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Modalities of a rupturing experience: applying Žižek's topological reading of the Lacanian real to COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 can be viewed as a societal rupture, a phenomenon that caused widespread disorientation. Studies applying Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis to social sciences have shown this by arguing that COVID-19 was an 'encounter with the real,' representing a disordered upheaval that questions social norms and cultural customs, as the real is a register of impossibility that reveals a void or gap in the socio-symbolic structure. What remains unaddressed in these studies is the topological nature of the Lacanian real and how it is embedded in every register of psychic experience, which Lacanian theory classifies as the imaginary, symbolic, and real. Slavoj Žižek has highlighted this by constructing 'knots' of 'imaginary-real,' 'symbolic-real,' and 'real-real.' In this paper, I will use these knots to analyse the experience of COVID-19 as a societal rupture.

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Introduction

The Plague (1948, p. 107) by Albert Camus describes the ongoing epidemic in the Algerian city of Oran as '*the thick of calamity that one gets hardened to the truth – in other words, to silence.*' By establishing a symbiotic relation of calamity, truth, and silence, Camus illustrates how a sudden traumatic event, such as an epidemic, is experienced. The experience can foster a disorienting existentiality, where the questions of truth rise, but are answered by silence. Since the book is read as an allegory to the French resistance to Nazi occupation during World War II, the statement can be interpreted as a more universal representation of a rupture. This disruptive societal phenomenon generates experiences that manifest very differently but are characterised by this existential disruptiveness. In this regard, the notion of (societal) rupture can be viewed through the definition of Martin Hoolbrad et al. (2019, p. 2), in which the rupture is seen very generally as '*a radical, sometimes violent and even brutal form of discontinuity.*'

In this paper, I ask *whether COVID-19, as a societal rupture, can be viewed through Slavoj Žižek's topological reading of Jacques Lacan's concept of the real.* My wager here is to argue that COVID-19 was an 'encounter with real,' meaning a disordering eruption that challenges the cultural and societal codes and patterns. As I will demonstrate, many Lacanian social-scientific studies on COVID-19 have already proven this – implicitly or explicitly.

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What is left unnoticed is the topological nature of the experience: how the rupture can influence every register that dictates human experience, which, in Lacanian theory, are the imaginary, symbolic, and real. These registers can be knotted together in various ways, generating different topological maps of experiences, but from the perspective of the rupture, the real is the register of disruption. To map the comprehensive experience of a rupture, one needs to examine it through registers of imaginary-real, symbolic-real, and real-real – tied together by Žižek. Thus, I will study how the societal rupture of COVID-19 is mediated through these knots. The topological reading of COVID-19 provides a framework for examining societal ruptures uniformly without reducing the heterogeneity of the experience, since the disruptive phenomenon is investigated through different psychic registers.

My study is rooted in research literature that examines collective or societal experiences of ruptures. Many of these studies are grounded in cultural research on cultural trauma. From the historian's perspective, Dominick LaCapra (2014) focuses on the 'negative sublime' side of trauma and how a traumatic event is articulated through writing. Cathy Caruth (1996) sheds light on the intertwined relation of language and trauma through literary theory and psychoanalysis. Jeffrey Alexander (2012) examines, from a sociological perspective, how social groups generate meaning from traumatic events. These studies and their research fields focus on more societal and collective traumatic events, most notably the holocaust.

Research on societal ruptures is also located in phenomenological studies. Michal Lipták (2025) has demonstrated how the canon of continental phenomenology tries to transcend contingency and seeks apodictic and necessary, i.e. the normal and optimal phenomena. Nonetheless, there is a margin focusing on the collapse back to contingency by interpreting the phenomenology of rupture as a 'limit phenomenon.' The phenomenological tradition has also focused on the societal rupture of COVID-19. Scholars such as Cyril Tarquinio (2020) and Pablo Velasco et al. (2022) have theorised the feeling of disorientation and linked it to COVID-19, thus conceptualising a general sense of 'being out of place' caused by this event. Judith Butler attempted to account for the common experience of the pandemic in their book *What World is This: A Pandemic Phenomenology* (2022). I align with Butler's approach, which suggests that '*of all the ways "the world," and specifically this world, might be investigated as an object of inquiry – via "geography, astronomy, world literature, systems theory, environmental science" – this project is phenomenological, which is to say, lived experience will take center stage*' (Reynolds, 2023).

