

In Search of the Lost Real¹

Alain Badiou

Translated by Alex Ling

Abstract: The real invariably functions today as a means of intimidation and constraint. That we consistently fail to overcome this static conception stems from the fact that we do not know what the real actually is, nor do we know how to access it. To address this shortcoming, Badiou looks first to the well-known story of the death of Molière to show how all access to the real necessarily entails division—not only a division of the real from semblance, but also a division of the real itself. Staying with theatre, Badiou then turns his attention to Pirandello to pursue the idea that, since the real is always manifested within semblance, its exposure demands not simply that its “mask must be torn off as semblance,” but moreover that “the mask itself demands that it be taken as real.” Applying these principles to our present situation, Badiou proceeds to isolate the contemporary semblance of real capitalism—the crucial mask that needs to be torn off today—as nothing other than democracy itself, noting that, as with all access to the real, its division will necessarily entail a measure of violence.

Today the real, as a word or a term, is primarily used in an intimidatory way. We must constantly worry about and obey the real. We need to understand that we are powerless against the real, or—to use the word

1. Translator’s note: This piece comprises the opening section of Alain Badiou’s book *À la recherche du réel perdu* (Paris: Fayard, 2015), which is currently being translated in its entirety for Bloomsbury. The *Journal of Continental Philosophy* would like to thank Alain Badiou for permission to publish this extract, Isabelle Vodoz for her thoughtful comments on the text, and François Ladouceur for his generous assistance with parts of the translation.

favoured by politicians and businessmen—realities. These realities are constraining and constitute a kind of law from which it is absurd to want to escape. We seem to be besieged by a dominant opinion concerning the existence of these constraining realities, so much so that we are incapable of imagining a rational collective action whose subjective point of departure would be to refuse to accept this constraint.

So I ask myself in front of you: is this the only possible answer to the question “what is the real?” Must we take it for granted that the only way to speak of the real is as a means of imposition? Is the real never found, discovered, encountered, invented? Must it always be the source of an imposition, a kind of iron law (like the “Iron Law of Wages,” or the “Golden Rule” that prohibits any budgetary deficit)?² Must we accept, as a law of reason, that the real demands in every instance a submission, rather than an invention? The problem is that, when it comes to the real, it is extremely difficult to know how to get started. This issue has plagued philosophy since its inception: how do we even begin to think the real? And how might we set forth in such a way that this inaugural thought is directed at an actual real, an authentic real, a real real?

Why is it so hard to get started when it comes to the real? The reason is that we cannot begin with the concept, the idea, or the definition, nor can we set forth from experience, immediate data, or the sensible. It would be easy to show how starting with the definition, the concept, or the idea, would only lead to a construction that is the complete opposite of what it is supposed to be, such that it would represent a loss or a subtraction of the real. Indeed, how can I encounter the real, or rise to the challenge of the true real, if I am myself firmly established in that which grants existence—at least in appearance—without any challenge from the real, namely, the idea, the concept, or the definition? The simple fact of the concept cannot serve as a genuine test of the real precisely because the real is supposed to be that which, when presented to me, resists me, is not homogenous to me, is not directly reducible to my rational determination. With such a point of departure, I can at best lay claim to formulating a *hypothesis about the real*, but not a presentation of the real itself. In this way, philosophy, overly rational, or else tempted by idealism, misses the real, since the very manner in which

2. T/N: Generally credited to Ferdinand Lassalle (1825–1864), the “iron law of wages” states that wages will always tend toward the minimum amount necessary to sustain the life of workers. The “golden rule,” on the other hand, states that governments should only borrow money in order to invest, rather than to fund existing spending.

it sets forth means that the real would be erased, obliterated, or concealed beneath entirely inadequate abstractions.

