

## **Apostles & Saints** — from parallel actions to parallel fictions

**Thomas Altheimer**  
**2006 MRes Dissertation — London Consortium**

Two months ago in June I was struggling to work out a framework for this dissertation. At the time I decided not to experiment as I have been inclined to on other occasions, instead I assumed a disinterested, objective voice in the treatment of the subject. Thus the initial presentation of the topic lays out a rather conventional, middle-class type study of the reception history of the figure of Don Quixote, pointing towards a rethinking of the figure with a view on present times. This was an application of the kind of methodology I was taught while studying Comparative Literature. Comparative studies of literary figures and motifs across history are among the most cherished jewels in the shrine of the science of letters. *‘Better play it safe!’ he thought to himself (middle-class par excellence!).* Still, this kind of safe playing can prove to be tricky business in interdisciplinary studies. Striking chords you calculate will resonate universally, risk appearing quaint and particular as they travel across disciplinary boundaries. Most likely students take this into account—consciously or subconsciously—as they shop around for a supervisor.

With the failsafe strategy there seems to follow an amount of humility towards the world. There is an initial admittance of guilt: *the truth is not on my side. I must enact the truth, which is where I am not.* Assuming a certain discourse and a certain form, you acknowledge your own fallibility in the same way a drunken person at times is able to. Occasionally, with the right constellation of planets, he is able to walk straighter than any sober person, because he knows he is lushed out; so he puts all his effort into mimicking the walk of proper people—of course all too revealing through the overly stiff, forced manner of his gait. *‘Better play it safe!’ he thought to himself*

Now it happened in July that I travelled to Hampstead to visit my supervisor. In tenor of my newfound humility, I got lost trying to find Ellerdale Road, nonetheless walking with a firm (stiff) gait, carrying a briefcase filled with good intentions and modest notions. In the extra time caused by geographical confusion I had plenty of opportunity to once again ponder the figure of Don Quixote. Along with the loss of bearings arrives a feeling of subsiding certainty, accordingly—in that moment—I found myself firmly on the side of the tradition, represented by the likes of the 18<sup>th</sup> century J. G. Herder, who sees Don Quixote as one of the “Pucks of history who are still riding in broad daylight without realizing that their hour is past” (quoted by Bergel: 1947, p. 314). To assume the posture of ego contra mundum like the Don is not human, it breaks up social order. The human self should be connected to other selves. *The truth is where I am not.*

I am seated with a cup of green tea at a stylish round table—my back to a Mary Kelly piece—Parveen Adams takes a seat opposite me. We are in her sitting room. Generously lit by the idyllic, foliate light of Hampstead in summer through a large set of windows next to us. Parveen has my dissertation proposal in front of her. Later, in the study, the next room over, my inhibited perception will only let me take note of one title on the book shelves—a Penguin copy of William Gaddis’ *JR* (or was it *The Recognitions?*). Everything is fine and in its place. *Yes, everything is fine and in its place.*

But only for a short while, alas. Here comes friction in the form of a pile of pink A4 sheets.

Now, if this dissertation is to fail it is because of this introduction of a second text (*not pink but black on pink*). It is a text that my supervisor asked me to compile and mail to her long after I had finished the initial middle-class exercise of the dissertation proposal. *So, Parveen, yet again raising the guilt stakes, I put the blame squarely on you, should this dissertation fail to pass!* With this second pile of pink sheets a gap is introduced—a gap through which the stars of anti-humanism and anti-philosophy—Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek—slip through to command the ball as dance masters; thus challenging the intended textbook methodology. The sheets contain quotes and texts related to my own work; billed as everything from theatre, performance, and fiction to revolutionary politics. So, on the table in Ellerdale Road 24 we have now two texts. One is an exercise in academic writing. The writing subject is clearly distinguished. It is signed ‘Thomas Strøbech’ which corresponds with my enrolment sheet at Birkbeck. Legibility is stable. The other is a montage of texts written by me as well as texts about acts I have done. There is a jumbling of proper names. Legibility is unstable. Of course the latter was not structured as an argument. It was requested by Parveen to give her an idea of what kind of work I have been involved in. And this is where it all goes wrong. As she looks up from her papers, Parveen addresses me as a practising artist, not as a student. An impatient gesture of her hand towards the sober proposal on the white sheets is followed by an outburst: *‘this simply didn’t strike a chord with me at all!’* Yes, exactly those very words that the interdisciplinary student dreads most. My universal statement hit upon the intransigent reef of non-recognition and fell apart in a shower of splintered particulars. The meticulously researched history of the reception of Don Quixote by the German romanticists in the nineteenth century was left void in an instant. The safe-playing student tries to hide his panic by another sip of the mug, like a nervous interviewee in an insufferably hot TV-studio, all the while frantically going over his options—*is it too late to (yet again) change supervisor?* But alas, to no avail, just like that green monster—*The Incredible Hulk*, ripping through the clothing of poor *Bruce Banner*—the meek middle class student is being possessed by his alter ego also known as *Thomas Altheimer*, founder of the *Parallel Action* and the new *Parallel Fictions*. Here we see an inversion of the dynamics at play in the scene with the innkeeper in the beginning of *Don Quixote*. I quote from my dissertation proposal: “The reader expects the end of delusion at his first contact with the outside world. But instead his madness is humoured. The first person he meets, the innkeeper, frightened by Don Quixote’s contentiousness and arms, chooses to accommodate the knight-errant: in order to get rid of him, he mimics the ceremonial of dubbing him a knight.”

The split logic of the two texts is transposed on to me, or rather, on the character sipping tea across from the supervising Parveen Adams. What does one choose—the identity of a creative artist, equipped as these people are with a *carte blanche* to invent worlds, *savoir-faire*, and a licence to make any kind of claim however ludicrous because they have access to the mystical powers of *poesis*—or the identity of a foreign exchange student with a peculiar accent and a chronic grammatical stigma of noun-verb inflection errors? (It is a choice of the kind facing the young men of restive Baluchistan: *Do we go on struggling as peasants like our fathers, year after year eking out a poor living from an intransigent soil—or do we choose to become glorious holy warriors?*) When Don Quixote arrived at the inn, he thought it a castle. When Thomas Strøbech arrived at Ellerdale Road 24, he thought it an inn. When he left it was a castle. He was leaving as Thomas Altheimer, dubbed a knight by the supervising duchess. Turning down Fitzjohn’s Avenue utterly deluded, humoured in his madness.

#### *The bipolar perspective*

But of course later that day, as he got tired and stuffed his belly like another Sancho Panza, it happened that the shock of food deflated the Altheimerian ego-balloon—jack returned to his box. Thus the meek and humble Strøbech managed to recapture some of the lost ground in time for the drafting of the structure of this dissertation. Nevertheless, as a consequence of Parveen Adam’s interpellation of the artist-in-the-student (the excess in the student, what is more in the student than himself) a redoubling of the writing subject has taken place.

### *Alzheimer*

Multiple characters constitute Alzheimer's voice. The text proposes a contemporary programme for action through the example of Don Quixote. The reading does at times seem mendacious and contradictory. It constitutes a celebration, choosing the self-declared *Don* as the precursor a new generation of fictional terrorists who, failing to separate first order presence (reality) from second order representation (art), enact fictions, plots written or yet to be written—in this way inflicting a multiplicity of personalities on the world—to retool a Joycean expression. Thus basic procedures of meaning are short-circuited, instigating a collapse of all forms of identity ascription in order to create a world in our own image. Such a procedure would ideally render reality highly malleable, setting the scene for Don Quixote's second triumphant coming in a world where object lessons are no longer taught, where the dark army of evil enchanters has been eliminated.

### *Ströbech*

Ströbech is a strictly unitary ego sides with Herder and his derision of the 'Pucks of history'. Herder describes Don Quixote as a dreamer, "the symbol of the man who has lost contact with the necessities of historical reality and confuses yesterday with the present." Ströbech is fed up with Alzheimer and his chorus. He has just been forced to take out a life insurance, so his children will be left with a bit of cash should Alzheimer succeed to enact a plot in Iran this fall where his death is written into the script. Ströbech is being dragged behind Alzheimer—in the same way that *fate leads the willing, and drags along the reluctant*.

