which is always already ‘there’ in advance despite the necessary obstruction, to be overcome progressively by the advance of positive knowledge, of its progressively segmented allocation to the signified.²⁰ The necessity that (as Lévi-Strauss puts it) ‘Man, since his origin’ already has had this completeness ‘at his disposal’ – but yet without being able to situate himself *outside* the total field of the possible signified to which it gives meaning – is the necessity that sense as a whole be formally reflected, within this field, by the paradoxical element or structurally necessary point of the impasse of consistent formalization.²¹ It is just here that the Real of structure proposes itself, in connection with the constitutive ideas of totality, reflexivity, and contradiction or inconsistency, to the only symbolic access that is possible to it, that of the formalization of constitutive and foundational paradox.

If there is no metalanguage, and yet the subject of signification thus always already in advance relates itself to the total structure of signification as such, then the structure of the subject of signification is irreducibly consigned to situate itself in the paradoxical gap that thereby formally opens up between this totality and itself. A formally similar reference to the constitutive impasse of formalization at its own limit is again the basis, in Lacan, for clarifying the structure of the subject as it results from the inherent gap between being and knowledge. Whereas, for Lacan, there is explicitly no way for the ‘one’ of totality to enter into the world except by means of the signifier itself – no source, that is, for this unity in a fusional principle of synthesis, or an intuitive givenness of unity as such – it is nevertheless crucial that, as he often puts it, through the agency of the symbolic and its proper mode of causality, there is nevertheless ‘[something of] oneness.’ [*Ya d’L’Un*].²² If, then, there is no metalanguage, and hence, as Lacan emphasizes in seminar XX, no ‘language of being’ capable of adequately expressing its totality, then the subject of the signifier is consigned to exist in the gap that thereby opens up between the ‘oneness’ that thus subsists on the level of structure and the unity of such a total (meta-)language of being, which is not.

²⁰ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 48

²¹ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 48.

²² ‘We know of no other basis by which the One may have been introduced into the world if not by the signifier as such, that is, the signifier insofar as we learn to separate it from its meaning effects.’ (Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, p. 50.)

‘For a long time I have scanded what constitutes the first step in this undertaking with a certain “There’s such a thing as One” (*Ya d’ l’Un*) This “There’s such a thing as One” is not simple – that’s the word for it. ... If the unconscious is truly what I say it is, being structured like a language, it is at the level of language (*langue*) that we must investigate this One.’ (Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, pp. 66-67)

In seminar XX, Lacan clarifies this situation by reference to its formal implication for the subject's relation to truth:

There is some relationship of being that cannot be known. It is that relationship whose structure I investigate in my teaching, insofar as that knowledge – which, as I just said, is impossible – is prohibited (*interdit*) thereby. This is where I play on equivocation – that impossible knowledge is censored or forbidden, but it isn't if you write “inter-dit” appropriately – it is said between the words, between the lines. We have to expose the kind of real to which it grants us access.

We have to show where the shaping (*mise en forme*) of that metalanguage – which is not, and which I make ex-sist – is going. Something true can still be said about what cannot be demonstrated. It is thus that is opened up that sort of truth, the only truth that is accessible to us and that bears on, for example, the non-savoir-faire.²³

As Fink notes in a footnote, Lacan's reference here is to Gödel's Incompleteness theorems. The first of these shows that, for any adequately strong axiomatic, consistent formal system of arithmetic, there will be some sentence which demonstrably cannot be proven by the system, but it nevertheless evidently true. In this sense, the theorem itself witnesses the possibility of a sort of truth – a relationship to being, as Lacan says – that exceeds the order of systematic knowledge and the correspondence it presupposes between signs and their objects. Beyond this assumed correspondence, it bears witness to the truth that opens up at the limit-point of possible formalization, in and through the very formalization of the internal deductive structure of a language as such. At this point of essential impasse, the systematically suspended demonstration of a truth, and with it the proper situation of the subject in relation to the real of its being, exposes its proper unity and hence the real of which it is capable, substituting itself for the one of an adequate (that is, consistent and complete) meta-language of being, which is not.²⁴

²³ Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, pp. 119-120.