Although I'm focusing on the general lived experience of the pandemic, the Lacanian approach doesn't need to be strictly assimilated into cultural trauma studies or the phenomenological tradition, since it can utilise its own theoretical and methodological categories, namely registers of psychic experience: the imaginary, symbolic, and real. Nonetheless, the Lacanian approach doesn't need to be clinical and focus on the individual's psyche on the experience of societal rupture. The Lacanian reception in the social sciences underscores this. For example, the well-established research tradition on ontological security examines, from the perspective of Lacan, how different ruptures can be regarded generally and collectively as encounters with the real that destabilise the socio-symbolic edifice (the imaginary and symbolic) (e.g. Andreescu, 2021; Eberle, 2019; Kinnvall & Svensson, 2023). A particularly clear reference for my study's disposition is Paul Crosthwaite's article '*Is a Financial Crisis a Trauma?*' (Crosthwaite, 2012), which takes as

its methodological point of departure the topological framework of Žižekian real and examines how the financial crisis was, on a general societal level, a traumatic experience of the symbolic-real.

I structure my paper by first presenting how Lacanian psychoanalysis and its multi-disciplinary research literature approach trauma, rupture, and COVID-19. The dynamics of rupture, strictly from a psychoanalytic perspective, are to be found in Lacan's commentary on trauma, which can be theorised as a notion of rupture in the social-scientific reception of Lacan. This reception is also applied to the societal rupture of COVID-19. Since these studies don't take into account the topology of the real and its relation to rupture, I subsequently illustrate the Žižekian interpretation of Lacan's topology as my theoretical framework. Lastly, I apply the Žižekian topology of the real (imaginary-real, symbolic-real, and real-real) to examine the different disruptive phenomena of COVID-19. These phenomena are presented through topical research literature on the theme.

Lacanian psychoanalysis on trauma, rupture, and COVID-19

If a fracture within the societal confines is vaguely defined as a societal rupture, the Lacanian commentary on dynamics such as this can be found in the Lacanian notion of trauma. In this chapter, I argue that Lacan's commentary on trauma, and thus the Lacanian commentary on ruptures, can be seen as an 'encounter with the real' – as a process where the lack of reality is faced. Subsequently, I will illustrate how this dynamic is demonstrated in societal studies on COVID-19, which apply Lacanian psychoanalysis as their theoretical framework.

Lacan defines trauma as an 'encounter with the real,' which could be translated to facing the non-symbolised part of reality (Lacan, 1998, p. 55; Verhaeghe, 2002, pp. 129–130). This refers to Lacan's notion of the real, which is a contested concept in Lacan's *oeuvre* and is defined differently in different periods of Lacan's seminars (cf. chapter below), but generally could be seen as coded impossibility in socio-symbolic experienced reality, or as Lacan put it: *'Not in the name of a simple obstacle we hit our heads up against, but in the name of the logical obstacle of what, in the symbolic, declares itself to be impossible. This is where the real emerges from'* (Lacan, 2006, p. 123). The socio-symbolic order relates to Lacan's registers of the symbolic and imaginary, which create the phenomenological experience of reality through language, cultural norms, and images that subjects hold (Black, 2020, p. 4). Therefore, trauma is related to something unexpected, where continuity of life is disrupted. As Gregory Bistoën argues: *'A traumatic encounter is defined by the fact that the pre-existent "logic of the system" was proven insufficient to deal with what has occurred: it is because the traumatic event cannot be assimilated or recuperated in this system ...'* (2016, pp. 54, 79). Clinically, the Lacanian notion of trauma posits itself against the mainstream notion of trauma characterised by DSM and PTSD discourse. In the discourse, the causality of trauma is seen, similar to Lacan, as unexpected and contingent, but at the same time, it relies on 'Newtonian' causality where A leads to B, since it tries to map out the linear cause-and-effect of the trauma. For example, the topic research of PTSD focuses on genetic risk factors and the overall predisposition of PTSD by different psychometric and physical tests (Wright, 2020, p. 238).

