

The Love of a Good Neighbour: Divine Love, Otherness, and the Object-Cause of Desire

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Right and Wrong Ways of Loving the Other

What can Hollywood cinema teach us about love? Even superficially, it stands to teach us a great deal - from the love that is found in the romantic comedy, lost in the melodrama, and threatened in the action film. Film theorists and film philosophers such as Stanley Cavell, Elizabeth Cowie, Joan Copjec, and Thomas Elsaesser, have all written extensively on love and cinema, albeit in different ideological and political guises. Nonetheless, love - either as explicit narrational content, implicit unconscious expression, or medium-specific cinephilia - remains a central concern in the study of film. Yet many of these explorations of love and cinema fail to account for the differences between love and desire, desire and wanting, as well as eliding the issue of the *ways* in which we love: love is regarded as a pleasant outcome or a torturous crawl towards fulfillment, but the involutions and negations which constitute its very 'structure' are disavowed in many methodologies which explore love in the cinema. Lacanian psychoanalysis, which was radicalized by

feminist film theorists in the 1970s and has more recently been taken up by film philosophers and queer theorists is, in this respect, methodologically exceptional. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, love is conventionally opposed to desire. While desire is sustained by the radical separation “by which the *jouissance* obtained is distinguished from the *jouissance* expected”,ⁱ or is infinitely “caught in the logic of ‘this is not that’”,ⁱⁱ love rejects this desirous cycle and aims directly at the object. Concurrently, while the desiring subject is always obliged to actively refuse that which is offered (‘that’s not it’), love’s logic revolves around a full acceptance of “‘this is that’ - that the woman with all her weaknesses and common features is the Thing I unconditionally love... [Transcendence] shines through in this very clumsy and miserable being that I love.”ⁱⁱⁱ However, this opposition between love and desire is rendered problematic by Lacan’s insistence in Seminar XI that such transcendence is facilitated by an object-cause, and that the Other’s precious *agalma* which is ‘in him more than him’ is indeed the *objet a*.^{iv}

Recalling that the *objet a* in Lacanian terminology simultaneously denotes the cause of desire (Lacan refers to it as “the object-cause of desire”),^v as well as a “semblance of being”,^{vi} it becomes clear that the *objet a* is not a positive entity or accessible property of the subject. Rather, it is the object of desire which we seek in the Other (1991 177),^{vii} that which is “in him more than him”^{viii} and - given its status as the object-cause of desire - is therefore the evanescent, traumatic semblance of the Other which we are forever barred from attaining/experiencing. This stipulation is often conveniently omitted in analyses that seek to evacuate the impenetrable caveat in Lacan’s rejoinder, “I love you, but, because *inexplicably* I love in you something

more than you...”^{ix} The crucial point in this caveat is that the relationship between the two conditions (love/love of something ‘more’) is not causal or logical, but rather properly *inexplicable*; it is not that desire eventually accedes or ‘gives way to’ love, but rather that the *objet a* is stubbornly, perpetually ‘stuck’ to love and cannot be fully absorbed by it, since the *objet a* is “the object that cannot be swallowed... [and] which remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier.”^x Furthermore, Lacan’s assertion in Seminar XI that “to love is, essentially, to wish to be loved”^{xi} draws a structural parallel between love and desire, and subverts the assumption that the two are diametrically opposed: in desire, what the desiring subject actually ‘wants’ is to become the object of the Other’s desire, just as the loving subject ‘wants’ the Other’s love.

Suffice it to say that the *objet a* (and its association with desire) occupies a tenuous and controversial place in discourses on love; its appearance in extended considerations of the topic is often aphoristic, tangential, or altogether vitiated due to its perplexing and counter-productive tendency towards reversal and self-negation. The impasse in analysis involves a (generalized) philosophical assessment of love, which incorporates and accounts for the (specifically) psychoanalytic variability of desire. As such, the probability of ‘losing oneself’ in the alternating philosophical-psychoanalytic discourses is high, and is evinced by many contemporary Lacanian accounts of love - the work of Renata Salecl ((Per)versions of Love and Hate), Joan Copjec (Imagine There’s No Woman), and various texts by Slavoj Žižek - that often

conceive of love as entirely contrary to desire or apply Lacan's maxims selectively. While these texts and authors certainly concede to the conceptual predominance of the *objet a* in psychoanalysis, this very centrality^{xii} often relegates the *objet a* itself to the periphery of discussion.

The unexpected difficulty of yoking love with desire and the *objet a* is explored in Alain Badiou's recent work on love, which is riddled with mathemes, graphs, and formulas that attempt to methodologically preserve the transformations of the object and its operations in love. "Love," Badiou writes, "can neither elude the object cause of desire, nor can it arrange itself there any longer",^{xiii} and it is this very transience and structural instability of love and the object-cause which renders their relationship elusive and fleeting. Sounding very much like Lacan in his seminars, Badiou's work on love is characterized by a series of concessions and admissions of incoherence: "Let us say that is it not the same body that love and desire treat, even though it is, exactly, 'the same.'"^{xiv} We begin to note the difficulty of accurately articulating the conditions of a philosophical partnership which provisionally appears self-evident, especially since neither love nor the *objet a* are psychically prepared to 'stand still' long enough to achieve seamless integration. It is this mutability which compels me to appropriate Badiou's terminology and regard love as a "predicament" and the object-cause as something that "wanders around"^{xv} in love; to mistakenly regard them as static elements that merely require identification and localization would disregard the inherent nomadism of both love (which refuses to structure its elements in an orderly fashion) and desire (which refuses satisfaction altogether). How, then, are we to conceive of them?

It is my contention that making sense of these modalities is dependent on a bridging of philosophical inquiry and psychoanalytic discourse. As such, the major aim of this paper is to restore the ‘invisible’ philosophical supremacy of the *objet a* in love by charting its wanderings; such restoration and documentation is not merely intended as an end unto itself, but rather as a means of interrogating the controversial association between romantic love and the love of one’s neighbour. Indeed, who is the neighbour if not the emissary of otherness, and, as such, the guardian of the *objet petit a*?