²⁴ The point is developed in more detail in seminar XIX:

...the Real affirms itself by an effect which is in no way the least, by affirming itself in the impasses of logic. I will explain. The fact is that at the start, in its all-conquering ambition, logic proposed for itself nothing less than the network of discourse in so far as it is articulated and that by being articulated, this network ought to close itself into a universe that is supposed to embrace and cover like a net anything that was involved in what was offered to knowledge.

Experience, the experience of logicians, showed things to be different... The remarkable thing ... is that it is not starting from the values of truth that Gödel proceeds in his proof that there will always be in the field of arithmetic something that can be stated in the proper terms that it involves, which will not be within the grasp of what posits itself as a means to be held as acceptable in the proof. It is not starting from truth, it is starting from the notion of derivation. It is by leaving in suspense the true or false value as such that the theorem is demonstrable. (Lacan, Jacques, *Seminar XIX: ...Ou Pire...* Transl. by Cormac Gallagher from unedited French manuscripts. Online at <http://www.lacanireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Book-19-Ou-pire-Or-worse.pdf> (accessed September, 2015), pp. 38-40).

The issues about totality, unity, and completeness raised here also have obvious relevance to the significance and derivation of Lacan's so-called “formulas of sexuation”, which involve distinct forms of non-totality indicated by a

Formalism, One, Critique

I have argued for the existence of a specific use of formalization in Lacan and Deleuze, one which functions as an elaboration of the total character of signification in relation to the constitutive formal (or meta-formal) ideas of completeness, consistency, and reflexivity.²⁵ On the suggestion that is common to both thinkers, this use of formalization articulates any possible position of a subject whose specific being is conditioned by the signifier, thereby inscribing at the point of paradox and formal impasse the truth that is proper to it. All of the specific formalisms which indicate the place of this truth, for Lacan and Deleuze, stand in determinative and formally tractable relation to the kind of unity – the one – that is introduced by signification as such. This is not the one of a self-enclosed and consistent totality of beings, accessible to a metalanguage position capable of assaying the total correspondence of words and things. It is rather the one that “subsists”, takes place, or is said in default of such a position – but is thus said only, as I have argued, on the basis of a problematic formalism of formalization itself, which there indicates, at the point of formalism’s own reflexive impasse, the proper mode in which alone the symbolic allows a thinkable access to being. This one that subsists at the point of impasse is what Lacan indicates with the motto that “there is oneness”; again, it is the one of what Deleuze calls, early in *Difference and Repetition*, the sole ontological proposition that has ever been, that of the *univocity* of Being.²⁶ As Deleuze argues, the formally articulated claim that ‘Being is said in one and the same sense’ of all its distinct designators, modes, and differences is sufficient to oppose to the analogical or equivocal senses of being invoked by Aristotle, Aquinas, or Hegel in the service of an ultimately conceptual unification of beings under the sign of identity the formal unity affirmed by another tradition, the one represented by Scotus, Spinoza, and Nietzsche, which rather allows the full restoration of the ontological rights of difference.²⁷ And as I have suggested, the formalization of this problematic unity or univocity, up to the point of paradox, operates for both Lacan and Deleuze as the sole possible indication of the problematic point of contact of symbolic thought with being in itself.

Although the formalization of this problematic unity in both Lacan and Deleuze is thus continuous with the pursuit of the function in which Plato, at one point in his career, located in the idea or form – namely, that of capturing the specific real of whatever is thinkable in being in itself – it has nothing to do with the positing of supersensible entities, timeless universals, or a transcendent dimension of reality of the kind that one associates with a vulgar “Platonism”. For as we have seen, it is not in the transcendence of forms, but rather in the formalization of

specialized use of logical quantifiers. For an illuminating discussion, see Chiesa, Lorenzo, *The Not-Two: Logic and God in Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, forthcoming 2016).

²⁵ For a fuller discussion of the meta-formal application of these ideas in connection with a realism predicated in part on Lacan’s register of the Real in the specific way it is formally available through the development of formal impasses, see Livingston, Paul M., ‘Realism and the Infinite’, *Speculations: A Journal of Speculative Realism* 2013, IV, pp. 99-117 (2013).

