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‘Peace at last’: Subjective destitution and the end of analysis in *Peaky Blinders*

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‘Peace at last’: Subjective destitution and the end of analysis in *Peaky Blinders*

By Jack Black, PhD

Such a subjective destitution entails the possibility for a radical form of separation,
paving the way to the real being of the subject, *son ‘être du sujet’*.
(Verhaeghe 2019, 378).

... the remainder that as determining his division brings about his fall from his fantasy
and makes him destitute as subject.
(Lacan, 1968)¹

There is much hope, according to Slavoj Žižek, in fictional characters, such as, Hannibal Lecter. Here, the heinous crimes of a serial killer, fuelled by the predilection for consuming his victims, reveals a public fascination that ‘bears witness to a deep longing for a Lacanian psychoanalyst’; or, as Žižek adds, “a desperate, ultimately failed attempt of the popular imagination to represent to itself the idea of a Lacanian analyst” (1993, 48). Indeed, for Lacan (2004), the act of analysis, and the efforts of the Lacanian analyst, is where the very kernel of the analysand’s being—the *objet petit a*—is laid bare. In so doing, the subject’s ontological consistency, that which makes the subject a subject, is, much like Lecter, the very “‘stuff’ that the analyst ... ‘swallows’” (Žižek 1993, 48). Certainly, while Žižek’s interpretation of Lecter reveals a public fascination for the process of analysis, today we can ask whether such forms of analysis produce the very radicality they seek to achieve? With the widely recited demise in symbolic efficiency, can fictional characters and popular media forms succeed in portraying the radicality that Lacan attributes to the analyst?

The finale to the British crime drama, *Peaky Blinders* (2013—2022), suggests its own answer to the power of Lacanian analysis. Here, “The ultimate aim of psychoanalytic treatment is for the subject to undo the ultimate ‘passionate attachment’ that guarantees the consistency of his/her being, and thus to undergo what Lacan calls ‘subjective destitution’” (Žižek 1999, 266). Such ‘undoing’ is echoed in Hegel’s “‘absolute knowledge’ ... a subjective position which finally accepts ‘contradiction’ as an internal condition of every identity” (Žižek 2008a, xxix). Accepting this contradiction works to disclose how, in the case of subjective destitution, it is the subject’s very consistency

which is called into question. Evidently, such destitution does not eradicate the subject, but only their subjectivity—that which the analyst, as Hannibal Lecter, carnivorously devours: the *objet a*. Subjective destitution can therefore be conceived as an occurrence whereby one's fundamental fantasy, that is, one's narcissism, and one's inherent sense of self, is surrendered, given up and/or traversed (Lacan 2004, 273). This desubjectivization of the subject results not just in the loss of one's subjectivity, but also the ethical concerns, imaginary formations, and symbolic identities, which, until then, were simply interpellations of the subject's functioning within society.

When contemplating Lacan's subjective destitution, one may immediately think of an act of suicide. Faced with a terminal illness, the option of taking one's life may, for the subject at least, comprise an escape from an end that is inevitable. Indeed, in the final moments of the *Peaky Blinders* season finale, such an option is all that remains for the show's protagonist, Thomas 'Tommy' Shelby (Cillian Murphy).

In the final season, we learn from Tommy's doctor, Doctor Holford (Aneurin Barnard), that he has developed an inoperable tuberculoma, leaving him with 18-months to live. The diagnosis puts into action the events of the final season, with Tommy working to safeguard the security of his immediate family and their criminal activities, before saying goodbye and leaving alone. The episode's final scenes take place with Tommy living in a gypsy caravan (*Vardos*) in the countryside. After a heavy night of drinking, Tommy awakens to 'flip a coin': a game of chance which he uses to decide whether he should commit the inevitable and take his own life before the tumour ends his. With the coin's decision in hand, Tommy enters his caravan, which is filled with family trinkets and personal artifacts, and prepares to shoot himself. However, before pulling the trigger, he hallucinates, and speaks to a vision of his deceased daughter, Ruby. Ruby advises Tommy that there is work to be done and encourages him to light the fire. Picking up a newspaper for kindling, Tommy is met with the image of Holford, his doctor, attending the wedding of the fascist politician, Oswald Mosley (Sam Claflin). While the show combined real historical figures and events with the fictional Shelby family's rise from slum bookmakers to the corridors of British power, Mosley, a depiction of the real-life British fascist, has remained a notable adversary to Tommy. Upon seeing his doctor attending Mosley's wedding, Tommy quickly realises that

Mosley and Holford have conspired to make him believe that he has an inoperable tumour.