Oh My Goodness! : On love and Justice For Your Friends and Neighbours

In attending to these issues, it is necessary to first specify a particular modality of neighbour love, which differs substantially from the conception of love as an exercise in justice and goodness. Addressing God, Augustine makes this distinction when he states that “you have commanded upon us not only continence, that is, to withhold our love from certain things, but also justice, that is, whereon we are to bestow our love”,^{xvi} but justice is often interpreted as equivalent to love, such that one expresses his love when he behaves justly or altruistically. Consequently, neighbour love is commonly misconstrued as a gesture of universalized charity, which serves to further elevate it above the singular fixation of romantic love: the Christian is good and just when he loves his neighbour, but comparatively discriminating and self-involved when he loves his beloved. This concentration on

justice, however, evacuates both the Other's desire and Kierkegaard's assertion that neighbour love is determined by love alone.^{xvii} Indeed, interpreting neighbour love as just and altruistic is problematic precisely because it renders love adjectival; love is no longer "recognizable only by love",^{xviii} but is identified as a distinct variety of love (just, good, charitable) which unilaterally bestows the same adjectival characteristics upon the lover (a good man, a just man, and so on).

While this contestable interpretation finds its modern philosophical equivalent in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, the misperception of neighbour love as a responsibility which ethically apportions affection/charity/understanding, simply because it is *owed*, is primarily a Biblical derivation. Apropos of justice, it is essential to note that the Augustinian dictum to love your neighbour as yourself and the equally oft-quoted Golden Rule of Matt 7:12 ("As you would like people to do to you, do exactly so to them") are not twin injunctions. Although both mandates require the subject to possess a certain self-knowledge (how does he love himself? how does he wish to be treated?), even a rudimentary reading reveals the crucial differences between the two. Primarily, the treatment of others outlined in the Golden Rule manifests in acts that are calculable in contingent reality, while love - either for oneself or for one's neighbour - has no such performative equivalent. Perhaps more insidiously, however, the 'good' treatment of others that takes *my* preference as its antecedent ("As you would like people to do to you...") is, as Lacan mentions in Seminar VII, governed by an avoidant impulse. Given that 'my goodness' exists as the arbiter of all goodness and desire for others, I am never forced to properly confront my neighbour's harmful *jouissance*, or that which problematizes my love for

him; rather, I merely append my preference to the neighbour and assume that our *jouissance* is identical.

Conflating love with justice results in Levinasian ‘responsibility’, where the encounter with the Other is synonymous with accountability:

From the start, the encounter with the Other is my responsibility for him. That is the responsibility for my neighbour, which is, no doubt, the harsh name of what we call love of one’s neighbour; love without Eros, charity, love in which the ethical aspect dominates the passionate aspect, love without concupiscence.^{xix}

While there is nothing particularly objectionable about this position, it illustrates perfectly the attitude towards neighbour love that must be debunked before neighbour love can be understood, and especially before we attempt to access neighbour love via the route of romantic love. For Levinas, responsibility is simply another word for love, and justice/altruism and love are irrevocably bound to one another (he later asserts that “justice comes from love [and]... love must always watch over justice”).^{xx} This entails that neighbour love is an ethical category that somehow eludes affect (passion), and that goodness is a stable characteristic in the subject^{xxi} which favours the Other above all things. Lacan, however, critiques this ethical position where “all the neighbours are maintained equally at the marginal level of reality of my own existence”^{xxii} as entirely contrary to neighbour love. Merely supplying the neighbour with what he ‘justly’ deserves - with what I believe he merits in relation to my desire - does not require much imagination or effort. Indeed, as Lacan reminds us, “It is a fact of experience that what I want is the good of others in the image of my own. That doesn’t cost so much. What I want is the good of others

provided that it remains in the image of my own.”^{xxiii} This is the inferred logic of so much cultural condescension which assumes that starving Ethiopian children would be thrilled by the temporary presence of a celebrity in their midst; after all, the adequately fed, medicated, and educated middle-class children in North America are unilaterally enamored of celebrities! What could be more generous, loving, or ‘just’ than bestowing our own desires (for surely we want only the best) upon a perpetually distant Other? Žižek’s response to such ‘selfless’ universality - expressed in the statement, ‘I fulfill my desire *in you* because I love you all!’ - is that it furthers the distinction between both self/neighbor and between deserving or needful multiplicities of neighbors:

... The universal proposition ‘I love you all’ acquires the level of actual existence only if ‘there is at least one whom I hate’ - a thesis abundantly confirmed by the fact that universal love for humanity always led to the brutal hatred of the (actually existing) exception, of the enemies of humanity. This hatred of the exception is the ‘truth’ of universal love....^{xxiv}

Logically, and at the necessary *expense of love*, one neighbor is always more deserving of justice than the other, and a neighbor that withholds justice is not worthy of love at all. Is it possible to be ‘just’ without hatred? Does our love for a victimized or oppressed neighbor balance the deficit or ‘pay the difference’ for our refusal to love the unjust and oppressive neighbor? Or is the failure of such Levinasian ‘loving’ responsibility evinced in its absolute *evacuation* of love from this either/or equation? One should here recall Christ’s proclamation that he brings sword and division and not unity and peace...

From this perspective, it seems that the loving equality espoused by Kierkegaard in Works of Love is nothing but a subversive means of maintaining the

neighbour's difference, but this is precisely why we must not conflate the injunction to love our neighbours as ourselves with the just/good 'love' espoused by the Golden Rule. Recall Kierkegaard's admission that only death can properly equate all individuals to the level of 'neighbour', provocatively rephrased by Žižek as "the only good neighbour is a dead neighbour";^{xxv} such equality in death is the only alternative to justice or Levinasian responsibility, given that death automatically transcends earthly attachments. Had Kierkegaard *not* conceded to the fact that "death erases all distinctions"^{xxvi} but continued to espouse absolute earthly equality in love, he would essentially be demanding goodness or justice - *but not love* - of his readers. In 'killing' the neighbour, Kierkegaard bypasses the Levinasian confrontation with justice, which seeks to classify love as 'good' by equating it with responsibility. In Seminar VII, Lacan refers to such goodness as psychically uncomplicated, and uses the account of St. Martin sharing his cloak with a naked beggar to illustrate that goodness always entails a pragmatic utilitarianism (but not necessarily love):

As long as it's a question of the good, there's no problem; our own and our neighbour's are of the same material. St. Martin shares his cloak, and a great deal is made of it... We are no doubt touching a primitive requirement in the need to be satisfied there, for the beggar is naked. But perhaps over and above that need to be clothed, he was begging for something else, namely, that St. Martin either kill him or fuck him. In any encounter there's a big difference in meaning between the response of philanthropy and that of love.^{xxvii}