²⁶ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 35.

²⁷ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, pp. 39-42

symbolic formalism itself, that Lacan and Deleuze locate this specific real and find its own properly paradoxical structure. Accordingly, it is not in the transcendence of the supersensible, but in the immanence of what is proper to the symbolic as such, that Lacan and Deleuze find the real indicated by formalizing thought, and there locates the specific structure of a being constitutively subject to it. It is also in this immanence, and at the specific point of impasse which formally locates the gap between being and knowledge introduced by the virtual totality of signification, that this use of formalism locates the point of possible critique, or transformation, of this totality as such. Indeed, as we have already seen in connection with what Deleuze calls the ‘paradoxical element’, whether it is a question of the transformation of an individual psyche, the innovation of new collective practices of art, science, or culture, or critical intervention at the point of the spontaneous ideology of the community or the social whole, it is always, from this position, the point of the paradoxical impasse that provides the specific hope of transformation and the promise of the new.

Elsewhere, I have attempted to describe, under the heading of the “paradoxico-critical” orientation of thought, the critical and political implications of this singular position with respect to the symbolic, its paradoxical impasse of formalization, and the specific real of contradiction, antinomy, or constitutive antagonism that shows up just there.²⁸ Here, in closing, I shall just attempt to indicate briefly how this formally grounded position, embodied in common by Lacan and Deleuze, differs from that of two other contemporary projects that also claim to draw on formalism, in substantial continuity to Lacan, to situate what are actually very different critical claims with respect to contemporary ideology and *praxis*.

First, it cannot be disputed that the ontological and political project of Alain Badiou certainly represents one of the foremost considerations of formalism and its implications in our time. Moreover, Badiou develops his account of being, the event, and the possibility of subjectively grounded transformation in substantial continuity with Lacan. This is clear (for instance) in both the opening and closing pages of *Being and Event*, where he invokes the possibility of a new “post-Cartesian” doctrine of the subject developing from (but also critical of) Lacan’s, or indeed already in the motivation of the interventionist activism of the *Theory of the Subject*, where, invoking and reversing Lacan’s motto about the real as the impasse of formalization, he calls instead for a theory of the forced ‘pass of the real, in the breach opened up by formalization’.²⁹ This is the theory which he would then later find in the apparatus of Paul Cohen’s technique of forcing, and its potential to inscribe the initially indiscernible, with radical structural consequences, at the infinite limit of the procedure of a faithful subject.

²⁸ See Livingston, *The Politics of Logic*, especially chapter 10.

²⁹ Badiou, Alain, *Being and Event*. Trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005 [1988]), pp. 1-3 and pp. 431-435; Badiou, Alain, *Theory of the Subject*. Trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009 [1982]), p. 22. For discussion, see Livingston, *The Politics of Logic*, pp. 188-92.

But although Badiou's development of forcing is thus itself continuous, in one respect, with the Lacanian thought of the relationship between the Real and the structural impasse, its way of conceiving of the location and consequences of impasse is in fact completely different. For while Deleuze and Lacan both suspend, at the specific point of the impasse of formalism with respect to itself, the paradoxical "one" which offers for both the only possibility of an ontological inscription of the real, Badiou's direct ontologization of mathematics invokes, by contrast, an ontology of pure multiplicity predicated on the presumptive denial of any "one" or "one-all" of signification as such. At the same time, a mandate of consistency is here to be maintained, at least with respect to that in Being which is presentable as such, by means of a problematic operation of "counting as one" which operates, as if from outside language or indeed any possible presentation, both to constrain and to produce the kinds of novelty that can then appear there. As I have argued in more detail elsewhere, this has the effect of officially displacing the locus of truth, outside any determinative connection to language or its structure, but raises once more the deep problem of the problematic position of a metalanguage, from which it would be possible formally to articulate both what is ontologically presentable and what can (on Badiou's theory) transform it from the exterior position of an event.³⁰ In a more critical and practical register, these displacements yield, in turn, Badiou's activist and decisionist account of the potential consequences of an event, an account which, despite its clear uses with respect to certain problems of identification, also tends to abandon any specific register of immanent critique.³¹