There is a certain fatalism which marks Tommy's decision to commit suicide. Facing a slow and agonising death, his physical demise would stand in complete contrast to the anti-hero of brutal authority and violence which has characterised his journey from criminal gang leader to a Member of Parliament for the British Labour Party, and sometime conspirator for the future Prime Minister, Winston Churchill (in fact, the journey suggests that Tommy's politics sits easily alongside his ongoing criminal activities). To this end, Tommy's suicide reflects a clear 'acting out': a "‘demonstrative’ act" that remains addressed to the Other (Žižek 2008b, 68); a final 'act' of rebuke performed on behalf of our fated protagonist towards an Other for whom his very guilt can only be assuaged by the punishment of suicide.

Yet, Tommy's realisation by the fire reflects an alternative, 'passage to the act' (*passage a l'acte*): an act that not only suspends the Other, but, on behalf of the subject, surrenders the very kernel of their being. It is an "act of assuming existential indifference," that is, of assuming "the very gesture of absolute negativity that gives birth to the subject" (Žižek 1998, 107). It is this "zero-point of losing everything," which is played out in the show's final scenes (Žižek 1998, 107).

After Tommy's realisation that Holford and Mosley are acquaintances, we cut to a large stately home belonging to Holford. From Holford's window, we realise Tommy's caravan has settled on the accompanying land. Repulsed by the caravan (we can assume Holford is a fascist and, therefore, not amiable to a travelling gypsy caravan living in the vicinity), Holford orders his groundsman to burn it, unaware of who it belongs to. Later, when Holford approaches his car, he is suddenly met by Tommy, who, with gun drawn, grabs Holford and demands that he kneels on the floor. What follows is not unlike an analytical session.



Standing over Holford, Tommy asserts: "I'm guessing you people all decided, that the only person who could ever kill Tommy Shelby is Tommy Shelby himself... you made me believe that death was coming, let my nature do rest, 'ey?" Trembling, Holford responds:

You may not have tuberculoma, Mr. Shelby, but you are sick. I know you. You're sick with guilt. Sick of death at your own hand. Sick of who you were. You are no longer the kind of man who would kill another man in cold blood. Tommy, you have been on a journey from the backstreets to the corridors of power. You can't go back. You're a different man. A gun no longer belongs in your hand.

Unperturbed by the doctor's reply, Tommy commands him to close his eyes, Holford's execution inevitable. However, before pulling the trigger, a bell from an adjacent clock tower chimes. Tommy checks his pocket-watch and, eyes closed, recites: "11th hour. Armistice. Peace at last. Peace at last." The gun goes off, with Tommy shooting the floor beside Holford.



We can conceive of the doctor as occupying the role of the big Other: a prescribed authority, with the assumed knowledge to condemn Tommy to a medical condition, but also, as Tommy now realizes, to lie. Indeed, what remains key to our relations with the big Other is that it exists only insofar as subjects believe it to exist. The knowledge and desires which we attribute to the Other remain valid against our own investment in them. It is this realization that underpins Lacanian analysis, for whom the analyst, occupying the place of the big Other, seeks a path from which the subject can enact their own choice. In the above scene, this choice is compounded by a confrontation with the Real: the clock's 11th-hour chime. In fact, for the 'new' to emerge, the Real must be confronted. Drawing from Žižek's work, Molly Anne Rothenberg states that "Whether he [Žižek] is speaking about the violence of the political Act or the violence of subjective destitution, he proposes the deliberate facilitation of this eruption of the Real" (2010, 183). Consequently, whereas "The new enters thought by way of the Real, by way of affect" (Rothenberg 2010, 183), it is in confronting the trauma of the Real that the very 'sense' of reality is upended. Here the "traumatic and nonsensical" Real can help instigate one's realization that "Entering a state of subjective destitution, at the end of analysis, requires some kind of awareness ... that there *is* no guarantee of meaning—that, in fact, the big Other does not exist" (Flisfeder 2012, 30). It is here that, in accordance with the Other's inconsistency, the subject reaches a subjective destitution grounded in the non-existence of the Other and the equally non-existent subject.