Consequently, an authentically 'loving' gesture may deviate entirely from one's self-conception of goodness or justice, given that the proper execution of this gesture is perpetually obfuscated by the Other's desire. Lacan's anecdote recalls a sequence from Todd Solondz's 1998 film Happiness, wherein two self-professed 'successful'

sisters Trish and Helen discuss the fate of their miserable sibling, Joy. The two sisters feign concern over why Joy remains single, unhappy, and unlucky in love despite the fact that she's "good." Trish explains that Joy has taken a job at a refugee centre because she "wants to 'do good'" and Helen exasperatedly replies, "Joy doesn't understand. She *is* good. So why isn't she happy like we are?" The sisters fail to comprehend that goodness, love, and happiness are mutually exclusive categories. Helen's question, however, may indeed be the foundation of all suburban malaise: how can one be 'good' but remain unloved and unhappy? Worse still, how can one be both 'good' and loved and continue to remain unhappy? The Lacanian 'solution' to this inquiry involves an interrogation of the Other's desire; rather than 'justly' assuming that the beggar would enjoy concealing his nakedness with a cloak or that Joy wants to find love, we should be extremely perplexed by the possibility that the beggar and Joy actually want something else: perhaps they would prefer to be killed or fucked? This essential distinction between justice and love returns us to the Lacanian dimension of *che vuoi?* - our necessary anxiety over the Other's desire.

Love Your Neighbour But Don't get Caught

Divorcing genuine neighbour love from justice or Levinasian responsibility suspends moral judgement of loving relationships without discrediting Kierkegaard's claim that neighbour love is indeed a distinct category. One could here attempt neutrality and conclude that, while romantic and neighbour love are not entirely opposed to one another, their respective modalities of desire make for a hostile and disharmonious union. As such, it is curious that we continue to regard romantic and

neighbour love as (somehow) ideologically opposed, but why does their relationship necessitate such clearly defined boundaries?

Hollywood cinema's treatment of neighbour and romantic love as distinct categories - and particularly as Levinasian exemplars that never combine responsibility with concupiscence - provides us with a unique opportunity to interrogate this philosophical rationale. In an essay entitled "Neighbours and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence", Slavoj Žižek articulates his anti-Levinasian approach in the assertion that, "*the* temptation to be resisted... is the ethical 'gentrification' of the neighbour, the reduction of the radically ambiguous monstrosity of the Neighbour-Thing into an Other as the abyssal point from which the call of ethical responsibility emanates."^{xxviii} For Žižek, the neighbour is not an occasion for justice, and, if he is an occasion for love (apropos of Augustine), then this love must be accessed by some means *other than* ethical responsibility. Given Žižek's fondness for identifying philosophical and psychoanalytic perversions in contemporary cinema, it seems strange that he fails to mention Hollywood cinema and its attitude toward neighbour love in this essay, since it is precisely this domain of ethical responsibility and justice which so many Hollywood films attempt to preserve and sustain (i.e., love your fellow man, our differences make us special but deep down we're all alike, and so on). Indeed, the false liberal multiculturalism of so many contemporary Hollywood films finds its ultimate expression in texts which 'teach the lesson' of neighbour love while explicitly barring any amorous contact

with the figure of the neighbour-other. It seems that one can never learn to love one's neighbour by becoming romantically involved with him, and it is therefore not uncommon for the Hollywood film to 'split' the love object into two distinct entities, such that the love one bestows is always existentially divided (and appropriately apportioned) between a romantic 'beloved' and the asexual figure of the neighbour-other.

To facilitate this split, many films erect romantic boundaries which prohibit the neighbour-other's construction as an erotic figure and ensure that he does not become romantically entangled with the protagonist. One can here name a variety of factors which ensure that ethical responsibility is not interrupted by romantic involvement: age (the moralizing child-prodigies of Pay it Forward and Uptown Girls are surely too young to be romantically desired by the disillusioned adults they advise), religious mandates (although the nuns of Lilies of the Field learn a valuable lesson about race relations, the vows of their order preclude any erotic contact with Homer Smith), insistent and non-threatening homosexuality (the gay comic foils of innumerable romantic comedies who counsel tormented and repressed women without sexual repercussions) and heterosexuality (Will Smith's turns in Hitch and The Legend of Bagger Vance as the reportedly virile but otherwise asexual mentor of morally and sexually frustrated white men). James L. Brooks' 1997 romantic comedy As Good as it Gets is particularly illustrative in this respect, given its clear delineation of love's function and the directed specificity of its object. The film's narrative concerns Melvin, a misanthropic writer who gradually transforms into a politically correct, compassionate, and sensitive 'New Age man.' Abated by Carol (a

single mother and waitress who later becomes Melvin's love interest), a gay artist who lives next door, and a precocious little dog, Melvin's transformation is clearly demarcated by a system of 'loving exchanges'; in order to properly overcome his homophobia and learn to respect his neighbour Simon, Melvin must enter into a heterosexual relationship with Carol. Concurrently, he is mentored in this romantic relationship by the erotically ineffectual Simon (rendered temporarily disabled by a beating that has conveniently suspended any suggestion of his sexual appeal), who "understands women" and is a paragon of New Age sensitivity. The little dog - and truly there exists no Hollywood mentor more sexually neutral than a friendly animal^{xxix} - oversees both of these relationships, ensuring that Melvin's romantic love for Carol and his neighbour love for Simon never overlap or become confused. Indeed, much of the film's comedy is located in Melvin's resistance to this love and his embarrassment over his abandonment of his non-PC excesses,^{xxx} but the film emphasizes that it is Melvin's neighbour love for Simon which proves more difficult and complex; to experience this love, Melvin - in Augustine's phraseology - *denies himself* (his misogynistic and homophobic excesses).

As such, while Žižek has asserted that As Good as it Gets is about nothing beyond the construction of an "ordinary boring couple",^{xxxi} it is also very much 'about' a man whose subversive assumption of ethical responsibility for his homosexual neighbour is supplemented and gentrified by his 'ordinary and boring' romance with Carol. Navigating between the acceptable limits of neighbour and

romantic love, the film employs sexuality to impose restrictions on Melvin's love and transformation; Simon, a 'feminized' man, instructs Melvin in how to appear compassionate and loving *enough* for Carol, but Carol's erotic presence ensures against an *excess* of such loving sensitivity (which would certainly code Melvin as gay himself). In As Good as it Gets, sexuality itself is the very limit of love. Indeed, the film's only impossible union is a romantic coupling between Melvin and Simon, and one can imagine the problematic filmic implications of asserting that Melvin's misanthropy could ostensibly be 'cured' by his acceptance of his homosexuality. Critical claims that the romance between Melvin and Carol felt forced, false, and tacked-on are therefore closer to the film's project than initially suspected: the film's proper topic is the subversive exhilaration or 'the thrilling romance' of neighbour love, politically sublimated and normalized by heterosexual eroticism.