### ***Alzheimer - Preliminary Sketch of the Issue***

At one point during the exchange at Ellerdale Road, Ms Adams—responding to our text—talked of 'the unconscious of reality'. Whereafter the discussion centred on Lacan's notions of the borromean knot and the 'sinthome'. This idea of the 'the unconscious of reality' opened up a new perspective for us where the burden of proof is reversed, so to speak. Normally it is expected that all debts, all flaws and symptoms are lodged in the unconscious of individuals. Any statement or action has to be filtered for personal, pathological content before it is allowed on the scene of the universal. Or rather—it is believed that any product or act that contributes to the edifice of human culture sets off from the personal (the useless, the particular). In consecutive steps the idiosyncratic substance receives a social form before it finally stands the test of the universal. Such a test could be its entry upon the marketplace; where a product acquires exchange-value in comparison with other products/forms through the universal equivalent—at least if it should prove to be of any [use]value to others. Another test could be in the form of aesthetic criticism. In his thoughts on sublimation Freud reflects on how artists have to wrap the disgusting intimate fantasies in a socially acceptable form—"offering the pleasure of the beautiful artistic form as a lure which seduces us into accepting the otherwise repulsive excessive pleasure of intimate fantasizing" (Žižek: 2006, p. 311). As a consequence, it is very difficult for any individual to lay claim to truths, which seems to go against common sense, seems unpractical, or—in the case of Don Quixote—seems outright crazy. This is one reason that individuals, who for some reason want to change perceptions or influence the priorities of a community, either has to act collectively or take up forms of representation. In this way the rationale of the aggregate appears 'objective', 'sound', as it seems far removed from the demons of the unconscious and the pathological, which lurk in the individual.

With the notion of the 'unconscious of reality', individuals would no longer find themselves as prisoners of the 'reality principle', because reality in itself could be deemed psychotic, irrational etc. Such a claim would probably be difficult to underpin with theoretical elaborations, but in these times it does serve as a healthy corrective to the increasingly paranoiac, hysterical crescendo, which political and mediatic discourse seem to have reached. It could thus serve as a sort of new *memento mori* for all who are bogged down by self-doubt, guilt and a burdened conscience—should we not all have a small figurine of Tony Blair on our desk, carrying the inscription: *the symptom of reality!*

### ***Strobech – When They Do Battle With Gravity***

I take the fact that he refers to himself in plural as proof of Alzheimer's escalating conceitedness and megalomania. My way of dealing with the phenomenon of Alzheimer is defensive and feet-dragging. As we inhabit the same body I more than anyone suffer the consequences of his choices. Alzheimer is stuck in modernist aesthetics and the project to fictionalize the world. This is his much repeated speech: he not only believes in Mallarmé's *credo tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à une apostrophe* (All in this world exists to end up in a book); by acting as a fictional character, he hopes to annul the distance between the world and the book in order to remove all obstacles for his desire. Thus, he claims to re-combine the modernist moment—the world as book—with Rimbaud's imperative to *changer le monde* in a manner, which bypasses the inconsequential, lacklustre pit of the postmodernist *everything is fiction*. He believes that it is exactly this imperative and the act that follows, which harbour the potential for decisive change in the name of relentless experimentation with greatness as the sole measure (Hannah Arendt).

Faced by this approach to life and existence, I drag my feet because Alzheimer, in his urge to do great deeds as well as in his eagerness to prove that his aesthetic project goes far beyond postmodernism, subscribes to the view that exacting a pound of flesh is the hallmark of the reality of his fictions. Seeking effect through a willingness to stake his life on fictional threads, in a manner that draws from the same well of effects frequented by suicide bombers.

Choosing not to go into a full-scale presentation of Alzheimer's prior projects here, I will only mention that he forced me to traverse Iraq in 2004, dressed as a European in a suit, on a frightful journey, which I claim was more about a self-centred quest for identity than about bringing democracy to the plagued country.

Marking out my theoretical position vis-à-vis that of my 'co-consciousness', I believe his is gravely simplistic: Alzheimer indulges in a veritable robinsonade, greatly overestimating individualism as a historical force. As he sets out to make his case for an individualistic revolution, I will make the claim that his 'programme for action' is shortsighted, romantic and melodramatic in its scope, seeking artificial resolutions of real societal contradictions. It is unreal in the sense that it stands outside history, staging fast and cheap wish-fulfillment in a frictionless fair ground of fictions—in a manner that ignores and disregards the real issues at stake for us all.

When the likes of Don Quixote and Thomas Alzheimer point to their inner and external wounds to authenticate what they believe to be an exemplary, epic struggle, we must counter and tell these egomaniacs that the lessons taught are of the same kind as the lessons that billions of stumbling toddlers are taught as they make their first painful experience with gravity.

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### ***Alzheimer (The Pink Papers)***

Correspondence with Forrest Gander at Brown University July 5, 2006:

*Alzheimer to Forrest:*

*"...I've hatched a parallel platform to the Parallel Action – Parallel Fictions – which has Don Quixote as a foundational, philosophical frame. The fictions are like the parallel action, written up and then sought inserted into reality. In the same manner as the romance crazed Quixote (who've read to many books), roaming the plains of Spain as a character in his own fiction but with real effects(?). It differs from the parallel action in the way that it readily acknowledges inevitable failure. The first fiction is based on the biography of Walter Benjamin. He committed suicide on the border between Spain and France in 1942, fleeing from the Nazis on his way to America through Lisbon, he was denied entry to Spain. He had with him a briefcase with a manuscript that was lost (maybe just a copy of the arcades project – but there are speculations that it was a new work). I will act as Walter Benjamin in 2007, taking up the narrative where he left off – completing his journey to America – travelling with boat from Lisbon, going to Los Angeles as many other German exiles. I will then make some stopovers on my way westwards and conduct talks with people as Walter Benjamin – all to be documented on film. In Los Angeles he will pitch the manuscript to a Hollywood producer – a manuscript (yes, the one he's carrying in his briefcase) that turns out to be the story of his journey from*

*France/Spain to Los Angeles.*

*The narrative is inspired from the influx of German émigrés into Hollywood and the merging of American horizontal culture with German vertical culture. Benjamin triggers a world revolution as he gets his script produced. Germany proves to be the universal idea, which harbours the revolutionary potential to release the world from its festering, vegetative ideology. (—Germany never had its revolution. All nations with revolutionary pasts have become conservative beyond Metternich’s wildest dreams. Now there is enough revolutionary energy stoked up in “Germany” to go round).*

*I was considering to maybe have a talk with you (which doesn’t have to be on anything related to Benjamin’s work because it already is taking place within the context of the narrative “Walter Benjamin”) and do a stopover at Brown. It would be great if you would be willing to meet (and be filmed!). I’ve already done some filming in Spain and placed a photo of me in character at the Benjamin memorial in Portbou where he was buried – to be seen at: [parallelfictions.com](http://parallelfictions.com)”*

*Forrest to Altheimer:*

*Very glad to have word of you, Thomas. And maybe we can fall together in London sometime since I get there now and then. Your projects have a scope— always have a scope— that makes me feel hopeful, when few things do. Just before your note, I had this communication from the John Hay Library (which unfortunately seems focused on Brown connections). Also, I’m going to take the liberty of showing your projected Quixote to a few people. If you come to Brown, you must talk with Kevin McLaughlin, in the English & Comp Lit Dept ([Kevin\\_McLaughlin@Brown.edu](mailto:Kevin_McLaughlin@Brown.edu)) as he edited the Arcades Project and translated it into English (with Skip Eiland). Also, the boy who was with Walter B when he travelled across the Alps is here at Brown, a professor in the engineering dept. My cheers to you. Please keep me informed. Your own, Forrest*

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*Forrest Gander*

[www.brown.edu/Departments/Literary\\_Arts/people/Forrest](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Literary_Arts/people/Forrest)

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### ***Altheimer — The Flesh of The Word — Don Quixote as Model***

If the romantic novel is the adventure of the soul looking vainly in the hazards of the world for a divinity that has deserted it, then, according to Jacques Rancière in his *The Flesh of Words* (2004, p. 86), that novel’s protagonist par excellence is Don Quixote. Now—with our new platform *Parallel Fictions*—we have taken the Spanish Gentleman as the ideal model for action in the contemporary world. It is an uncompromising model, whose protagonists refuse to suffer from the imperfections of the world in the form of boundless stupidity (prose). So, we declare *if the world will not come to the book, the book will come to the world!* This strategy does not distinguish reflection from action. The sense that we live in a fallen world, searching for an absent god or looking for answers to basic questions, would, if limited to the sphere of reflection (philosophy), cause any sane person to suffer from severe melancholia. A remedy for this condition is often sought in aesthetic suspension of the world, in art, or, in the case of Don Quixote, in chivalric romances. By conflating reflection and action, we apply literary/ artistic/philosophical imagination and creation directly onto the world. And should the miraculous fail to appear, we would at least save our sanity—by writing life as a fiction, we are able to protect ourselves, like the Don, behind a cloak of madness.