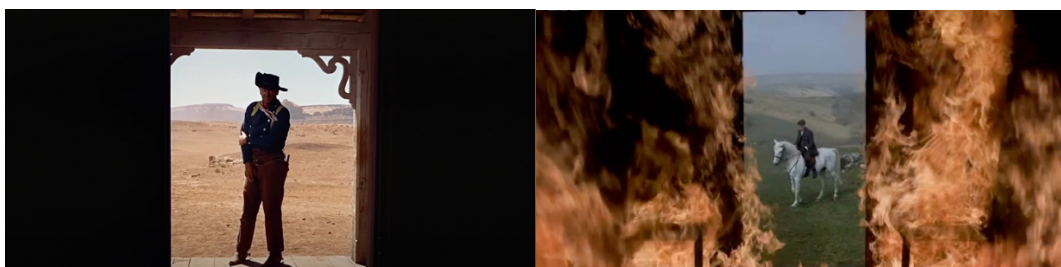
Despite Holford's attempts to reason with Tommy, Tommy replies, "I am back. Back from under the ground." With the accompanying clock chime, Tommy's decision to leave the doctor alive, suggests a surrendering of the 'inner kernel' which has structured and governed his post-war life; a sense of self marked and shaped by the horrors of the war and his failure to come to terms with the loss of his former wife, daughter, and younger brother. During the war itself, Tommy and his elder brother were part of a tunnelling company within the British Army.² With Tommy being 'back from under the ground', there is the suggestion of an overcoming of this past: a past which has, over the course of the final season, haunted him through vivid hallucinations depicting him underground, fighting hand-to-hand against a German soldier. Accordingly, Tommy's subjective destitution underscores the forgoing of any such attachment to this past, denoting, as Derek Hook explains, "a state of ego-dissipation where one might truly hear and accept what is most terrible about myself and the symbolic-historical heritage that I am heir to" (2011, 500). There is no 'forced choice' here, but, instead, a re-choosing—a choosing to hear and accept the chime of a bell—that effectively restructures the coordinates of one's symbolic field. These new symbolic coordinates reveal the paradoxes of the Lacanian subject: a de-subjectivised subject founded in the destitution of a 'choice' that undermines the very choices that are afforded.

This is confirmed when Tommy returns to his caravan. Tommy realises that the doctor's groundsman has already set the caravan ablaze, with Tommy's possessions and memories of the past consumed by the flames. Standing in front of the burning caravan, Tommy's past is lost. In fact, with the discovery of the burnt-out wreck, one could assume that Tommy has perished with the flames. To this extent, the burning caravan denotes a traversing of the fantasy, a radical move which confirms Tommy's subjective destitution. With his personal possessions and his familial memories and heritage set to burn, he is witness to "the violent act of setting off the ontic properties that lie at the heart of subjectivity" (Khader 2017, 140)... himself. This destitution does not suggest his literal disappearance (he's clearly still alive), but his "reduction to a zero-point, the disintegration of [... his] entire symbolic universe," entombed within the burning fire, and the subsequent possibility of his 'rebirth' (Žižek 2020b, 371). Ultimately, this 'rebirth' dislocates Tommy from the metonymy of his desire. It effectively 'vanishes'

him from his subjectivity to a position of enunciation that occupies a “place between the two deaths”—indeed, a position of impossibility (Lacan 1992, 295).