On loving Your Neighbour's Naked Body: Tolerating the Other

One should here also consider the obverse situation: if so much of Hollywood cinema is devoted to pacifying the exhilarating dissidence of neighbour love by creating 'ordinary boring couples', then surely narratives which treat neighbour and romantic love as synonymous are the proper solution to this deadlock. What should not be overlooked in this hypothesis, however, is the fact that such a resolution is *also* false and equally problematic. Consider any number of films that regard erotic engagements as essential to an outsider's integration into a community, such that this foreigner's initiation into an (often exclusionist) community is facilitated by his romantic entanglement with an established community member. Despite these texts' apparently noble ideological intentions stressing equality and unity, such offerings

nonetheless strike the viewer as deeply suspicious. Films that dramatize the culturally-sensitive adventures of the 'benevolent colonialist' (such as Edward Zwick's 2003 The Last Samurai, Terrence Malick's 2005 The New World, Kevin Costner's 1990 Dances with Wolves, Michael Mann's 1992 The Last of the Mohicans, and James Cameron's 2009 Avatar) are especially paradigmatic of Hollywood's tendency to justify colonial takeovers through the 'loving' erasure of cultural distinctions. In these films, erotic engagements seem to function as the ultimate rejoinder to accusations that the colonial outsider is simultaneously tolerant/culturally sensitive *and* a cultural threat. Neighbour love, in this respect, is independently insufficient as a legitimate ethico-political gesture, and can only convey a sense of ideological universality when it is supplemented by romantic love; such love is therefore naïvely perceived as the quintessential expression of acceptance or the (attempted) erasure of cultural, racial, or spiritual difference. Here, one can invoke the now-standard sex scene endemic to all of the aforementioned films, with its fetishistic attention to tenuous and curious bodily exploration, observed differences in skin colour ("You're so pale!" etc.), and the ritualistic removal of ceremonial accouterments such as beads, robes, and decorative hairpins. It seems unnecessary to add that the eventually consummated sexual union serves to completely overwhelm these differences in a veritable orgasm of sameness, stylistically enhanced by low-light/soft focus compositions which mute contrasting skin colours and create the appearance of intermingling/indistinguishable flesh.

Simply stated, the participants in this particular filmic variety of the sex act are no longer culturally, spiritually, racially, or even linguistically divided (one should never underestimate the communicative powers of the language of love), but together constitute an entirely new and revived entity - a bastion of liberal multiculturalist tolerance mitigated and nurtured by erotic contact.

Films such as The New World, The Last Samurai, and Avatar enjoin the spectator to not only love his neighbour as he loves himself, but to obliterate difference (here incorrectly imagined as prejudice) by *also* loving his neighbour's naked body. Indeed, if - in the depths of our hearts and in low-lighting - we are all truly alike, then it shouldn't matter if a man encroaches on his neighbour's land and magnanimously imposes his own cultural, spiritual, and political mandates, since the differing values must certainly converge at one point or another (everyone wants peace, prosperity, happiness, health, and so on). This is the similarly explicit reasoning behind a variety of romantic comedies which initiate the 'lesson' of neighbour love through the enactment of romantic love (Joel Zwick's 2002 My Big Fat Greek Wedding, Stanley Kramer's 1967 Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?, Mike Nichol's 1996 The Birdcage), wherein the love between an outsider-figure and an established member of a community unite formerly opposing factions into a cohesive, socially-constructive, and tolerant unit. This harmonious outcome is clearly exemplified by one of the final sequences of The Birdcage, in which a stuffy and bigoted right-wing senator and his wife avoid tabloid photographers by disguising themselves in outlandish drag costumes and dancing in the gay club owned by their

future in-laws; the song which plays over the soundtrack in this sequence is, appropriately, “We Are Family.”

This sexualized variant of Levinasian responsibility, wherein romantic love supplements neighbour love in the service of sameness and abstract universality, is an exceptionally precarious solution to the combination of neighbour and romantic love. Firstly, and most pertinently, it is essential to mention that the (psychoanalytically nonexistent) sexual relationship functions in these films as the *solution* to difference - a feature which should immediately arouse suspicion in the spectator who, apropos of Lacan, is aware that the vagaries of the sexual relationship are hardly constitutive of a satisfying resolution. Secondly, the universality espoused by these film texts, while certainly more sympathetic to Levinasian conceptions of loving justice and responsibility than to Lacanian accounts, is indeed in excess of even Levinasian universality. For Levinas, the encounter with the Other (which he terms “the Face-to-Face encounter”) does not insinuate sameness or even similarity, but rather serves to determine the neighbour-Other’s autonomy as a subject. Given that justice, for Levinas,

is always starting out from the Face, from the responsibility for the other that justice appears, which calls for judgment and comparison, a comparison of what is in principle incomparable, for every being is unique; every other is unique,^{xxxii}

one cannot properly assume responsibility for the Other if difference is obliterated. In fact, the Face-to-Face encounter which is the antecedent to responsibility and justice is *predicated* on difference and autonomy, since one cannot logically bestow justice upon an Other who is no longer identified as such. The erotic unity from which

justice and responsibility emanate in films such as Dances with Wolves and My Big Fat Greek Wedding, is contrary to not only Lacanian conceptions of the sexual relationship, but also to Levinasian loving responsibility (with which it initially appears somewhat complementary).