Through the example of Don Quixote, Rancière helps us take the first step to establish an ontology conflating action and reflection, fiction and reality: “The madness unique to Don Quixote is to break this principle of reality of fiction that the people of good sense who surround him assert. They all recognize a space-time of fiction that has its well marked-out and delimited place in reality...Don Quixote’s madness interrupts this wisdom, it opposes the principle of reality that limits fiction to one single thing, the bare truth of the book...The

world is not just made of perceptible, experienced equalities; it is also made of books, not of a conventionally shared “imagination,” but of a continuum of books and attestations to the existence of what they discuss’ (2004, p. 90). Thus when Strøbech ridicules our imperative to exact a pound of flesh to attest the truth of our fiction as self-indulgent and childish, I point with Rancière to the model of Don Quixote where the decisive proof is the sacrifice of the body that exposes itself to attest to the truth of the book: ‘Don Quixote gives his body in order to attest to the truth not of the Book but of books in general’ (2004, p. 90).

### **Strøbech — Protestant Mortification**

Don Quixote of La Mancha reinvents himself as a knight ‘the kind, as people say, who go to seek adventures.’ Cervantes’ story, situated at the end of the struggle between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, is the story of an individual ridden by nostalgia for the golden age and the heroic past, the triumph of good over evil, the exciting life over quotidian boredom, inspirational dream over everyday reality, madness over prudence. Don Quixote declares: “everything is artifice and mere appearance” (“devised by the evil magicians who pursue me” —Cervantes: 2003, p. 551), and he interprets the greatest defeats as the works of ill-willed enchanters and the smallest victories as the greatest triumphs; thus insulating himself from any corrective incursions by the reality principle. Don Quixote acts in a fallen world—a world given over to gunpowder, science and rationality. Don Quixote is not stupid. He knows because he reads and because he knows he suffers from bad case of melancholia. To counter this, he dreams and fantasizes and escapes into the homeostatic universe of chivalric romances, which he knows by heart. He chooses to flee into a form where old-fashioned virtues, chivalry, and the importance and relevance of individual action is undiminished. Before I go on to argue that these pathos-laden postures (ego contra mundum) are all within a particular paradigm of storytelling—that of romance—I would like to address Altheimer’s claim to authenticity through mortification and this unpleasant sounding incarnation of the ‘flesh of words’. To me this sounds like a combination of protestant worldly asceticism and imperative of action with catholic mimesis, which situates the alleged truth within a very particular cultural horizon. Accordingly I see this ‘world book’ reduced to at most a Scandinavian book and I remind Altheimer of a conversation between one his alter egos—*Rasmussen*, his colleague, Nielsen, and Danish professor of Political Science O.K. Pedersen. The conversation took place in a freight container, dubbed *The Democracy*, on a central square in Copenhagen, a couple of months before the former two travelled to Iraq with a replica of the container:

*Rasmussen: “Taken by itself, the essence of democracy seems to pledge a permanent openness (...) But at the same there is the danger that this commitment shifts into a commitment to relativism—we then sought to add an existential element—some sincerity, by sacrificing some parts of ourselves at each intersection, some corporeal part, a part of your life—with the result that one cannot change positions without leaving something behind. In this way democracy appears as a fight which entails sacrifice (...)”*

*Nielsen: “...and then at the same time not fixed. To reinforce visibility in the staging of politics and public space, you would then constantly have to step away from your position—enabling you to reflect on it, (...) and then simultaneously making yourself answerable to it by exacting your pound of flesh (...)”*

*O.K. Pedersen: “But this is democracy in the sense of a personal attitude, and behind this is the claim that democracy should be a kind of life mode. If it wasn’t just us three, who had to live this way, but if we also call on others to do the same, ultimately insisting, then it is a life mode (...) This more obliging form of democracy came about during the more recent Danish history with the concepts of participation and citizenship. This concept of citizenship is in my opinion undemocratic. It is very much a Swedish notion, which we then have*

*adopted. Here the institutions of the state, and the public sphere, are used to convince, to persuade the individual to engage in a participative and democratic mode of life. With the result that democracy changes into a form of coercion”.*<sup>1</sup>

Here we see how this purported ‘aesthetics’ of personal sacrifice has more to do with a particular cultural and political ethos than any claim to a ‘universal truth’. Moreover ‘democracy’ seems to be interchangeable with any notion be it *quixotism, terror, art, justice, donjuanism, freedom* as long as it is followed by a collective gobbling up of the hostie on offer. — A Christian sacrificial variety of postmodernism. In the absence of a divinity we are left to inflict wounds on ourselves to prove the reality of the world, that there is a world, that we share a world—and the one who can sustain the most pain gets to call the shots.

And yet, I do not believe that pain is really the issue here. To the contrary, it is difficult to accept such a sacrificial stance when represented by a ‘flat’ fictional character. As believable as if the Tom of *Tom & Jerry*, upon his slamming into a door, should halt the carousel of violence to propose a new ethos founded on the pain inflicted on him.

“Don Quixote’s crazy, we’re sane and he walks away healthy and laughing, while your grace is bruised and sad” (Tomé Cecial to Bachelor Carrasco, Cervantes: 2003, p. 549). —This might not be a world of the Hannah-Barbera kind and yet they are somehow related; as Ian Watt writes—this is obviously “a world of self-perpetuating delusion that no reality can destroy” (1996, p. 65).

I see escapism of the same brand at work in Altheimer’s argument. Obviously an attempt to insulate himself from insurmountable contradictions determined by a societal formation, whose extent, in time as well as space, far exceeds, and is qualitatively different from, the level of the individual. The elephant in the room seems to be what Fredric Jameson, following Spinoza, calls the ‘absent cause.’ That which causes these melancholic dreamers to give themselves over to fictions, whose ‘realization’—be it through imitating literary characters on the plains of Spain or through the kind of ‘writing fiction with reality’ that is at the core of Altheimer’s poetics—is an attempt to create a fake, parallel world where everything is possible. Instead of turning to face the void in an attempt to capture the fugitive dynamics of the real, instead of trying to direct the process itself, they run along with all the other clowns enacting sentimental spectacles full of tears and high moral tones. In his *Political Unconscious* Jameson designates this void History, only known through its effects, never directly. “History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its ‘ruses’ turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention.” The dreamers have dislocated their wrestling with Necessity to an artificial site, a theatre of shadows, where they can be sure to win or at least stage an honourable defeat. Hegel was right to proclaim Don Quixote “the subjective character in its extreme form,” comic because of the “the contrast between a rationally organized world and an isolated individual who tries to create for himself order and stability” (quoted after Bergel: 1947, p. 328)

Hear this from Joyce—an author you would otherwise use in your defence for sovereign individual action:

“Life is exceptionally violent; painful and violent. It must not be covered over with euphemism, avoided by turning to the blue heavens: the cure was realism, not romanticism: in realism you are down to facts on which the world is based: that sudden reality which smashes romanticism into a pulp. What makes most people’s lives unhappy is some disappointed romanticism, some unrealizable or misconceived ideal. In fact you may say that idealism is the ruin of man.” (Joyce quoted by Johnson: 2000, p. xiii).