Yet as soon as we diagnose this shortcoming, this idealist failure to meet the test of the real, it is the real as imposition that resurfaces. The intimidating power of the use of the word real will invoke “concreteness” as a pretext in order to directly challenge the idealist obsession, which is today commonly referred to as a criminal utopia, a disastrous ideology, an antiquated dream . . . All these names denounce the inadequacy of the thesis that presumes to begin the quest for the real in the figure of abstraction. Against this will be opposed a true, authentic, and concrete real: the realities of the global economy, the inertia of social relations, the suffering of everyday existence, the verdict of the financial markets . . . All of this, which weighs heavily indeed, will be opposed to the speculative obsession, to the militant ideocracy that—we will be told—has engaged us in countless bloody affairs over the course of the twentieth century.

From this perspective, there is one thing that plays a decisive role today, which is the position occupied by the economy in any discussion of the real. We might say that knowledge of the real has been entrusted to the economy: it is the economy that knows.

It seems it was not so long ago that we had numerous occasions to see that economics did not in fact know very much at all. It did not even know how to foresee imminent disasters in its own field. But this has hardly changed anything: time and again, it is the economy that knows the real and imposes it on us. It is of no small interest to note, moreover, that, despite its absolute inability not only to foresee what was going to happen but even to figure out what was going on, the economy’s position with regard to the real has survived perfectly intact. It would appear that, in the world as it stands, economic discourse presents itself as both guardian and guarantor of the real. And so long as the laws of Capital remain as they are, we will never overcome the intimidating prevalence of economic discourse.

What is especially striking about the economy understood as knowledge of the real, is that even when it states—and here it is occasionally constrained by factual evidence—that its “real” is doomed to crisis, to pathology, and ultimately, to disaster, all of this disturbing discussion fails to produce any break with the subjective submission to the real whose knowledge the economy boasts of providing. In other words, understood as the discourse of the real, what the economy says, foresees, or analyzes, only further validates the intimidating character of this celebrated real, and leads us right back to it. So that when this real appears to falter, when it seems

to reveal itself as pure pathology, when it devastates the world and destroys peoples' livelihoods, and when the economists themselves no longer know where to turn, the sovereignty of this intimidation of the economic real not only fails to be reduced in any meaningful way, but actually increases as a result. The economists and their backers reign even more imperiously than they did before the disasters that they not only failed to predict but, like the rest of the world, only noticed after the fact. Which just goes to show that these are people who are not so easily overthrown.

The lesson here is an extremely valuable one: the economy as such does not in any way instruct us on how we might escape the intimidating and ultimately oppressive conception of the real to which this selfsame economy has devoted its development and the complexity of its impotent "science." This is of no small importance, since the question of the real is obviously also a question of determining those relations of human activity, both intellectual and practical, that support it. And in particular, it is a question of knowing whether it functions as an imperative of submission, or if it can or could operate as an imperative that is open to the possibility of emancipation.

Let us say that the philosophical question of the real is also, and perhaps above all else, a question of knowing, when faced with a discourse that conceives of the real as constraining, whether or not we can change the world in such a way that it presents a previously invisible opening through which we can escape from *this* constraint—without, for all that, denying the fact that both reality and constraint necessarily exist.

You will immediately see how we could make a brief excursion here on the side of my dear Plato, since the theme of the "exit" is a major motif of the allegory of the cave. This allegory presents us with a world closed in upon an image of the real which is itself false. It is an image of semblance that presents itself to everyone imprisoned in the cave as the indisputable image of what can exist. Perhaps this is our situation. It may be that the hegemony of economic restraint is ultimately a semblance. But the point of the allegory lies elsewhere. What Plato means is rather that, in order to know if a world is subject to the law of semblance, it is imperative that we first exit the cave, that we escape from the place that this semblance governs by means of a constraining discourse. Any consolidation of this semblance as such, in particular any theoretical consolidation—as in the discourse of economics—only prohibits the possibility of escape and further secures us in our place as victims intimidated by this semblance's false reality, instead of seeking out and locating the exit.

All of this comes down to saying that we are unable to gain an unrestricted access to the real by prioritizing a theoretical knowledge considered to be the last word on the subject. All of these forms of knowledge, in one way or another, work towards maintaining the impossibility of an escape, that is to say, they uphold an image of the real as a form of intimidation and a principle of submission.