Another contemporary position which claims substantial continuity with Lacan's, but in fact ultimately misplaces the level and critical force of the appeal to formalism which he shares with Deleuze, is Žižek's. The problem here is not, as with Badiou, that of a direct ontologization of formalism that bypasses the specific significance of the symbolic in relation to the Real, but rather that of the distortions produced by a forced unification of the proper *impasse* shown by formalism for Lacan with the problematic and officially generative core of the Hegelian dialectic in the contradiction of terms. In texts such as the recent *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, Žižek's zeal to force such a marriage of Lacan's structuralism and Hegelian dialectic indeed allows him, while clearly recognizing how Lacan's formalism points to a constitutive and formally demonstrable inadequacy of the One of signification with itself, misleadingly to identify this inadequacy with the Hegelian contradiction. Accordingly, Žižek writes as if the (actually imaginary rather than symbolic) Hegelian "unification of opposites" were itself sufficient not only to capture but indeed to traverse this proper "deadlock" of the symbolic, thereby repeatedly yielding a greater ontological positivity to be reinscribed on a higher level.³² This has the further effect, in terms of the specific terms of

³⁰ See Livingston, *The Politics of Logic*, chapter 9.

³¹ For this line of critique, see Livingston, *The Politics of Logic*, chapters 9 and 10.

³² The problem is evident in passages such as this one, where Žižek, commenting also on Badiou, takes up the implications of Lacan's motto about formalization and the impasse:

critique which Žižek can accordingly propose, of reinscribing the resource of positive transformation in the activity and agency of a once again substantialized subject, the subject able repeatedly to supplement the basic ontological inconsistency of the world itself by means of the kind of imaginary unification its agency can provide. With this, the essential formal impasse that Lacan and Deleuze both recognize, and place at the core of the possible access of a signifying subject to truth, is misplaced, and the specific possibilities of immanent critique and transformation it offers again missed.³³

For Lacan, the Real can only be demonstrated through formal logic, not in a direct way, but negatively, through a deadlock of logical formalization: the Real can only be discerned in the guise of a gap, an antagonism. The primordial status of the Real is that of an obstacle, the absent cause of a failure, a cause which has no positive ontological consistency in itself but is present only through and in its effects. To put it succinctly: one tries to formalize the Real, one fails, and the Real *is* this failure. That is why, in the Lacanian Real, opposites coincide: the Real is simultaneously what cannot be symbolized *and* the very obstacle which prevents this symbolization. And this coincidence, the coincidence of a Thing with the very obstacle which presents our access to it, in other words this overlapping of epistemological failure and ontological impossibility, is profoundly Hegelian. (Žižek, Slavoj, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 841) .

As we have seen, however, the *identification* that Žižek here proposes between the failure to “formalize” the Real, and the Real itself, is nowhere suggested by Lacan (or Deleuze) and is moreover highly problematic in itself. Lacan does not say that the Real *is* the impasse or failure of formalization, but just that it can *only be inscribed on the basis* of such an impasse. Whereas the inscription *of* the impasse or paradox – as for instance in the writing of Russell’s paradox, or the inscription of Gödel’s theorems – *is* in a certain way a “direct” symbolization *of* the Real, this writing is itself not to be understood as either an impasse or a positive obstacle to this symbolization. Moreover, the kind of impasses or paradoxes (not ‘failures’) that show up here are in no simple sense epistemological *or* ontological, and so cannot be used, as Žižek suggests, to license a “Hegelian” transformation of (critical) epistemological limitation into ontological (dialectical) positivity. It is rather (as for instance in Gödel’s theorems) the case that a formalization of the *possible* formalization of the symbolic (which has nothing to do with epistemology) here yields, not the ontological production of a new thing, but the inscription of a new undecidable at the formal limit of the symbolic structure itself.

³³ For a fuller development of these points, see Livingston, Paul M., ‘How do we Recognize Strong Critique?’, *Crisis and Critique* 3, 2014, pp. 85-115.