Bistoën describes how the current state of trauma research is characterised by, on the one hand, clinical accounts like neurosciences, cognitive psychology, and clinical

psychiatry, but on the other hand, cultural research fields like literature research, holocaust studies, and postcolonial research. The Lacanian perspective works between these accounts, since psychoanalysis observes trauma as a clinical and cultural phenomenon (Bistoën, 2016, p. vi-vii). On a theoretical level, the Lacanian psychoanalysis's relation to trauma takes its moment of departure from the socio-symbolic reality, which is, as Black argues, primarily a cultural and societal structure, and thus it is highly linked to the socio-symbolic reality's breakdown, meaning the breakdown of cultural and societal coordinates. Thus, Florentina C. Andreescu (2013) argues that radical social change can be studied as a Lacanian traumatic event that opens the socio-symbolic registers. Crosthwaite (2012) has applied the Lacanian notion of trauma to the financial crisis and analysed how the collective experience of the crisis could be described as an encounter with the real. In addition, Bistoën connects the traumatic encounter to the political rupture, which has been a keen interest of Lacanian scholars applying Lacan to social issues (Bistoën, 2016, p. 104; cf.; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Stavrakakis, 1999; Eisenstein & McGowan, 2012).

This connection of social trauma to political rupture paves the way for the more general reading of different societal ruptures as the Lacanian encounter with the real. The theoretical premise for interpreting a general societal rupture as an encounter with the real can be read from Jacques-Alain Miller, the editor of Lacan's seminars. In a 2008 interview addressing the financial crisis of that year, Miller provides a preliminary conceptualisation of a societal crisis from a psychoanalytic standpoint. He does not focus on the individual psyche, but rather on the collective experience. Miller states that:

There is a crisis in the psychoanalytic sense when discourse, words, figures, rites, routine, the whole symbolic apparatus, is suddenly found to be powerless in tempering an unruly real. A crisis is the real unchained, impossible to master. It is the equivalent, in civilisation, of those storms that periodically come to remind the human species of their lack of security and fundamental debility. (trans. Garoz, 2014)

The key theoretical takeaway from the quotation is the fact that Miller sees crises as processes where *'the real is unchained.'* In Lacanian parlance, this means that in the event of crisis/rupture, some form of a void or a gap surfaces, if the real is defined as a gap within the socio-symbolic order of reality. In other words, in a societal rupture, society experiences the fact that it is fundamentally flawed and precarious. A rupture reveals the inherent fractures in human institutions.

This general reading of a social rupture as a crisis where the Lacanian real is confronted opens a way to interpret social-scientific studies of Lacanian psychoanalysis from this perspective, and many theoretical and empirical studies on COVID-19 lean on this dynamic. On a theoretical level, Žižek himself (2020, p. 14) states that the pandemic was *'a result of natural contingency at its purest, that it just happened and hides no deeper meaning,'* in which the pandemic is interpreted as an encounter with the real (cf. Black, 2020).¹ Similarly, Western (2020) argues that the prevailing 'capitalism-science' apparatus of the Western world has caused nature to disappear, which returned to the lifeworld through *'an intrusion of the real'* in the case of the pandemic. More on the empirical level, Kinnvall and Svensson (2023) have also illustrated through the theory of ontological (in) security, which leans greatly on the Lacanian psychoanalysis (e.g. Eberle, 2019; Vieira, 2017; Vulovic & Ejodus, 2024), that in COVID-19 the ontological lack, the lacking apparatus

of security, the real, was faced. Through a Lacanian biopolitics, J. Peter Burgess (2023, p. 8) sees COVID-19 as *'ground zero of meaning'* and connects it to the Lacanian real in which the biopolitical apparatus tries to create significance through corporeal experience. Küchenhoff (2021) illustrates that COVID-19 was an event where the real surfaced, which was transformed into a Freudian uncanny imaginary object, meaning that the pandemic questioned familiar life experiences and introduced a feeling of displacement to the lifeworld.

The Lacanian commentary on trauma, societal rupture, and lastly, the specific rupture of COVID-19 proves that in these ruptures, there is an underlying dynamic of 'encountering the real.' On a theoretical level, Lacan's theory of trauma can be read more generally and from a societal perspective as an event where the real surfaces, which was concretely sensed in the case of COVID-19. How is the surfacing of the real sensed? What kind of different experiences does the eruption of the real generate? I approach these questions by introducing Žižek's topological reading of the real, which highlights the intrusion of the real as a uniform but multidimensional experience.