Must we then say that the real can only be apprehended on the side of experience, of sensible perception, of immediate sensation, or even emotion or anxiety? There is a long philosophical tradition here. It is, after all, on these terms that Pascal sets out to destroy Cartesian rationalism, that the empiricists attack Leibniz, that Kierkegaard criticizes Hegel, or that existentialism replaces truth with freedom. According to Kierkegaard, Hegel missed the real because he believed it could be systematically unfurled through a vast rational construction, a theoretical discourse whose point of departure was pure categories: being, nothing, becoming . . . Rather, one needed to set out from an entirely different point: from subjectivity as such, the only thing capable of encountering the real and of describing this experience. And this experience is all the more real since it risks the anxiety [*angoisse*] that is felt when it is missed, or to the contrary, when experienced in its fullest measure [*surabonder*].

Psychoanalysis, of course, clearly has its roots in this existential tradition, not least in the promotion of the word “real” in the work of Lacan. For we can observe how, in the clinical setting—as the master repeatedly insists—as soon as it is a question of the real, as soon as the defences organized by the imaginary or by semblance collapse, anxiety is on the agenda. Anxiety alone does not deceive, being an encounter with a real of such intensity that, in exposing itself to it, the subject must pay the price.³

The objection I would make to this view is that this is precisely our experience of anything which is completely imbued with the power of the real as intimidation or submission. After all, this is what indicates the function

3. T/N: Lacan repeatedly insists that, “out of all the signals, anxiety is the one that does not deceive,” that this stems from the fact that, unlike the other affects, “it is not a question of the loss of the object, but its presence: the object is not lacking,” and that “what anxiety signals is the real,” Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 54, 160 (trans. modified). In essence, anxiety arises when the subject confronts its real cause of desire in the form of the *objet petit a*, resulting in “a moment of traumatic unveiling whereby anxiety reveals itself for what it is, as that which does not deceive, a moment where the field of the Other, as it were, splits open and exposes its foundation,” Lacan, *Book X: Anxiety*, 312 (trans. modified).

of anxiety in psychoanalysis, since the real reveals itself here as that which is, for the subject, beyond measure. But if the real discloses itself in this way, this is doubtless because it in no way evades [*soustrait*] the systems [*dispositifs*] of intimidation that are generated by the organization of the world through dominant human activities, including its symbolic and theoretical practices.

In actual fact, the sensible world—our world—has no particular nudity, being entirely shaped and comprised of relations that directly recall the dictatorship of the image of the real that I began with. We could therefore argue that by purely and simply placing our trust in the immediately sensible, in feelings, in emotion, and in the encounter, we do not so much strengthen the academic or supposedly scientific knowledge of the real, as we merely consolidate what the “real” means according to dominant opinion. This just leads us back to the fact that our perception, our encounter with the real, what we take to be our free and independent spontaneity, all of this is in reality structured through and through by the picture of the world as it stands, that is, by a world subjected to the imperative of the real as intimidation. Thus, far from referring to a knowledge alienated in intimidating objectivity, as in the first hypothesis, we will instead have an opinion that we cannot differentiate from the immediate experience of the real in a world which is explicitly structured by the dictatorship of a concept of the real as intimidation.

On this point, there is something really quite instructive about the way that scandal functions in our world. The scandal always presents itself as the revelation of a little bit of the real. One day we learn, through our media of choice, that so and so went to such and such and later emerged with a briefcase full of cash. Everyone then has the overwhelming impression of touching on something more real than what all of these people usually tell us. The scandal is precisely what, in terms of opinion, opens the door to a kind of unveiling of a piece of the real, but at the price of this fragment being immediately treated as an exception. A scandalous exception.

Were it not for this touch of exception, there would be no scandal either. If it were known that everyone went out at night carrying briefcases collecting cash from the rich, no newspaper could thrill its public with the revelation. The structure of scandal actually brings us back to our second conception of the real, the empiricist and existential vision: it is because we stumbled, in an immediate and sensible way, onto a little piece of the real, that we can direct ourselves and others toward an opinion that is both free and grounded in the real.