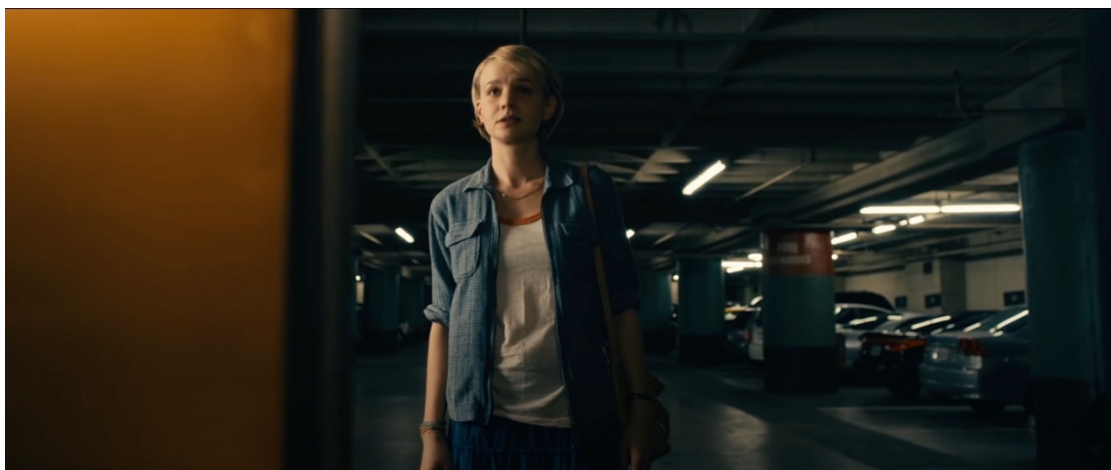


The final shot of the episode, and series, gives credit to this interpretation. After a final close-up of Tommy, we cut to an inside shot of the burning caravan, with the caravan’s open door filling the centre of the shot. Astride his hoarse, Tommy is positioned within the centre of the open door. The shot bears a notable resemblance to the final scene from John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956).³ In the film, Ethan, played by John Wayne, is set with the task of saving his niece, Debbie (Natalie Wood/Lana Wood), who has been abducted by Comanche Indians. After rescuing Debbie, Ethan returns her to the family home. As Debbie and the family move offscreen, the shot of the open door fills the centre of the frame. Standing outside, Ethan lingers at the open door, before turning and walking away, the door shutting behind him. Formally, the scene is echoed in the final scene of *Peaky Blinders*. Linger on his horse, Tommy takes one final look into the caravan, and then rides away. The camera, and us, the audience, remain inside the burning caravan, as the roof collapses and the screen goes black.



In the case of Ethan, we witness how “He stands as a necessary absence” within the film (McGowan 2013, 336): his separation from the family, and the ‘domestication’ of the ‘Wild West’, set apart from Ethan’s position as the violent frontiersman. In doing so, Ford leaves the audience on the side of the family home, with Ethan’s necessary exclusion upholding the fact that such domesticity can only ever be maintained through the very absencing of that which works to establish it.

In a notable comparison, McGowan refers to a scene from the film *Drive* (2011), where, after viciously murdering a man in an elevator, the spectator is positioned on the side of the murderer: an unnamed Hollywood stunt driver moonlighting as a criminal getaway driver. While committing the brutal attack, the Driver (Ryan Gosling) does it in front of the woman he has fallen in love with, Irene (Carey Mulligan). Unaware of the violence he is capable of, Irene leaves the elevator and stares back in fear as the elevator door closes. Inside the closed elevator with the Driver, “the film places the spectator with the missing and excluded signifier, in direct contrast to the final shot from *The Searchers*” (McGowan 2013, 337). For McGowan, “This scene from *Drive* reveals the political project of psychoanalysis in an image form” (2013, 337). This project is underscored by the scene’s relation to the gaze. By using the scene from *Drive* to help emphasise the distortion of the gaze—a necessary absence within the filmic experience, which, on most occasions, is excluded for the spectator—“*Drive* pushes this logic even further by locating the spectator within the distortion itself” (McGowan 2016, 81). This helps to certify how the distortion of the gaze remains inescapable.