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*Guardian, Thursday November 3, 2005:*

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from unpublished paper. Can be found on: <http://www.demontage.dk/OnTheRoadWithSlavojŽižek.pdf>

## *The Parallel Action*

*Concept A European invasion of Guantánamo Bay*  
Creator *Thomas Altheimer*

*In January 2004, Danish artist Thomas Altheimer and his collective toured Iraq with a box labelled Democracy, offering its contents to soldiers and citizens. This month he plans to invade Guantánamo Bay and claim it for Europe.*

*Altheimer's work, a combination of performance art, activism and mischief, is based on hope and idealism. He is, in his own words, "pointing in directions where reality could follow". His group's so-called Parallel Actions are like naivety bombs: a previous project that subverted Denmark's hardline immigration policies by creating a matchmaking site for foreigners to marry Danes.*

*Altheimer says he got the idea from the US military's attempt to evict Manuel Noriega from the Vatican embassy in Panama with round-the-clock rock music. On November 18 Altheimer's group will sail into the waters around the detention centre and play Beethoven's Eroica Symphony full blast until the Americans lay down their arms or - as is more likely - he's arrested.*

*A former actor, Altheimer says the group are playing roles: "You have to formally treat yourself as a naive fictitious character that cannot predict what happens if he does this or does that."*

*They will send satellite dispatches back to a Parallel Action control room at the House Gallery in Camberwell. "I hope we'll have a massive party in Guantánamo Bay after the Americans have left," he says. "I have a European flag to signal that a European world order has somehow triumphed."*

*A public view and evaluation of the invasion will take place at the gallery on November 30.*

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## **Altheimer – Saint Homme**

### *The Politics of Prescription*

Lacan's name for this 'absent cause', this elephant, is the Real. We are, I believe, quite contrary to the charge of escapism, taking the truths of books (ideals) into the world, creating a world where there is none, so to speak. In a struggle with impossibility, we go beyond the pleasure principle, giving ourselves over to our own lethal *jouissance*. The *Don Quixote*-politics of mortification rejects the reinforcing of the status quo through compromises, negotiation and gradual change, as it is practised in the 'real' world. It is equivalent to the politics of prescription, which Žižek ascribes to Badiou: "The act of prescription posits an axiom as a starting point and demands its direct installation as the guiding principle of our actions, not as a distant goal we should approach gradually, strategically weighing the circumstances" (Žižek: 2006, p. 322). Badiou's ambassador in the anglo-saxon world, Peter Hallward, follows up: "Prescription is *direct* because its element is the urgency of the here and now. Prescription ignores deferral, it operates in a present illuminated through anticipation of its future" (quote from Žižek: 2006, p. 322). Of course, at this point 'realists' would claim that prescription is only possible in the frictionless worlds of Hannah-Barbera. And here we are maybe willing to admit that we (the parallel-fictionistas) indeed act as cartoon characters in a world where all laws are suspended as Strøbech claims. This is so because to us the world of books is the true three-dimensional space. How can one act as anything but a fictional character in a social reality where one does not accept the existing coordinates—a reality which to us seems two-dimensional and flat?

That it all comes down to the existing coordinates was aptly put by Žižek in a recent article on the Middle Eastern geopolitical symptom (2006, August 14): "*This is why the Middle East crisis is such a sensitive point for the pragmatic politics that aims to gradually resolve problems in a realistic mode. In*

*this case, the true utopia is precisely that a “realistic” approach will never work: The only “realistic” solution is the “big” one, to solve the problem at its roots. Here, then, the old motto from 1968 applies: Soyons réalistes, demandons l’impossible! Only a radical gesture that has to appear “impossible” within the existing coordinates will realistically do the job.”*

*Beings-of-language and the Hysterical Protagonists of the Parallel Action*

We would do better to supplement our text with a theoretical outline before unrepresentable *jouissance* breaches the last vestiges of coherence traumatically. First of all, the old-fashioned inflexible opposition between the individual and the collective, which Ströbech wields in every second paragraph, has to be thought in a radically different way.

Following Jameson, Ströbech situates the human subject under a horizon that is ultimately historical (‘in the last instance’). Now, our horizon coincides with the human subject. So, we have a first crude formal distinction of the two commentaries at work—one is horizontal and diachronic—the other is vertical and synchronic. In the mid-1970s Lacan comes to conceive of the human subject as a knot in which real, symbolic and imaginary are linked together. The three orders should be thought of as “inseparable, structurally coordinating acts of consciousness, experiences of the subject” (Valente: 2003, p. 166). One of the reasons why I am so fond of Lacan is that the relation of the individual and (social) reality, which seems to be at the centre of the majority of discourses—be they journalistic, pedagogical, scientific, artistic or political, takes up such a small and insignificant place in his epistemology. The much fetishized ‘reality’ appears only as a subset on the level of the symbolic. So it happens that we in the symbolic might see the body and blood of the Son of God in the host but seen from a composite perspective of the three orders, we just see a wafer of bread. Any practician of a quixotic programme should be naturally drawn to Lacan. His thinking delivers no qualitative difference per se between the truth of one who believes himself to be a knight, fighting for the virtue of an imaginary maid, or the truth of a communitarian who believes that the fabric of society is strengthened through his membership of choral societies and birdwatching clubs. This would then be another matter regarded from within a symbolic order. Here the truth-value of a statement ultimately hinges on the mandate of the master discourse, whose authority is founded on a pure act of power. All meaning is determined by its position within the symbolic order, which at any point is made up by a particular set of coordinates. If we look up ‘quixotism’ in a (American) dictionary, we find this most offensive definition: “*Quixotic - caught up in the romance of noble deeds and the pursuit of unreachable goals; idealistic without regard to practicality*”<sup>2</sup>. It is clear that one has to be situated in a very particular position for such a definition to make any sense. Or actually, one could imagine ‘quixotic’ to retain this meaning in any dictionary in any symbolic order, as it fits perfectly as a dismissal of acts, which have no place in the signifying chains of the symbolic.

We also find binary oppositional structures, the mode favoured by Ströbech (and our own fateful diachronic/synchronic distinction) within the symbolic order. Here signifiers only acquire value through their mutual relations. This constitutes the basic mechanism of the symbolic order. All experience is symbolically mediated and structured according to the logic of linguistic differential categories. The symbolic is seen to be the determining order of the subject – “the subject is himself an effect of the symbolic” (Sheridan: 2001, p. xi). Both desire and its object are produced through operations of language. In this way, personal identity, desire, or language is not determined by biology, but instead constructed through one’s relation to the symbolic. Lacan thus places the subject in a pre-established symbolic order – an order of cultural codes, habits, repetitions, etc. Subjects are to some extent prisoners of language and its mechanism of assigning meaning to arbitrary signifiers through its differential system. It “orders our perception of reality and selects from what is continuous and unbounded” (Wright & Wright: 1999, p. 3).

In an analysis of Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Purloined Letter*, Lacan asserts that the entire structure of intersubjective relations is determined not by the individuals involved, but by the

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<sup>2</sup> From Houghton Mifflin’s *Dictionary of the English Language*. The *OED* is less derisory: “striving with lofty enthusiasm for visionary ideals”.

way those individuals “model their very being on the moment of the signifying chain which traverses them. If what Freud discovered and rediscovers with a perpetually increasing sense of shock has a meaning, it is that the displacement of the signifier determines the subjects in their acts” (Lacan: 2001, p. 60). Lacan attributes the possibility of this displacement to the fact that the signifier is separated from the signified. The linkage between them, which is normally thought of as ‘meaning’, is merely an effect of the signifier itself and its relation to other signifiers in the signifying chain.

Lacan’s key notion is that we are all beings-of-language: “The subject is always fastened, pinned to a signifier which represents him for the other, and through this pinning he is loaded with a symbolic mandate, he is given a place in the intersubjective network of symbolic relations” (Žižek: 1989, p. 112). In his analysis of ideology, Žižek (1989) seizes on this aspect to describe how the master signifier works as a ‘quilting point’ in an ‘ideological field’. It quilts the signifier’s chain, retroactively fixing meaning and ordering the universe of values around it. The subject is not passively pinned like a butterfly specimen but actively seeks to appear ‘likeable’ to a certain gaze—the ‘ego-ideal’ in Lacan terminology—which is the point of symbolic identification that functions as the agency through which we observe and judge ourselves” (Žižek: 1989, p. 108).

This theory has been central to the framing and thinking of our interventions and inventions. The people behind Parallel Action thought that it was possible to shift accents in the signifying chains through artistic trickery. Some even believed it possible to quilt and propose a new master signifier.