The truth, however, is that there is no new freedom in the scandal, since it forms part of our comprehensive and ongoing education in submission. The only lesson the scandal has to teach us is that this terrible exception must be cut down and punished. It is therefore, in the final analysis, an occasion for the whole world to declare its submission to the general conception of the real as it stands, with the understanding that there will of course be a few exaggerations or marginal pathologies which are scandalous.

An interesting symptom of our society is the fact that the scandal is, by and large, a scandal of corruption. This is its essential name. It is rather odd that corruption is scandalous, since it could be argued that society is corrupt from top to bottom. We could even argue that corruption constitutes its innermost law, and that it is in order to cover up this systemic and entirely real corruption that the scandal ultimately designates a kind of scapegoat. In a society that openly, explicitly, and, it must be said, largely consensually, accepts that profit is the only means capable of driving the community, it is fair to say that corruption is straightaway the order of the day. If earning as much money as possible is the norm, it quickly becomes difficult to deny that all possible means are good means. For what other standard, what fanciful measure, could we use to standardize the actual standard which is that of profit? While we might respond that there are laws, it is clear that all this is needed to preserve the general shape of things, that is, to uphold the image of the real we have to deal with. This is why a scandal is required every now and then, not at all as a revelation of the real, but as a staging of a very small piece of the real itself *in the role of an exception to reality*.

The unique force of the scandal therefore lies in the dramatization [*théâtralisation*] of a tiny fragment of the real as a denial of the real itself. By and large, theatre may have a significant role to play in this investigation of the real, and I will say a word on this shortly. But let us first look at the overall drama [*rythme*] of the scandal: there are twists and turns, new discoveries, accomplices, conspiracies, etc. The “*coup de théâtre*” of the scandal is obviously part of its integral nature, which is very easy to recognize if we understand how it is in fact a matter of ensuring that a piece of the real functions as if it were an exception to reality, and of sacrificing this exception to the overall visibility of opinion so that it essentially returns to its submission, to what is, at bottom, the law of the world: the omnipresence of corruption.

Let us note in passing that sport is today a big victim of scandal. It is philosophically interesting to ask ourselves why there are so many scandals in sport. This is because sport is a kind of global showcase for the scandalous

exception. Sport takes place in public and for the public. Hence the fact that scandal, which is always a kind of public exposure of what was supposed to remain hidden, is, if I may say, especially at home in sport, which never ceases to flaunt its virtues: effort, self-sacrifice, embrace of suffering, loyalty in competition, indisputable performance, hard-earned success . . . What would sport be without the constant display of these rare qualities, which we inevitably seek to pass on to the younger generation through exercise and the admiration of physical activities of all kinds? So what are we to think when we learn that thousands of football matches are rigged so that invisible gamblers can get their hands on huge amounts of money, or that a winner of the Tour de France was drugged up to the eyeballs and stripped of his seven victories—which is, by the way, an extraordinary legal undertaking—or that it is perfectly reasonable to raise comparative questions like whether or not tennis is more corrupt than American football? Scandal is without doubt entirely at home in sport, since watching it brings people together, while the match-fixing and doping ensure that the spectacle is a pure semblance. Unlike the figures who hide in the shadows at night clutching briefcases full of cash so as to guarantee their electoral success, this real is out in the open, it is something that everyone follows and watches, on the sides of roads, in stadiums, or on television screens. Notwithstanding the challenges of conducting investigations and the unwillingness of federations, we find in sport a kind of public form of generalized corruption.

Still you will notice how, even under these conditions, the prevailing view is nonetheless that the “vast majority” of athletes are, it goes without saying, clean and loyal, and that every effort is made to ensure that, outside of a few scandalous exceptions, sport is restored to its incorruptible being. Whereas in actual fact, if you are behind the scenes, you know that sport is an extraordinarily corrupt place, simply because the money that circulates within it is altogether too vast to be innocent. This is a point that we should always bear in mind: wherever there are vast sums of money, there is corruption, because whenever money circulates in large amounts, the only thing ensuring the fluidity required for this circulation is that it spills out on all sides.