Certainly, whereas McGowan (2013) praises the political consequences of locating the spectator on behalf of the ‘missing signifier’—the necessary absence encapsulated in the nameless driver, an absence that underscores the subject’s inherent absence, universally shared—it is also clear that we cannot remain in this subjectless state... eventually, we must leave the elevator. As Adrian Johnston notes, “Lacan does not consider it possible or desirable to dwell permanently in such an analysis terminating destitute state” (cited in Žižek 2020a, 66). Instead:

He [Lacan] sees it as both appropriate and inevitable that egos, big Others, subjects supposed to know, and the like will reconstitute themselves for the analysand in the aftermath of his/her analysis. Hopefully, the versions of these reconstituted in the wake of and in response to analysis will be better, more liveable versions for the analysand. (Johnston cited in Žižek 2020a, 66)

Evidently, in both *The Searchers* and *Peaky Blinders* the opposite occurs, with the necessary absence of Ethan and Tommy set apart from the spectator, who, in the case of *The Searchers*, is left within the family home, and, in the case of *Peaky Blinders*, remains within the collapsing caravan. Yet, it is here that an important distinction can be drawn. In the final shot of *Peaky Blinders*, we are left inside the fiery caravan, a clear indicator that the audience are entombed within the remains of Tommy’s past, and, to this extent, it is the spectator who is positioned with the violent trauma that has marked the past six seasons. Within the framing of the scene, it is Tommy’s exclusion that cements his subjective destitution, his traversing the fantasy, and, ultimately, the realization that his very treasure—his own subjectivity—is worthless and easily left behind. Positioned *within* the burning caravan, the audience remain separated from Tommy’s point-of-view and thus removed from his subsequent reconstitution (who knows where Tommy is set to travel?). Looking out at Tommy’s achieved destitution, we are left inside the burning vestiges of his former self, soon to be destroyed.



Therefore, while acts of subjective destitution work to fundamentally reveal the inherent nonsense—the inherent lack—of the big Other/Symbolic order, ultimately, they can serve to secure the realization that this nonsense holds a social and ethical significance, encapsulated in the mundanity of a past, now left behind. Following Johnston, Tommy will encounter new, hopefully better, big Others; however, for the spectator, it is the impossibility of any final resolution or direction to Tommy's future which compounds their position in relation to the scene.⁴ Within the confines of the collapsing caravan, we are left in the position of what now lies outside the social and political order as well as to what is now excluded: a true position of universality, a form of “forcing us out of ourselves” (Ruda 2020) towards the subject's “impenetrable abyss” (Žižek 2010, 120)... a subject at the end of analysis.

Notes

¹ The original appearance of this quotation has been included in the reference list. The translated quotation is drawn from Russell Grigg's translation (see Lacan, Jacques. “Proposition of 9 October 1967 on the Psychoanalyst of the School.” *London Society of the New Lacanian School*, translated by Russell Grigg. <https://londonsociety-nls.org.uk/index.php?file=The-School/The-Proposition-of-the-Ninth-of-October-1967-Jacques-Lacan.html>).

² In World War One, the British Army's Royal Engineer tunnelling companies were tasked with digging tunnels under enemy lines. Here, the series echoes Sebastian Faulks novel, *Birdsong* (1993), which contains an interleaving story of a miner who, while underground in the British tunnels, listens for German tunnellers.

³ The scene has proven popular amongst psychoanalytic interpretations, with Robert Pippin (2009), Žižek (2010) and McGowan (2013; 2016) analysing the well-known

scene. In my *Race, Racism and Political Correctness in Comedy – A Psychoanalytic Exploration* (Black, 2021), I draw upon the scene to help analyse examples of comedy from the British sitcom, *The Office*.

⁴ The saga is set to continue with a forthcoming film, where, at the time of writing, Tommy's—or, rather, Cillian Murphy's—role within the film has not been confirmed. Perhaps, therefore, the true ending of the show is here, with the television finale. A rare achievement for a television series. Indeed, one is reminded of McGowan and Ryan Engley's *Why Theory?* podcast, where they frequently discuss how the 'correct' ending to a show very rarely succeeds at its prescribed end (it's finale), but at some point during one of its seasons.

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