One example of this was seen during a mobilizational effort undertaken en route to Guantanamo Bay by mission leader Thomas Herzen. In this action the proposed quilting point was ‘Europe’ In the manner of the French and their nineteenth century African force of *Tirailleurs Senegalais*, Herzen attempted to convert indigenous Jamaicans into Europeans in order to increase the number of Europeans in the attacking column bound for Cuba. He wrote in his diary (November 25, 2005<sup>3</sup>):

*“I’m telling everyone that they are Europeans, that I regard this as my home country and I invite them all to go and settle on the European mainland. I have now gotten my very own Jamaican nickname ‘Preacher’. —Much to the point of these activities. On our way across the island I inspected some European projects and Saw That They Were Good. I enhanced an European installation (development project funded by the EU) during a minor intervention at a banana plantation, getting on the box, flying the flag, playing Beethoven, and giving a speech to the assembled workers about Europe, offering to include them all in a European world order, concluding by pronouncing all present to be European. We meet no hostility towards this idea and the natives are all quite fond of the thought of them going to the mainland to settle and vice versa.”*

Herzen was a fictional character created by the Parallel Action, who, furnished with the ego-ideal of ‘Universal Europe’, was to try to transfer the new master signifier onto the Jamaican subjects. The use of symbols and a bit of theatre antics was intended to halt the process of identification and make onlookers uncertain about Herzen’s *real intentions*. The assumption was that this moment of uncertainty (*what does he really want?*) would loosen the grip of the signifier, giving the subject an opportunity to take a leap and latch on to a new master signifier, to assume a new symbolic mandate. In the same manner as Cervantes’ innkeeper who chooses to accommodate Don Quixote and mimics the ceremonial of dubbing him a knight; trying to appear likeable to the gaze that Don Quixote is directed by.

Now, the results on Jamaica proved to be rather poor. In his diary, Herzen talks of a banana farmer who turned European. When he mentions the cook who eventually signed on the boat bound for Cuba, he furnishes him with the prefix *Just-turned-European*. And he also mentions *the former colonial subject Donovan*.

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*Excerpt from The Art Newspaper – January 2006*

*By Emma Beatty*

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<sup>3</sup> Published on [www.parallelaction.com/EUROPE\\_GUANTANAMO](http://www.parallelaction.com/EUROPE_GUANTANAMO)

Unfortunately, Alzheimer was not as successful. First, he could not raise sufficient funds to rent a decent sized boat in which to set sail. Instead, he set out from Jamaica in a 20-foot vessel with a crew of just five sailors: all hired Jamaicans. He then failed to recruit any volunteers, as his attempts to lure backpackers with the promise of a free adventure proved fruitless; the modern backpacker is a non-political beast he found.

Alzheimer and his motley crew set sail at midday from Jamaica, expecting to make Guantanamo in nine hours. He had, however, failed to check the weather forecast and the boat soon ran into the high seas and strong winds. One engine broke and the boat drifted off-course. Their nine-hour passage turned to 28, and they were forced to dock in mainland Cuba, 60 kilometres from target, tired, weak and seasick.

Undiscouraged, Alzheimer proceeded to launch his musical assault by land and hired the services of a local taxi-driver. The artists arrived at the perimeter fence boxing off the US territory on 28 November; they positioned themselves on a high mountain slope with good views of the yellow prison huts that have become the byword of US injustice. The artists took aim, pointed their speakers at the huts, and played two movements of the symphony at full blast.

The result? Not a stir in the camp below. Alzheimer had hoped to be arrested, to be abused, to confuse or confound the enemy: but the enemy remained resolutely unprovoked. Was he disappointed? Yes, of course, he says, but hope reigns eternal; he is already planning a second assault. He says next time he will raise more funds, and get a better boat. He will sail in June and Beethoven's Third will be played from the water as originally planned.

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#### *Jouissance, the Sinthome and the Act—the Genius and the Apostle*

We have recently conceived a new platform—*Parallel Fictions*—as we felt that interventions were turning into pure parodies. A number of factors contributed to this. With the main focus on the symbolic order, it is clear that we are dealing with what Lacan designates *the discourse of the hysteric*. The position of the parallel-actionistas in the symbolic network is not firmly established. They address the hallmark question of the hysteric to the master: *Why am I what you are saying that I am?* The question, according to Žižek (1991, p. 131), “articulates the experience of a fissure, of an irreducible gap between the signifier that represents me (the symbolic mandate that determines my place in the social network) and the nonsymbolized surplus of my being-there.” This is a position that affirms one’s subjection to the master. And this of course is totally unacceptable for us in our attempt to reach a state of pure sovereignty, where we are able to propose our own set of coordinates for the social—resulting in a new reality.

As a consequence of this hysteric position, aspirations seemed to become ever more grandiose (hysterical), with a rapidly widening gap between means and ends (a small ghettoblaster was used to attack an American military base). “*For the fantastic in action produces comical situations which give only too much pleasure to gleefully malicious minds*” (Goethe quoted by Bergel: 1947, p. 330). Another factor contributing to a comedic turn was the translocation from a continental German *Sprachraum* to the Anglosphere. In a wonderfully crude distinction (which does not favour one for the other), the representative audience in the Anglo-Saxon cultural sphere could be said to demand immediate transparency (answers) and gratification (punch lines) from cultural products<sup>4</sup>, contrary to a continental audience, which prefers to work through a dense immediate illegibility—with gratification (edification) coming from the individual production of meaning.

Don Quixote is clearly not a hysteric. He is very persistent in his Donship. Don Quixote politics is exactly Badiou’s politics of prescription, transposing the idea directly into concrete reality. The kind of politics, which, according to Goethe (Bergel: 1947, p. 332), is the basic trait of the Spanish national character. He is not stripping off his clothes in the gaze of the big

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<sup>4</sup> Actually this preposterous generalization could come down to the particular passions of our kind patron who tends to play the role of initial focus group when ideas are pitched.

Other, demanding answers to who he is. Before he might have been known as Quexana, Quixada or Quexada but through all his adventures—victories as well as humiliations—he remains firmly in character; always retaining an air of moral superiority to his adversaries. This moral transcendence qualifies him for sainthood, which delivers us into Lacan’s seminar on the *sinthome* and his pun—*saint homme*—the exemplary human subject who is able to invent a new practice, a new order. According to Luke Thurston (2004, p. 96), sainthood is reached through the “radical withdrawal from the everyday social-discursive consolidation of identity”. Thurston goes on to describe the *sinthome* as a “site of ‘disinvestment’ (*désabonnement*) from the repetitious social circulation of signifiers; an act that entails a mysterious or terrifying apparition beyond the forms of identity imposed by the Other” (ibid.). When Quixote still carries a subscription to reality he is a poor scrawny hidalgo crazed by romances about knight-errantry. As Quexana/Quixada/Quexada, his name is not fixed; he is not bounded by a paternal name, but even so has no influence on the agency (the Other) that ascribes identity. At this point he is, as W. H. Auden writes, a “hearer not a doer of the word” (2001, p. 77). He then sets out to enact his own word. He becomes the doer of the word. Auden: “It is a conversion, an act of faith, a taking up of his cross” (ibid.).

Shifting gears: In a foreshortened perspective, based on the Lacan’s late seminars, we venture to declare the ontological situation of the subject to be psychotic. Following this pointed claim, we are tempted to drive the point home with “*hence reality is psychotic*”. But of course this cannot be so as reality is the very patch that dissimulates our ontological predicament. The three registers, the real, the symbolic, the imaginary, are no longer inseparable with the advent of the notion of *le sinthome*. Reality is produced with the social bond, the discursive network but there exists preceding this story (fiction) a prehistory, “a certain psychotic kernel evading the discursive network—a certain ‘free-floating’ space in which signifiers find themselves prior to their discursive binding, to their articulation” (Žižek: 1991, p. 132). The space is made up by material signs that resists meaning “and establishes connections not grounded in narrative symbolic structures: they just relate in a kind of presymbolic cross-resonance” (Žižek: 1992, p. 199). There are three ways for the subject to confront the initial psychotic situation (speaking theoretically—evidently it is not a question of choice). No, actually four ways, as there is, of course, also the possibility of the subject remaining in the presymbolic, becoming psychotic. Bracketing the latter, we see the overwhelming majority (the *subject proper*—Freud’s subject of the unconscious; Lacan’s subject of the signifier) either embrace a symptom in the form of “a coded message in which the subject receives its own message from the Other in reverse form” (Žižek: 1991, p. 132), or go with an imaginary scenario that, “by means of its fascinating presence, curtains the lack in the Other, the symbolic order, its impossibility” (e.g. phallic presence). The third way is the way of the *sinthome*, which allows the imaginary, symbolic and the real to be held together without a paternal metaphor or a symptom issued by the Other, thus enabling the subject to support its consistency even though it is outside the Other.