All of this leads us to conclude that when it comes to the real, we cannot begin with a rigid definition that would be philosophically constructed at a remove from any actual test. Yet nor can we start by getting caught up in the idea of a sensible encounter with the exception that would suddenly open a door onto the real. Neither the arrogance of the concept nor the provocation of the scandal in themselves reveal the real. We need to go about things

differently. To approach the real, we need to move in a crab-like manner, or construct diagonal paths [*des diagonales*], in a process that is unique to each situation.⁴ This is what I will attempt to do by ordering things in the following way: 1) an anecdote; 2) a simple theoretical maxim or definition; 3) a poem.⁵

ANECDOTE

This is a very well-known anecdote since it concerns the death of Molière. As you all know, Molière dies while performing *The Imaginary Invalid*.⁶ You see here the emergence of a fable, since he himself dies of a very real disease. This real disease, the one we call “the death of Molière,” reveals itself within, or with regard to, or through the symptoms of an illness that is not only performed, but which is already presented within the play as imaginary. We have here—and note that we are still in the realm of theatre and dramatization—a very particular kind of friction between the real and semblance. The fatal illness that will take Molière manifests itself at the very heart of semblance, which is to say, at the same time that Molière is actually acting out—since the play itself partakes of the real—the semblance of illness. It is all the more striking since the performance collapsed into chaos as the unconscious Molière had to be carried from the stage, leaving the spectators, suddenly confronted with this real death which superimposed itself over an imaginary illness, deeply affected.

What can we learn from this living dialectic [*dialectique vivante*] that takes hold of death? In this anecdote, the real is what *outplays the play*. Or in

4. T/N: Badiou often uses the term “diagonal” to indicate a movement that cuts across rather than coincides with the terms of a given situation. In particular, the process of “diagonalizing” is key to the work of the truth-procedure, which constructs a paradoxical multiple “which is random, subtracted from all knowledge, and which weaves a diagonal to the situation, yet which is already part of the encyclopaedia’s repertory,” Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 332.

5. T/N: Note that only the first of these sections, namely, the “anecdote” concerning the death of Molière, is included in this extract.

6. T/N: The circumstances surrounding the death of the French playwright and actor Molière have become legend. On 17 February 1673, while performing the role of Argan—the “imaginary invalid” of the play’s title—Molière, who suffered from tuberculosis, twice collapsed on stage in fits of coughing and haemorrhaging: first during the performance (which he insisted on completing), then again after the curtain fell. Following this second fit, Molière was placed in a sedan chair and carried to his home, where he died a few hours later.

other words, the real is the moment where the semblance is more real than the real of which it is the real: the imaginary invalid is played by a real invalid, and the death of one entails the impossibility of the death of the other. Here we have a very interesting dialectic of semblance and the real, since the real emerges with an extraordinary violence, even to the point of its semblance, even to the extent that we are dealing with an imaginary invalid.

Let us then say that, in this case, the real is *what comes to haunt semblance*. Death strikes the character of the imaginary invalid, just as the real actor Molière embodies it on stage, and the real comes to haunt not only this semblance—the character of the imaginary invalid—but also the semblant of this semblance, namely, the actor Molière, pretending [*faisant semblant*] to be the imaginary invalid, which is to say, pretending to be the semblance of illness.⁷ It is obviously especially striking to see how the one who feigns [*fait semblant*] to be the semblance of illness dies from a real illness. Let us attempt a generalization of this anecdote that specifies a close and difficult relationship between the real and semblance. We could, for example, say that every real turns out to be the ruin of semblance. This would be to maintain that even though there is no direct intuitive access to the real, nor any direct conceptual access, there is always this indirect necessity that the real manifests itself in the ruin of semblance. In other words—I will keep up the theatrical metaphors—the real is only acquired if we unmask it. The real—much like the philosopher according to Descartes—comes forward masked.⁸ Hence, it must be unmasked. But you can see that, in unmasking the real, we must at the same time take into account the real of the mask itself. Molière dies, and what is more real than death? In doing so he brings out the fact that, while imaginary illness is all well and good in the theatre, there is real disease as well. It should nevertheless be noted that this irruption of the real arises not only from the semblance that is the imaginary

7. T/N: An alternative translation seeking to further highlight Badiou's repetition of the word *semblant* here would be to substitute "resembling" for "pretending": "the actor Molière, resembling the imaginary invalid, which is to say, resembling the semblance of illness." This may, however, lead to ambiguity, and in any case does not do justice to the sentence's performative, theatrical context.