Another issue worthy of address in this context is the purported 'legitimacy' of the ideologically structuring romantic relationship as a radical ethico-political act. In her analysis of Lars von Trier's Dogville - a film which takes the erotic/romantic pretext of neighbour love as one of its many objects of satire^{xxxiii} - Lisa Coulthard^{xxxiv} invokes Augustinian flawed, earthly love (which can also be interpreted as the psychic coexistence of Lacanian desublimation/sublimation) as the ironically radical response to von Trier's satirical critique of community. Coulthard's contention that the true radical gesture in Dogville would be a flawed, ordinary love between Grace and Tom that contained all the humdrum of daily existence (insults, injuries, annoyances), recalls Žižek's interpretation of Lacanian desublimation in love; contrary to illusory idealization, such properly desublimated love accepts the beloved's imperfections and allows the sublime dimension to transpire through "the utmost common details of everyday shared life - the 'sublime' moment of the love life occurs when the magic dimension transpires even in common everyday acts."^{xxxv} However, one should err on the side of caution when identifying the construction of (or concession to) the 'ordinary boring couple' as a radical gesture or a true ethico-political act, since the subversive complement of eroticism in neighbour love is not a ubiquitous feature. Indeed, it is precisely Dogville's allegorical-satirical structure which identifies it as an exceptional text in this respect, given that its subject is not

the promotion of tolerance and naïve conceptions of neutral universality, but rather the inevitable failure of such conceptions. We can therefore risk the claim that romantic love which champions tolerance can never be read as a legitimately radical ethico-political act.

Slavoj Žižek briefly addresses this contention in his discussion of tolerance in the children's animated series, The Land Before Time. As the cartoon dinosaurs in the film learn to respect one another's differences, they sing a song which Žižek deems worthy of citation ("It takes all sorts/To make a world/Short and tall sorts/Large and small sorts/To fill this pretty planet/with love and laughter").^{xxxvi} Although the dinosaurs respect the sensibilities of their key spectatorial demographic by abstaining from any sexual contact, we can identify the sentiment expressed in their discourse of tolerance ("It takes all sorts") as similar - if not identical - to the sexual/romantic logic of films such as The New World and The Birdcage. Such tolerant love, Žižek argues, can never properly be identified as an *act* because it is little more than the misrecognition of universality as "an infinite task of translation, of [the] constant reworking of one's own particular position."^{xxxvii} In other words, one loves the subversive shock of recognition when one realizes that the violent savage is sensitive (The Last of the Mohicans), that the stoic warrior's daughter has a sense of humour (The Last Samurai, Avatar), that the vulgar Greek appreciates Western culture (My Big Fat Greek Wedding), or that the flamboyantly gay couple upholds the institution of family after all (The Birdcage). It seems unnecessary to assert that,

in such situations, the neighbour or romantic love one experiences has little to do with the Other or his autonomy, but is rather a love of tolerance itself - a love of one's ability to translate the neighbour-Other's impenetrable excesses into socially and sexually desirable qualities, or a love of the illusory neutral space that only a misreading of universality can produce.

The Object in the Neighbour or the Object-Neighbour?

The "Fiction" segment of Todd Solondz's film Storytelling (2001) functions as a particularly cynical exploration of how the so-called "antinomies of tolerant reason"^{xxxviii} can go awry in the guise of romantic love. In this segment of the film, Vi, an idealistic graduate student in creative writing, desperately attempts to associate herself with 'fringe' minority communities through misguided sexual altruism and subversiveness. When her boyfriend Marcus, who suffers from cerebral palsy, unexpectedly ends their relationship, Vi is furious and confused. "I'm so stupid!" she cries to her roommate. "I thought he was different! I mean, he has CP, for God's sake!" Similarly, when Vi discovers some tasteless nude photographs of one of her colleagues in their (black) professor's washroom, Vi is initially shocked, and momentarily reconsiders the sexual tryst which will inevitably transpire when she exits the washroom. Replacing the photos and attempting to regain her composure, Vi chastises herself by repeating, "Don't be a racist, don't be a racist", as if her sudden reticence were somehow racially motivated. Of course, this is precisely the case, as Solondz makes abundantly clear in a later sequence where Vi's classmates critique

her written autobiographical account of the incident: Vi's reticence in the washroom sequence is entirely motivated by her erroneous perceptions of race since, given her expectation of the professor's "black male potency", he likely *should* be sleeping with as many female students as possible, and to assume otherwise would simply be racist. Much like John Smith of The New World or Nathan Algren of The Last Samurai, Vi unwittingly exploits erotic engagement as incontrovertible 'proof' of her open-mindedness and loving responsibility for her marginalized and persecuted neighbour-lovers, but unlike the aforementioned benevolent colonialists, Vi's xenophilic fantasy is brutally externalized mid-investment when the professor coerces her into repeatedly and demeaningly voicing this fantasy ("Nigger, fuck me hard!") during the sex act.

What we have necessarily encountered in these films, which couple Levinasian responsibility with romantic love is, according to Augustine, 'wrong' loving or love which is somehow in excess of self-love. Augustine himself refers to such concupiscence as "disordered love", which is contrary to "rightly ordered", virtuous love. Recalling that Augustine's caveat to 'love thy neighbour *as thyself*' casts the self as a minimal and maximal limit, it therefore logically follows that anyone who attempts to love his neighbour more than he loves himself is assuming a God-like position that neglects the very condition of selfhood and casts it into divine evanescence. In Dogville, Coulthard asserts that Grace's loving 'justice' (which should be interpreted as both her endless sacrifice to the community and her

eventually annihilative sacrifice of the community) constitutes an over investment in the Other that attempts to approximate divine love. Although we can identify such ‘wrong love’ as a kind of theological hatred, we should not neglect the other insidious but well-intentioned ‘truth’ behind this hatred, which is - quite simply - loving responsibility. If, in Levinasian terms, one can only properly love the Other for whom one assumes responsibility, then surely the same must be said of hatred...

Concomitantly, if we accept Žižek’s assertion that universal tolerance (the most extreme manifestation of loving responsibility) is an act of endless translation and repositioning (“It takes all sorts”), then it stands to reason that this process transpires at the necessary expense of love, and should never be confused with love. Although I have already employed Kierkegaard’s Works of Love to distinguish legitimate neighbour love from conceptions of justice or Levinasian responsibility, I should account for his castigation of those who love simply because they consider themselves to be ‘good’ people, and assume that the expression of this goodness is of the highest (i.e., divine) loving order:

However ridiculous, however backward, however inexpedient loving one’s neighbour may seem in the world, it is still the highest a man is capable of doing. But *the highest* has never quite fitted into the relationship of earthly life - it is *both too little and too much*.^{xxxix}

Kierkegaard’s reiteration of Augustine’s earthly ‘limit of the self’ is a significant anomaly in his analysis, since it problematizes his earlier claim that neighbour love’s ‘perfection’ is rooted in its rejection of a particular discriminating object. This philosophical suspension in Kierkegaard’s argument which acknowledges the limitations of earthly love has interesting ramifications on our reading of the object

itself: if 'the highest' is both too little and too much, then its excesses and limitations can be traced back to its absent object. Surely God has no need of an object to justify His love, and nor does He need to "shut [His] eyes [to the] distinctions of earthly existence."^{xl} Conversely, earthly love seems to always require an object, regardless of how one exercises his love upon this object (neighbour, erotic, friendship-based, and so on).