The third way is the way of the artist. Lacan developed the notion of *sinthome* through his reading of James Joyce and his epiphanies. It seems to be a preferred term in analyses of the kind of (autistic) enjoyment that artists engage in when they take on the impossible face on (fx Soler (2003), Žižek (1991, 2006), Adams, Kaltenbeck & Morel in Adams (2003)). It is the kind of art that deals with the hard real: It hurts, “it causes pleasure-in-pain, and it produces its effect through its own failure, insofar as it refers to the impossible Things” (Žižek: 2006, p. 147). Adams (2003, p 149) designates this subject, the *subject of inscription*. This subject—not a *subject proper* more of an *ego*—is able to sustain a position in the presymbolic, where “discourse has no direction” (Soler: 2003, p. 95), by way of its ability to set its own mark “in a primal moment of identification or ‘fixation’ in the real” (Adams: 2003, p 149). Adams continues: “Thus the subject’s very foundation, the anchorage which prevents its dissolution in the flow of signification, is posited as a moment of *writing*.” This writing is the ability to “express/articulate ‘that which is in him more than himself’” (Žižek: 2006, p. 148).—In distinction to the subject proper, which represents the stuff of the other—that which is outside of himself, so

to speak. So, we are left with two positions—one outside the Other/imaginary, that ‘functions at the level of the real’ (Adams: 2003, p 149), inhabited by the likes of artists and psychotics, and the other position within—inhabited by hysterics, neurotics, analysts, academics and reality arbiters (real estate agents).

Žižek (2006, pp. 147-150) draws up a pointed contrast, extending the traits of each position into a pair of ideal opposites from the example of Kierkegaard’s text *On the Difference between Genius and Apostle*. The contrast traces the shift in our own practice from the *Parallel Action* to the new *Parallel Fictions* and its quixotic programme. A few days after his return from Iraq in 2004, one of our egos, *Rasmussen*, was asked by a journalist what sense it made to travel around the plagued country in a suit carrying a box labelled *The Democracy*. *Rasmussen* responded:

*“There is (...) an aspect of the jester’s role in what we do (...) The jester entertains by impersonating the king and doing exactly the same things as he (...) thereby making people laugh and enjoy themselves, letting off some steam, when they see the king mimed in this way. The difference here is that we are both king and jester at the same time - you can never tell the difference. And we have effect. If you mime, which is meant by us saying - ‘we take the democratic mandate upon us’ - and then, to some extent, our characters disappear - we are transformed into empty carriers of some sort of democratic mandate, that is to say, instead of saying: ‘If you do it in our way, the proper way’, or something similar, then we just take what is exterior to us, take it upon us, and then we just do it. Just like Nike [laughs]. Which in this case was to go to Iraq with the democracy, as it is presented (...) in the newspapers (...) in the Western public, it is all about bringing democracy to Iraq. Then you could say - it all begins with some personal frustration - which plays into the question where to begin in this crazy universe?? Where does the act begin? - Here our answer was to just do what is already out there, what is stated in the public sphere, what is said, which is: we take democracy and bring it down there.”*

What these parallel-actionistas did (*Nielsen & Rasmussen*) was to assume the symbolic mandate of Democracy unconditionally, attempting to empty themselves of all friction-causing ego fluff. Religiously this is not the position of the saint (homme) but the position of the apostle. The latter is, according to Žižek (2006, p. 148), “a purely formal function of the one who has dedicated his life to bearing witness to an impersonal truth that transcends him. He is a messenger who was chosen (by grace): he possesses no inner features that would qualify him for his role. “This is the subject of the signifier. The subject proper that remains after the ego is sacrificed, ‘the wealth that constitutes a person’ (ibid.). *Rasmussen* had accepted the selfless task of bearing witness to Democracy. The same way that fellow parallel-actionista *Thomas Herzen* a year later bore witness to the truth of Europe in the Caribbean. Both characters based their authority on a Truth that they carried around with them in a box as a ready-made. (“Truth itself is not a property of statements, but that which makes them true. Truth is like ready-made art: an urinoir is a work of art when it occupies the place of a work of art—no material property distinguishes Duchamp’s urinoir from the urinoir in a nearby public lavatory” (Žižek: 2006, p. 150).) These apostles are not hysterical as they fully accept the mandate delegated to them. What is hysterical about the *Parallel Action* as such is the incessant experiments with a series of truths, never going with just one, always in the end finding some fault with the mandate. Still, this all takes place within the discursive arena of the social.

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*Excerpt from The Art Newspaper – Sept 2005*

*By Anna Somers Cocks*

*If this project sounds risky, it is certainly not more so than their “Democracy” action, when they toured Iraq with a box called Democracy for three weeks in January 2004, in the lead-up to the elections. “At first we met with quite aggressive reactions because we were wearing suits*

*and people thought we were politicians or businessmen,” says Altheimer: “We took all the blame for US and European policy, but then the absurdity of a box containing democracy (actually it contained some tea and coffee cups, pencils, and proposals for world democracy) liberated discussion. People who were too afraid of the fundamentalists to approach the subject felt empowered to do so with us because we were not the Coalition; we were artists; we were in the position of court jesters”. Someone who saw the point of them at once was a British army officer in Kuwait, who was responsible for them getting into Iraq. A Kuwaiti general was about to refuse them permission on grounds that it was too dangerous and they were not soldiers, journalists or businessmen, when Colonel Andrzej Frank walked in: “But these are Rosencranz and Guildenstern”, he said, referring to the characters in “Hamlet” who, in turn, are the protagonists of Tom Stoppard’s play. “All right then, let’s throw them to the lions” said the Kuwaiti general, after some explanation. At the end of the first stage of the “Democracy” project, the box was left at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad, then brought out via Jordan, shipped to the US in October 2004, where it got lost at JFK airport, retrieved and used in the second stage, in the run-up to the US elections.”*

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To stay outside, to identify with something outside the discursive bounds and bonds of social reality—to identify with “what refuses to be subject to the constraints that constitute that reality” (Thurston: 2004, p. 96), we arrive at Kierkegaard’s genius, the opposite of the apostle. This is the *ego* of the presymbolic. Attempting to shift from subject to ego is an inversion of the order of Kierkegaard’s three stages of life where the emergence of the ethical dimension would correspond with the transition from ego to subject. But in Lacanian terms it is the exact opposite: suspending the service to the community has a Kantian ethical substance (the notion of non-pathological nature of the ethical act).

Until now it has been unclear what agency was behind the structures of the ideal types *apostle* and *genius*. Thinking the quixotic artist in the role of ‘genius’, we see that his struggle with impossibility is always bound to result in ‘failure’. As we have stated, the artist/genius goes beyond the pleasure principle, where the apostle stays within the unconscious that obeys the laws of language, which again governs the pleasure principle (Kaltenbeck: 2003, p. 103). The two prime movers at play here are desire and drive. “Desire points towards a lost and absent object; it is lack in being and the craving for fulfillment in the encounter with the lost object. Its concrete expression is fantasy” (Braunstein: 2003, p. 106). Desire is a force of momentary impact that can go through cycles of tension and satisfaction. And what most suggestive in this context is Lacan’s observation that “desire comes from the Other” (ibid.) So, if Don Quixote had found himself on the side of the pleasure principle, his reading would not have taken him beyond fantasy out onto the dusty plains of Spain. He would have found satisfaction and calm by fulfilling his desire in his fantasies. But no book comes from satisfaction and calm. So, instead we have a monstrous 1000 pages long account that takes the protagonist through one humiliation after the other, not in pursuit of anything, more of an attempt to fill the place of a referent to the signified ‘knight-errant’. A ‘knight-errant’ who, according to the *OED*, “goes wandering in search of adventures and opportunities for deeds of bravery and chivalry”. The narrative could in principle involve an infinite number of adventures and an equal number of defeats (discounting the artificial ending—on his deathbed, wanting to be known to posterity as *Alonso Quijano*, admitting that it was all lunacy). This is in tenor with the drive towards jouissance—a jouissance which “will permit of no halting at any position attained” (Freud quoted after Braunstein: 2003, p. 106). There is no satisfaction possible for the drive; at most it will find pain/enjoyment in the endless tracing of the object’s contours. Pleasure, for Lacan, is bound to desire as a defence against jouissance. “Desire, fantasy, and pleasure are all barriers on the way to jouissance” (ibid., p. 107). Jouissance represents something whose limits cannot be overcome, like death. Most importantly in this context, jouissance constitutes the substance of the *sinthome*.