8. T/N: Descartes begins his earliest known philosophical writing by announcing "larvatus prodeō"; that he "comes forward masked." Cf. "Actors, taught not to let any embarrassment show on their faces, put on a mask. I will do the same. So far, I have been a spectator in this theatre which is the world, but I am now about to mount the stage, and I come forward masked," René Descartes, "Early Writings," *The Philosophical Writings of René Descartes: Volume I*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugland Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 2.

illness, but also from the fact that he himself, this Molière who really is going to die, is, as an actor, the real bearer of this semblance.

Thus the real would always be something that we uncover, whose mask we tear off, meaning that if we have any chance of finding the real, it is always at the point of semblance, with the understanding that there must also be a real of semblance itself: that the mask exists, that it is a real mask. And so we come to the very strange conclusion that all access to the real—be it the experience of a spectator seeing all this in a theatre in the seventeenth century, or more generally, anyone who experiences the real for themselves—is, in the final analysis, always that of a mask being ripped off, an act which, if it actively establishes the distinction between the real and semblance, nevertheless must also assume that there is a real of semblance, or that there is a real of the mask.

This leads to the following important statement: *all access to the real brings about its division*. There is no real that could be purified from what it is not, since all access to the real is immediately and necessarily a division, not only of the real from semblance, but also of the real itself, in light of the fact that there is a real of semblance. It is the act of this division, whereby semblance is simultaneously torn away and identified, that we can be described as the process of accessing the real.

Pirandello labored over this division of the real to the point that he made it the main subject of many of his plays. And when the first edition of his theatrical works was published during his lifetime, he chose to call it “Naked Masks.”⁹ This is something of a recap of what we have been trying to say: while the mask must be torn off as semblance, if we are to finally access the naked—un-masked—real then we must also recognize the nudity of the mask; we must first take into account the fact that the mask itself demands that it be taken as real. And this is exactly what constitutes the subject of his plays *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *Henry IV*. Reading Pirandello’s plays provides us with an excellent education on the question of the real, since it is precisely this question they are concerned with: which real? This is the question posed by his plays, with, for that matter, varying conclusions—just as philosophy offers varying conclusions on the relationship between the real and semblance, or between essence and appearance. Pirandello moves about his theatre on the basis of an initial hypothesis, ac-

9. T/N: Pirandello’s entire theatrical output—totalling forty-three plays in all—is published in Italian in the multi-volume collection *Maschere nude* (*Naked Masks*). In English, Pirandello’s preferred title has been retained for the more modest edition *Naked Masks: Five Plays*, ed. Eric Bentley (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1952).

ording to which there is no real whatsoever, since every mask is the mask of another mask, such that removing one mask would require the removal of another, without ever arriving at the naked real, because it is the mask itself which is naked: it is semblance itself that is real. Yet, other, more optimistic perspectives open up from here, whereby through semblance—the semblance of the real and the real of semblance—something genuinely real comes to assert itself.

Were I to attempt to apply these remarks to the contemporary situation, this would be tantamount to asking myself what the mask of our real is, and therefore, what the semblance proper to imperial globalized capitalism is: under what mask does it present itself that prevents its identification from dividing it? What is the mask at once so real and so removed from all reality that it is virtually impossible to tear off?

I am sorry to have to say that the contemporary semblance of real capitalism is democracy. This is its mask. I am sorry because the word “democracy” is a beautiful word, and it will be necessary to recover and redefine it, in one way or another. But for now, the democracy I am talking about is the one that functions in our society in an institutional, statist, regulatory and normalizing manner. To take up once more the metaphor of Molière’s death, we might say that capitalism is this world that is constantly performing a play whose title is “The Imaginary Democracy.” And it is performed well; it is the best play of which capitalism is capable. The spectators and the participants generally applaud, for the most part. In any case, it is a ritual to which they are summoned and to which they surrender. But so long as this play goes on, it is precisely imaginary democracy that is being performed, while underneath, the globalized process of capitalism and imperial pillage continues unabated, with its intangible real, the description of which is of no use whatsoever. So long as this play goes on and is enjoyed by a large enough audience, the real of capitalism—meaning the possibility of dividing it, of forcing an internal scission that would guarantee its dissipation or destruction—remains politically inaccessible.¹⁰ Because if this play is the play of democratic semblance, if it is the mask that grants contemporary