Is this not precisely why attempts at divine, universalized love (Grace 'loves' the entirety of Dogville without question or exception, Vi 'loves' visible minorities) always traumatically fail - because such love lacks any referent beyond its own divination and pious universality? Consider Kierkegaard's statement that neighbour love rejects "any of the more definite qualifications of difference, which means that this love is recognizable only by love",^{xli} and his later - somewhat contrary - assertion that such perfect love "is not proudly independent of its object. Its equality does not appear in love's proudly turning back into itself, indifferent towards the object. No, its equality appears in love's humbly turning itself outwards, embracing all, yet loving everyone in particular but no one in partiality":^{xlii} how is it possible for any earthly, living^{xliii} being to accomplish this feat of 'turning love outwards' while still acknowledging the necessity of the object? How can anyone *but* God espouse impartial love without slipping into the ethically tenuous territory of responsibility and universal tolerance?

Suffice it to say that the actual, enacted practice of loving one's neighbour romantically is a contentious undertaking, as it renders its practitioner open to attacks of false tolerance, misguided attempts at universality, and fetishism. Indeed, Melvin's stringently divided (romantic) love for Carol and (neighbour) love for Simon in As Good as it Gets seems organized and oddly 'perfected' compared to the convoluted and 'disordered' commingling of responsibility, tolerance, and sexuality evinced by texts that collapse the neighbour and the beloved into a single entity. However, the actualized (practical) crisis of loving one's neighbour romantically/erotically says nothing of our *comprehension* of these loves - of how we come to philosophically devise and recognize them - and I aim to address this apperception in the remainder of this paper.

PLUS-DE-JOUIR, PLUS A: The Only Good Neighbour Is The One We Acknowledge as Desiring

To facilitate this discussion, I should like to return to my earlier consideration of the *objet a* in Alain Badiou's work on love. For Badiou the *objet a* is something that "wanders around"^{xliv} in love and can only be characterized by its radical indeterminacy. To assign the *objet a* a precise position in the matrix of love is to effectively disregard both its omnipresence in the amorous encounter and its erratic appearance and reappearance in desirous situations. To fathom the character of such appearances, consider the various quirks and tics of the beloved (certain vocal intonations, habits and superstitions, erratically fastidious and excessive behaviour, and so on) which, over the course of a relationship, seamlessly shift from appearing

adorable and unique to pathological and annoying. Fully conceding to the difficulty of appropriating the object as one's own or integrating it into the beloved's selfhood, Badiou writes that the amorous encounter is

guided by the obscure star of the object, but in excess of it, since it goes straight to that aspect of the object from which the subject draws its little bit of being. And, through a reversal contained completely in the declaration 'I love you' (it's you I love, and not exclusively the object you carry), love comes to assert... that it is from the being of the subject that the object, as cause of desire, has the singularity of its presentation, and finally the charm of its appearance.^{xlv}

Although Slavoj Žižek addresses the "limit of [Badiou's] logic"^{xlvi} in reference to a different citation, it is appropriate to transfer Žižek's objection to Badiou's analysis to the above citation as well: "do Badiou's own examples not display the limit of his logic?"^{xlvii} In our case, does Badiou's assertion that the statement 'I love you' connotes that I love *you*, "and not exclusively the object you carry",^{xlviii} not appear as somewhat reductive? This claim is challenged by any number of situations in which the 'love' one purports to feel is actually Levinasian responsibility/justice (Storytelling) or the affection of neutral universality (Dogville). While it should be mentioned that neighbour love does not figure prominently in Badiou's reading (he focuses his attention on how the nonexistent sexual relationship impacts romantic love), it nonetheless remains significant that the object in Badiou's analysis - and likewise in Kierkegaard's - exists as *the* foremost impasse in the loving enterprise. Badiou's solution to this predicament in "The Scene of Two" involves reimagining the object-cause *a* as the generalized philosophical *u* (which designates, simply,

'love'), while Kierkegaard personalizes the object such that the beloved himself acquires the status of the object in earthly, imperfect love (erotic, artistic, friendship-based). Consequently, in Kierkegaard's account, the beloved and the object are one and the same; accordingly, when I love my friend (for example), I love a certain peculiarity which I assume is exclusively his and (to risk a loaded term), 'objectify' him at the expense of other potential friends. The reduction of a subject to an object is a non-issue in perfected neighbour love since, according to Kierkegaard, I love everyone equally, and am therefore engaged in a mutual exchange with God.

From a Lacanian perspective, both Badiou and Kierkegaard's respective approaches to the object are dubious. Unless Kierkegaard is suggesting that the imperfection of earthly love - and, by extension, the imperfect beloved himself - is its/his *own* object-cause, then the *objet a* in Kierkegaard's account falls into obscurity.^{xlix} To merit consideration from a Lacanian perspective, love (in either its romantic or neighbourly variety) must be approached not only from the focal point or "obscure star"¹ of the object-cause of desire (*the objet a*), but from this object's role in structuring and regulating the subject's relationship with the Other. Short of psychically transforming the Other (neighbour, lover, or neighbour-lover) into the object himself, love's Lacanian contingency poses a unique challenge to universality or the generalized *u* of Badiou's romantic couple: between the subject and the Other, there always inevitably exists the *objet a*, and even if I should regard my friend or lover as a Kierkegaardian object-in-itself, *between us* there still lies an additional object-cause that cannot be subsumed by a specific identity ('I love you, somehow independently of your object') or neutral universality ('I love everyone'). This object-

cause, by virtue of its very existence, particularizes the loving experience and identifies the Other *as such* (and not merely as a shapeless mass of ‘otherness’), but can never be properly consolidated in the Other’s selfhood. This is precisely Lacan’s point when, in his discussion of love’s purported unity (“we are but one”), he introduces the *objet a* as a crucial caveat, stating that “in no case can two as such serve as a basis [for identification]. Between two, whatever they may be, there is always the One and the Other, the One and the *a*, and the Other cannot in any way be taken as a One.”^{li}