It is obvious that the ‘comic’ effect (comic in the eyes of readers such as Strøbech) achieved by Cervantes relies on the pairing of two characters from either side of this conceptual divide. The character on the side of the pleasure principle is of course Sancho Panza, who constantly drags his feet and whose happiness is complete when his stomach is full. Don Quixote is most of the time left “dejected and melancholy at the misfortunes inherent of knight-errantry” (Cervantes: 2003, p. 765). He not only refuses to learn any lesson, any ‘object-lessons,’ from his many bruising encounters with ‘reality’, he consistently declines all offers of comfort and leisure—in accordance to the sacred code of knight-errantry of course. A code, a signifier permeated by jouissance, that drags its physical frame after itself like a rag-doll—or a cartoon character. What I want to suggest with this exposition is that Don Quixote has made his own mark on the level of the real—a sinthome—becoming one with a signifier permeated with jouissance “that prevents it from becoming articulated in a chain” (Žižek: 1991, p. 132). By his real life enactment of a historically defunct referent—knight-errantry—that only exists as a trait of a genre, romance, he succeeds in creating his own order alongside that of the Other. Everyone laughs at his madness but his danger and ultimate triumph is recognized by a Castilian near the end of Cervantes’ story, who calls out to him as the knight is passing by:

*“The devil take Don Quixote of La Mancha! How did you get this far without dying from all the beatings you’ve received? You’re a madman and if you were a madman in private, behind the doors of your madness, it wouldn’t be so bad, but you have the attribute of turning everyone who deals with you or talks to you into madmen and fools, too; if you don’t believe me, just look at these gentlemen who are accompanying you. Return, fool, to your house, and look after your estate, your wife, and your children, and stop this nonsense that is rotting your brain and ruining your mind.”* (Cervantes: 2003, p. 867)

Yes, why did he not die after all those beatings? It simply seems impossible. But we know by now that the impossible is another word for the real. Alenka Zupančič (2000, p. 235): “The Real is impossible, and the fact that ‘it happens (to us)’ does not refute its basic ‘impossibility’: “the Real happens to us (we encounter it) as impossible, as ‘the impossible thing’ that turns our symbolic universe upside down and leads to the reconfiguration of this universe. *Hence the impossibility of the Real does not prevent it from having effect in the realm of the possible*” (my italics). The devil has already taken Don Quixote of La Mancha. From within the coordinates of the symbolic order, in the eyes of a situated individual (the Castilian), Don Quixote’s Other—the impenetrable gaze that he performs for—is associated with evil. What is more, the Castilian recognizes the triumph of quixotism through the physicality of Quixote’s signifier. The ‘gentlemen’, who are accompanying him, took Quixote on a mule through the streets of Barcelona. They had dressed him in a cassock and without Quixote’s knowing attached a sign to his back, which read THIS IS DON QUIXOTE OF LA MANCHA. It is upon reading the sign that the Castilian ‘recognizes’ Quixote. In a way this could be thought as the sinthome, the signifier as bearer of jouis-sense, enjoyment-in-sense, as Žižek (1991, p. 131) dubs it, retroactively attaching itself to and sustaining the frail frame of our protagonist. A word scribbled on the parchment of his yellowing skin—his yellowing frame—“dry, tall, thin, his jaws kissing each other inside his mouth” (Cervantes: 2003, p. 660). The signifier penetrated with pain/enjoyment, the sinthome, as literally his “only substance, the only positive support of our being, the only point that gives any consistency to the subject... the way we ‘choose something instead of nothing’...” (1991, p. 131). The impact on the realm of the possible then measured by the partaking of the Spanish gentlemen, who responds to Don Quixote’s sinthome by celebrating its [a]d[v]ent in reality with a parade of the signifier and its ‘master/slave’.

#### *Example of a Parallel Fiction*

This is the Iran fiction, which is to be enacted this fall:

*Two European artists travel to Washington, DC with the intention to co-opt the American plans for Iran to use in a large-scale art happening in Iran. To their surprise, they find*

*themselves co-opted as agents for the US. They are sent to Iran via Dubai to gather intelligence and to identify possible partners to the US Government. Inside Iran they hire a local film photographer, a driver and an interpreter, travelling through Iran under the pretence of wanting to engage in an intercultural dialogue. Acting beyond their American mandate they seek to instigate a democratic revolution, attempting to mobilize the Iranian people for a new 'Movement', a re-enactment of the collective movement that caused the overthrow of the Shah in the '79 revolution.*

*The Iranian regime discovers the real intentions of the Europeans and the two are sent to the infamous 'Evin' prison. In the meantime Washington realizes that their European partners had been triple dealing them all along and sends orders for their assassination to the American embassy in Dubai. Concurrently, an Iranian court denounces the two as agents for 'the Great Satan' and issues a death sentence. As they await hanging, their fate has the world media spellbound. Because of their accelerating prominence, the Iranian President decides to pay them a visit. The Europeans succeed in winning over his sympathy as they explain that their role as secret agents was a cover for the intention to hijack the American plan. The president pardons the two and they are soon after released. As they walk to the car of the interpreter an American sniper shoots the two from a nearby roof terrace.*

*In parallel events it turns out that the new movement has taken roots and spread throughout Iran. Different from the events in '79, 'the movement' not only causes the downfall of the Iranian regime but spreads to all corners of the globe.*

Like the *parallel actions*, the starting point of all *parallel fictions* is a 'pure' script/concept, untainted by experience or from what is thought to be real. It is then assumed that it will go on to accumulate vestiges of reality. So far we have reached the stage were the two Europeans are about to leave for Dubai/Iran. The two travelled to Washington, DC in March this year as representatives for the so called *European Initiative*, intending to get some useful surreal input from neoconservatives in the Project For A New American Century and the American Enterprise Institute as a part of a new process-based art work focusing on Iran. After several meetings with scholars mostly from the AEI, they were invited to meet with the director of the Near East section of the National Security Council, Michael Doran, as well as with Adele Ruppe from the Office of Public Diplomacy at the State Department. After these meetings, there was no longer talk of art. The effort had morphed into an operation sanctioned by the US.

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*Dear Thomas,*

*I have to say that I also had some thought that it could be viewed suspiciously that you set out from Dubai and met w/ embassy folks there prior. Could you call/email the person at the embassy without actually going there in person? I think you should go with your gut instincts as to what makes most sense.*

*I don't believe that we have any big new initiatives at the moment, most seem to still be in the works.*

*Best,  
Adele*

*Adele E. Ruppe  
Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs  
U.S. Department of State  
Tel: 202-647-3533  
Fax: 202-647-9140  
Email: [ruppeae@state.gov](mailto:ruppeae@state.gov)*

*From: European Initiative [<mailto:euinit@bluebottle.com>]*

*Sent: Monday, May 15, 2006 7:08 AM  
To: Ruppe, Adele E  
Subject: Re: Iran meeting*

*Dear Adele, Thanks for your response. About Dubai: some of our contacts thinks it would seem suspicious to set out from there. I don't know – it seems that the paranoia barometer has gone down a few notches.*

*Are there any interesting new big initiatives crystallizing from your side?*

*Best, Thomas*

*On 10/5/06 03:41, "Ruppe, Adele E" <RuppeAE@state.gov> wrote:*

*Dear Thomas,*

*Thank you for the update on your activities. Are you saying that your Iranian contacts think it would be problematic to set out from Dubai?*