10. T/N: The opening gesture of Badiou’s first “big book,” *Theory of the Subject*, is to isolate two distinct matrices of the dialectic in Hegel, the one idealist, which follows the standard logic of alienation (followed by negation, then negation of the negation, etc.), and the other properly materialist, which contrarily follows a logic of scission, according to which there is no “negation of the negation” since “there is no unity that is not split.” With scission, Badiou contends, “there is not the least bit of return into itself, nor any connection between the final and the inaugural. Not even ‘integral communism’ as the return, after the exteriorization into the State, to the concept of which

imperial capitalism the cover it requires, and if, moreover, no possibility of tearing off this mask or of interrupting the play is on the agenda, then something remains politically inaccessible for any political project of access to the naked real.

Access to the real of contemporary imperial capitalism—also called the West, the democratic world, the international community, the Rule of Law [*État de droit*]¹¹ (the names are hardly lacking)—access to all of this can only be achieved through a constitutive division of a political nature. But what we see is that this play only allows for false divisions, of which the most familiar is the distinction left/right. Take a close look at the left today. Observe it as if you were attending the play of imaginary democracy, which is *the* play, the only play in the repertoire. In any case, there are no other plays that are performed, at least on this scale, namely, that of the State, of the nation, of the world devastated by capitalism. Thankfully there are small experimental theatres here and there performing other plays, but that's a whole other story. Looking at the left today, what do you see? When the government decides to give twenty billion to the bosses, without any compensation, it performs the play with conviction. But we mustn't see this as pathological—after all, that's what it is there for! What the hell else could it do? It is as if, all of a sudden, in the middle of a play, an actor stood up to say that he'd had enough of performing this piece and wanted to perform another! Which is, incidentally, exactly what Molière did, since when he dies in the middle of the play, it is a different piece that is performed . . .

The real is always what is revealed at the cost of the semblance that subjugates us being torn off. Since this semblance is part of the very presentation of the hidden real, I have proposed to call this tearing off of the mask an “event.”¹² I have called it this because it is not something that is internal

‘primitive communism’ would be the simple immediacy,” Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009), 4.

11. T/N: “*État de droit*” translates the German *Rechtsstaat*—the doctrine that governments are themselves subject to the law—and might also be rendered “Juridical State” or “Legal State.”

12. T/N: The axis on which Badiou's entire philosophy turns, an “event” designates a momentary and unpredictable “perturbation of the world's order,” Alain Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Louse Burchill (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 91. Technically, an event testifies to a sudden upsurge of being itself in the space of the situation, such that the underlying being of a particular object—what Badiou terms a “site”—not only comes to appear, but the intensity of this appearance is, if only fleetingly, absolute. Meaning an event is, in a sense, doubly real, in that it figures the illegal presentation of real being: as both being itself and its direct presentation, the “realness” of an event extends as much to its form as to its content.

to the representation itself. It comes from somewhere else, an inner elsewhere [*un ailleurs intérieur*], so to speak, even if this elsewhere is difficult to locate and, unfortunately, often hard to accept.

My final remark concerning the anecdote of Molière will be that, if the real is only accessible by tearing away its inherent semblance, then there is, as a matter of course, a certain amount of violence in accessing the real. In the anecdote of Molière's death, this violence is overwhelmingly present: the actor collapses, coughs up blood, etc. This is, of course, a metaphor. It indicates—without demonstrating anything—that there is inevitably a measure of violence, because the relation of semblance to the real forms part of the real. So that in tearing off the mask, you divide the real, you do not leave it intact before you. All access to the real violates it, through the inevitable division inflicted upon it by its unmasking.

This dispenses with the anecdote.