Such identificatory specificity is evinced in Lacan’s reading of Richard of St. Victor’s book on the divine trinity, which Lacan pairs with the three interconnecting rings of his own Borromean knot. For St. Victor as for Lacan, love always concerns an other, and St. Victor articulates the scenario theologically: God bestows His love upon a worthy, divine being (the Son), who unilaterally returns God’s love. Although this doubtlessly initiates a loving interchange that is mutually pleasing to God and the Son, it is nonetheless an imperfect union and - despite its conveyance between two divine beings - is not divine in itself. In order to *perfect* this love, the Son must share the mutual love with another, third person or *condilectus* (co-loved). St. Victor states that,

When one person gives love to another and he alone loves only the other, there certainly is love (*dilectio*) but it is not a shared love (*condilectio*)... Shared love is properly said to exist when a third person is loved by two persons harmoniously and in community, and the affection of the two persons is fused into one affection by the flame of love for a third. From these things it is evident that shared love would have no place in Divinity itself if a third person were lacking to the other two persons.^{liii}

In St. Victor's explication of the trinity, the *condilectus* appears as a variation on Lacan's oft-quoted dictum that our desire is always the desire of the Other, in the sense that something or someone must be privy to the loving relation in order to justify its existence. In Lacan's reading of St. Victor's analogy (which he introduces in "Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty" and continues in Seminar XX), this *condilectus* materializes as the *objet a* and functions as the condition of possibility for the love between the One and the Other, mitigating the inadequacy (or imperfection) of their relationship. Simply stated, for Lacan, although three terms exist, "in reality, there are two plus *a*."^{liii} For our purposes, this formulation demonstrates that the *objet a* exists within and between every relation and - perhaps more significantly - positions the *acknowledgment* of desire as the genesis of all acquaintanceship.

Although this 'conclusion' is certainly well-documented in regards to the *objet a* itself, its repercussions for a philosophical and psychoanalytic conception of love are significant, especially when attempting to appreciate love's various modalities. Regardless of whether one conceives of 'perfect' love as Kierkegaardian (lacking any particular object) or in the terms outlined by Richard of St. Victor (requiring a *condilectus* or Other to validate love's divinity), I contend that our comprehension of such love is always necessarily romantic in nature, or at least in origin. This does not suggest that we are unable to actualize our love for the neighbour without engaging him romantically (I have already endeavored to prove that such love is hardly a convenient solution to neighbour love), but rather that

romantic love explicitly addresses the vagaries of the desirous cycle and accounts for the addition of the object-cause (the *plus a*) to this desire; conversely, neighbour love tends to sublimate this cause as justice or universality, and often ‘loses’ the *objet a* in the process. The diagram appended designates the place of the *objet a* and its properties of accrual (+ *a*) in relation to neighbour love’s problematic trinity (God, self, neighbour). The diagram reproduces a conceptualization of the self-neighbour relation outlined by Kenneth Reinhard,^{liv} which positions the self and the neighbour within Lacan’s Borromean knot of Real-Symbolic-Imaginary. Curiously, Reinhard relocates the *objet a* in his diagram from the central negative space which intersects/unites the three rings of the knot, to the lower-register negative space between the self and the neighbour. The empty, central space which designates “the point of intersection of God, Self, and Neighbour”^{lv} is, for Reinhard, an ideal location for the phallus, but he ultimately decides to leave the space open “in order to allow it to signify precisely the Open, the set that is identical with its interior.”^{lvi} This relocation - and subsequent ‘emptying’ of the central space of the knot - is contrary to Lacan’s own central placement of the *objet a*^{lvii} and also does not account for Lacan’s formulation of *plus a*, which allows God, the self, and the neighbour to share a common object, effectively inscribing the *a* into every relational level between the One and the Other insofar as, “starting from little *a*, the two other [rings] are taken as One plus *a*.”^{lviii} In my reimagining of the diagrammatical relationship between God, self, and neighbour, the *objet a* is once again centrally situated, but is specifically

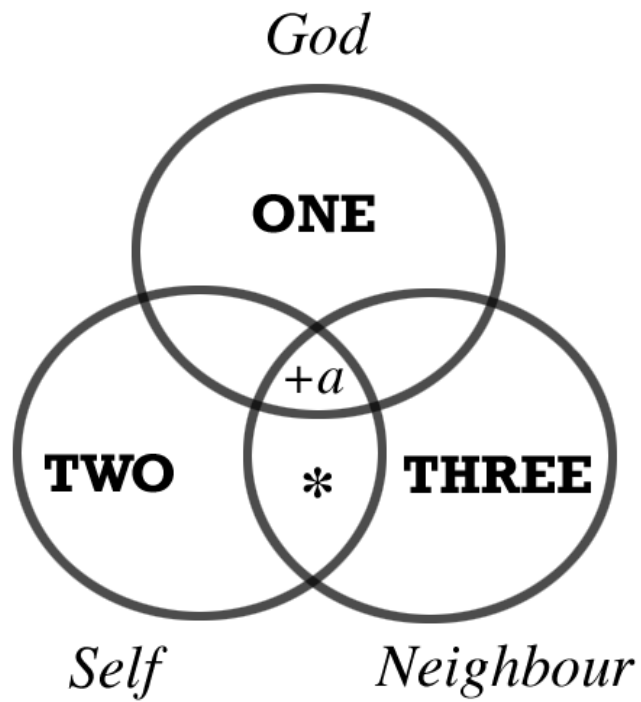
identified as *plus a*; while this specificity does not function to grant the object-cause absolute supremacy in the loving relation, it nonetheless serves to remind us of the object's mutable omnipresence or position as *plus a* between every encounter. The *plus a* here designates the act of positioning the *objet a* as the addition to the one and the other. In this respect, my invocation of the *plus a* does not conceive it as a sovereign object independent of the *objet a*, but rather designates the formal activity of addition: one + other + the lostness that causes desire. Crucially, this is not a shared object, but rather the very mark of the encounter.