*All the best,  
Adele*

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*From: "Doran, Michael S." <Michael\_S.\_Doran@nsc.eop.gov>  
Date: Thu, 4 May 2006 19:47:28 -0400  
To: European Initiative <euinit@bluebottle.com>, "Mustafa, Herro K." <Herro\_K\_Mustafa@nsc.eop.gov>  
Subject: RE: Iran meeting*

*Good luck!*

-----Original Message-----

*From: European Initiative [mailto:euinit@bluebottle.com]  
Sent: Thursday, May 04, 2006 7:05 PM  
To: Doran, Michael S.; Mustafa, Herro K.  
Subject: Iran meeting*

*Dear Michael*

*Following up on our meeting March 30, I'd like to thank you for the kind reception of our petite delegation. As you suggested, we've chosen to go to Iran at the end of the Ramadan in October. We'll keep you updated on the mail address you gave us. Let us know if there is a change of plans.*

*All the best,*

*Thomas Strobec / European Initiative*

----- End of Message

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The concepts of the *Parallel Action* have played out and communicated on the level of the symbolic. They deal with representational dynamics, attempting to accumulate or monopolize symbolic mandates, treating them as ready-mades. We acknowledge that there is a degree of (romantic) irony involved in the attempt to duplicate a given discourse and then point to its constituent lack. It does not offer a unique new order per se, instead protagonists have flipped

through the old catalogues to find and try out ‘universals’ in a hysterical manner (coming upon ‘Europe’ in a very old mouldy catalogue from the nineteenth century). This is in tenor with and circumscribed by “the impotence of the symbolic order which tries to ‘camouflage’ its constitutive lack by all kinds of interventions—for example, by proposing a multiplicity in place of the lost One” (Zupančič: 2000, p. 240).—All unfolding within the economy of desire with its symbolic constraints on *jouissance* that constitutes social reality.

But now, coming from a partisan position outside the symbolic order, *The Parallel Fictions* is attempting to do away with the symbolic constraints to render reality unreal. The manoeuvre is very simple and plays out in two movements: First to take up the position of the all omnipotent writer who—through his removal from the world—can indulge in the solitude of writing that gives every license to his fantasy—indulge in “the mastery of the writer who can play with any illusion” (Rancière: 2004, p. 90). And then in a second movement complete an ontological leap to become a character in this fiction. In this way reality is breached by the conflating of unconstrained fantasy and constrained reality. What is more, the point of identification is dislocated to a point outside the signifying chains of the reality (the partisan position), which they seek to impact. Uniting creator and created in one subject, protagonists no longer demand for an Other to fill the hole left by the lost object. This is where the *sinthome* replaces the symptom. Instead of being the supplied with a symptom to veil the lack left by the lost object, they occupy the position of the Other and subject in one. This is the model for the true sovereign—cutting his own mark in the real and performing for his own gaze in one movement. In the three-dimensional world he will seem like a two-dimensional character because he has become a genre, a form—form which equals death in life. This is the object sticking out—what is more in the subject than the subject. And that is why these characters can die a million times and suffer endless beatings like Don Quixote. In the end they will cause people around them to ‘fall out of character’ and turn everyone who comes to deal with us into madmen and fools.

### ***Strobech – Restoring a Lost Eden?***

Now if I may interrupt to put in a word here—noting that it seems I have been allocated the not too flattering role of a dim Socrates interlocutor. True to this role, I would like to point out, looking down on your newly acquired paunch; I see more signs of a complacent Sancho Panza than any quixotic parchment. Which could bring me to claim that this whole supposed new ‘aesthetics’ of yours is nothing but a sophisticated attempt to trick your sedentary, urbane self (selves) into some exercise. On all our adventures, you have always taken me to the point of starvation.—Three days on the boat from Jamaica to Cuba with no food but White Rum and cigarettes (discounting the KFC meal that you regurgitated over the side into the foaming waves). Three weeks in Iraq with cigarettes, Coca Cola and unripe bananas as only sustenance. And now coming up next month, four weeks in Iran, I wonder what you have in store for me this time—a diet of dates and cigarettes?

Going over that Iran plot of yours, I don not see anything but pure melodrama. The semi-religious ‘Movement’ sounds more like a pandemic than a genuine collective force. It plays out within the genre of romance, which to Northrop Frye (Jameson: 1981, p. 110), is a “wish-fulfillment or utopian fantasy which aims at the transfiguration of the world of everyday life in such a way as to restore the conditions of some lost Eden, or to anticipate a future realm from which the old mortality and imperfections will have been effaced.”

The Iran storyline contains all the traits of a romantic surrogate resolution of evil hierarchical power versus good people/(artist) vertical power. What is this but romantic enthusiastic dreams of greatness and unbounded activity with a feeling of bitterness against the world because of its imperfection and its remoteness from ideals. It is all about restoring the paradisiac state of harmony in a world, which has lost the identity between idea and reality, as Schelling would put it.

The ‘Movement’ might sound blander than Novalis’ *Blue Flower* but it obviously serves the function as a great redeeming force—unleashed by two romantic heroes. What you are co-opting is not Washington but Lacanian theory to make the claim that there is an outside to society, an outside that contains one signifier—your so-called *sinthome*—which can be realized

after the event if your belief is strong enough without having to consider proper collective and strategic action. Whether this is the abstract ‘movement’ or *die blaue Blume*, it is a neat theory that exactly works to curtail jouissance and make sure that you will continue to run in the hamster-wheel of desire. The result is not the substitution of some more ideal realm for ordinary reality but a process of transforming ordinary reality: “it is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality *but will still contain that reality*” (Frye quoted by Jameson: 1981, p. 110).

The form, which you claim is unbounded jouissance in life, seems to me more of a device used to frame, to bound life, in a *société morte*. As a reaction to *mundum* outrunning *ego*, its vast historical rhythm counting one stroke for every 20 generations, you create and enact a pure fantasy to dupe yourself into believing the historical wheel can be moved on account of you alone. The hope for real change is displaced into a vain individual desire, a fancy, which delivers its protagonists into immediate personal satisfaction in a world out of joint. “And so out of a revolutionary a rebel is made. All his opposition rests firmly within the systemic forces of bourgeois society. The individual desire turned against the whole of society is the same obstinate interest that determines the form of this totality” (Adorno: 1952, pp. 167-168).

### ***Alzheimer – You All Have to Accommodate Us Madmen of the Letter!***

Acknowledged, the first movement—the script-writing phase—might indeed be perceived as an unhinged melodramatic imagination sustained by the symbolic order to check jouissance. But what happens in the second movement—the enactment of the script—is quite the opposite of the enforcement of an artistic frame on reality. It is precisely the dissolution of the border separating artwork from reality. It might have been appropriate, in another historical situation, to dismiss all these Don Quixotes as reactionary individualists. But in our contemporary world, as state authority loses its position as the outermost horizon of community life—a horizon, which worked to reduce the question of sovereignty to the question of the allocation of powers within this order - these ‘Pucks of history’ are suddenly enabled to act as sovereign beings, who cannot be dismissed and locked up in the madhouse (all individuals could be a ‘superempowered fanatic’ (to borrow an expression from a recent article in the NYTimes) carrying an atomic bomb – a State of the individual). So all – States and innkeepers alike - has to some extent to accommodate those that seem to be mad (by upgrading the lunatics to the level of state agents) who in another period would have been given a lobotomy. These knights-errant “inhabit a world largely free of national, political, or geographical constraints; they fight, not for their liege lord, but for the purpose each knight-errant has individually chosen” (Watt (1996, p. 58) on the chivalric romances in the early sixteenth century). In this world individuals are free to do battle with the impossible on their own terms—on their own *sinthomes* so to speak. The world is again opening for utopian experimentation.

Anyhow, wait and see. We have only gotten halfway into the dissertation. The other half—the results from its application—will appear in November. We travel to Hollywood on October 11 to meet with script consultants to go over the manuscript once again. After a week we go on to Dubai and Iran. The foundation has now been laid. This dissertation will prove to have been the starting point for THE MOVEMENT; in a way it has become the *sinthome* that holds the three rings in place in its own fashion.

Updates on [thomasandclaus.blogspot.com](http://thomasandclaus.blogspot.com) and [lettertoiran.com](http://lettertoiran.com)

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