Finally, I have assigned romantic love itself to the lower-register negative space between the self and the neighbour. The term Žižek assigns to such discrimination which arises from a particular (i.e., non-universal) object-cause is, quite simply, 'indifference', and we are here in a position to couple Žižek's own suspicions of neutral universality and Levinasian responsibility with the ethical implications of romantic love:

The universal proposition 'I love you all' acquires the level of actual existence only if 'there is at least one whom I hate' - a thesis abundantly confirmed by the fact that universal love for humanity always led to the brutal hatred of the (actually existing) exception, of the enemies of humanity. This hatred of the exception is the 'truth' of universal love, in contrast to true love which can emerge only against the background - not of universal hatred, but - of universal indifference: I am indifferent toward All, the totality of the universe, and as such, I actually love *you*, the unique individual who stands/sticks out of this indifferent background. Love and hatred are thus not symmetrical: love emerges out of universal indifference, while hatred emerges out of universal love.^{lix}

For our purposes, which seek to understand how I can love my neighbour as myself without assuming Levinasian responsibility for him, such indifference is little more

than the exacting scrupulousness of earthly romantic love; here, romantic love is precisely the measure of detachment and selectiveness that grants us temporary access to Augustinian ‘rightly ordered’ love. Indeed, how else could Žižek conceive of professing love for a compelling neighbourly uniqueness without invoking the object-cause endemic to romantic love, and without acknowledging the non-universal contingency of the object? One could here easily critique Žižek’s ‘solution’ of indifference as overly romanticized due to its poignant address to a specific individual (“I love *you*”) at the expense of the faceless multitudes, but even a reproach of Žižek’s position would confirm the necessary existence of romantic love *within* neighbour love as its psychoanalytic counterpart and desirous coordinate. Romantic love serves as both a response and a means of approaching such divine or perfected neighbour love. In this respect, the proper - and indeed the only - limit of love is indifference and, ultimately, its object-cause.



** = romantic love/indifference*

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Notes

ⁱ Jacques Lacan, Seminar XX: Encore, On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1975), 111.

ⁱⁱ Slavoj Žižek, On Belief (New York: Routledge, 2001), 90.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Jacques Lacan, Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1981), 268.

^v Ibid., 179.

^{vi} Lacan, Seminar XX, 95.

^{vii} Jacques Lacan, Seminar VIII: Le Transfert, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 177.

^{viii} Lacan, Seminar XI, 268.

^{ix} Ibid., emphasis mine.

^x Ibid., 270.

^{xi} Lacan, Seminar XI, 253.

^{xii} This centrality should here be interpreted literally, given Lacan's placement of the objet *á* at the centre of the Borromean knot (introduced in Seminar XX, 124-126).

^{xiii} Alain Badiou, "What is Love?" in Sic 3: Sexuation, ed. Renata Salecl (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 273.

^{xiv} Ibid., 274.

^{xv} Ibid.

^{xvi} Augustine, The Confessions, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), X 37.61.

^{xvii} In contrast to erotic and friendship-based love, which relies on a specific object.

^{xviii} Søren Kierkegaard, Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 77.

^{xix} Emmanuel Levinas, Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbar Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 103.

^{xx} Ibid., 108.

^{xxi} Is the most effective rejoinder to this hypothesis not contained in the canonical expression of indignation, “Oh, my goodness”? If goodness is a stable ethical category that merely awaits an opportunity for expression, then why do we note its potential disappearance as an embarrassing exposure of bad character? “Oh, my goodness!” means nothing less than, “My goodness has been threatened! I risk losing it!”

^{xxii} Jacques Lacan, Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, trans. Dennis Porter (London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1986), 187.

^{xxiii} Ibid.

^{xxiv} Slavoj Žižek, “Neighbours and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence” in The Neighbour: Three Inquiries in Political Theology (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 183.

^{xxv} Ibid., 3.

^{xxvi} Kierkegaard, 74.

^{xxvii} Lacan, Seminar VII, 186.

^{xxviii} Žižek, “Neighbours and Other Monsters”, 163.

^{xxix} With the possible exception of the horse, which is traditionally paired with a sexually blossoming pubescent girl (Clarence Brown’s 1944 National Velvet) or a frigid, emotionally maladjusted woman (Alfred Hitchcock’s 1964 Marnie).

^{xxx} Slavoj Žižek, The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* (Seattle: Walter Chapin Simpson Centre for the Humanities, 2000), 8.

^{xxxi} Ibid.

^{xxxii} Levinas, 104.

^{xxxiii} Given that the “beautiful fugitive” Grace’s romance with Thomas Edison Jr. is conceived as an inevitable matter of course in her developing relationship with the town of Dogville.

^{xxxiv} Lisa Coulthard, “The Limits of Love: Augustine at the Movies” (paper presented at the Augustine in America: Migratory Histories conference, Green College, The University of British Columbia, April 2006).

^{xxxv} Žižek, *On Belief*, 41.

^{xxxvi} Slavoj Žižek, “The Violence of the Fantasy,” *The Communication Review* 6 (2003): 277.

^{xxxvii} *Ibid.*, 278.

^{xxxviii} Slavoj Žižek, “The Antinomies of Tolerant Reason: A Blood-Dimmed Tide is Loosed,” Lacan.com, 2006, <http://www.lacan.com/zizantinoies.htm>

^{xxxix} Kierkegaard, 95.

^{xl} *Ibid.*, 79.

^{xli} *Ibid.*, 77.

^{xlii} *Ibid.*, 78.

^{xliii} As was previously mentioned, and perhaps too conveniently, Kierkegaard identifies death as the ideal solution to this earthly conundrum.

^{xliv} Badiou, “What is Love?”, 274.

^{xlv} Alain Badiou, “The Scene of Two,” *Lacanian Ink* 21 (2003): par. 3.

^{xlvi} Žižek, “The Violence of the Fantasy”, 278.

^{xlvii} *Ibid.*

^{xlviii} Badiou, “The Scene of Two”, par. 3.

^{xlix} Although this would certainly make for an interesting approach to Kierkegaard’s text, the reader must be cautioned against incorrectly assuming that the Kierkegaardian object and the Lacanian object are identical.

^l *Ibid.*

^{li} Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 49.

^{lii} Richard of St. Victor, Richard of St. Victor: The Twelve Patriarchs, The Mystical Ark, and Book Three of the Trinity, trans. Grover A. Zinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), III.XIX.

^{liii} Lacan, Seminar XX, 49.

^{liv} This diagram appears on page 74 of Reinhard's essay, "Toward a Political Theology of the Neighbour" in The Neighbour: Three Inquires in Political Theology. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

^{lv} *Ibid.*

^{lvi} *Ibid.*

^{lvii} Lacan, Seminar XX, 124.

^{lviii} *Ibid.*, 49.

^{lix} Žižek, "Neighbours and Other Monsters", 183.