The three knots of the real

The concept of real in Žižek's *oeuvre* refers to the inconsistency of reality – as with the Lacanian definition. Black (2020, p. 4) describes the Žižekian real as *'though it [the real] does not sit "behind" or "beyond reality", it does constitute a "void" or "gap" within the socio-symbolic orders that we use to structure and orientate our lives'*. This notion stems from the later seminars of Lacan, as it can be interpreted in the first seminars of the 1950s that the concept of the real means only the sphere of reality that *'what resists symbolisation absolutely'* and *'something one always finds in the same place, whether or not one has been there'* (Lacan 1991, 66, 297). In layman's terms, the real can be seen as part of reality that would appear if the symbolic register could be set aside (cf. McGowan, 2025, pp. 61–62). In the seminars of the 1960s and 1970s, the concept shifts into commentary on the impossibility of the symbolic and imaginary orders, similar to Žižek (e.g. Lacan 2018; Lacan 2006). The commentary leans more clearly to the interpretation in which there isn't reality beyond the symbolisation, and the real is just a coded impossibility in reality – not a divide between transcendental object beyond reality and empirical reality (cf. Žižek & Daly, 2004, p. 67).

The conversation about real needs also must consider the topological nature of Lacan's registers (the symbolic, imaginary, and real). Lacan emphasises that these registers are interconnected and do not operate on a single plane through the illustration of a 'Borromean knot' that holds these registers together (Lacan, 2016) (Figure 1). Although Žižek occasionally treats the real as a more singular register or plane (as Black illustrates in his definition of Žižek's real), he also highlights its topological reading. As a topological category, the real should be understood as imaginary-real, symbolic-real, and ultimately 'real-real,' where the real forms the framework within which the triad of registers is interpreted.

The topology of Žižekian real is characterised by an intellectual history in which the concept is defined in different and even contradictory ways, but ultimately, it is given a rather coherent definition. Gregory Flemming (2015) has provided a short introduction to the intellectual history of the topological real in Žižek's thinking². The first

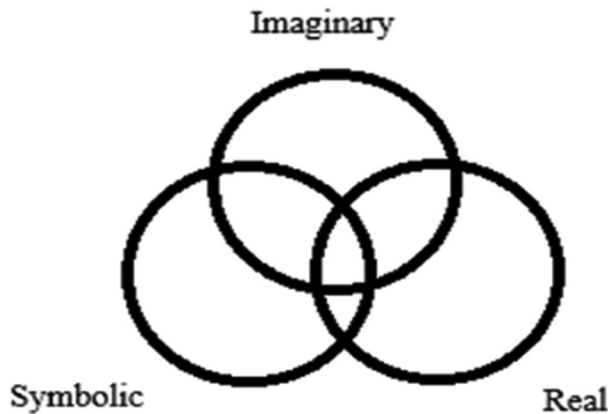


Figure 1. The intersecting Borromean knot is usually illustrated through the Borromean rings.

interpretation of the real's topology appears in the book *On Belief* (2004/2001), where Žižek sees imaginary-real as '*abyss of the primordial Life-Thing*.' This can be interpreted as part of an experience in which an image of something very corporeal or 'raw' is encountered, and Žižek compares this to the palpitating flesh of Freud's well-known patient Irma. The symbolic-real is presented as '*meaningless letter/formula*', which refers to an experience of something that structures reality but doesn't operate on a level that is known. For example, quantum mechanics can be located in this dimension (cf. Žižek, 2004/2001, p. 82). Flemming argues that the symbolic-real is defined rather homologically throughout the development of the topological real. In addition, Flemming states that Žižek contradicts himself regarding the development of the real-real. Žižek (2004/2001, p. 82) interprets the real-real as '*the horrifying thing, the primordial object, like Irma's throat*,' which clearly is very similar to the imaginary-real (cf. Flemming, 2015, 162). The second time the topology of the real is brought up is in *For They Know Not What They Do* (2008/1999). The real-real is defined as '*horrifying thing, the primordial object, from Irma's throat to the Alien*,' and imaginary-real as '*the unfathomable "something" on account of which the sublime dimension shines through an ordinary object*' (Žižek 2008/1999, p. xii). This leaves the topology in a very puzzled and contradictory state.

The clarification of the topology is found in *Schlagend, aber nicht Treffend!* (Žižek, 2006c) (cf. Flemming, 2015, p. 162), where the imaginary-real is seen as '*thing beyond representation in its monstrosity*,' '*primordial abyss that swallows everything, dissolving all identities*,' and the real-real is articulated as '*purely formal gap/limitation that thwarts or dislocates every symbolic identity*.' In summary, Žižek states that the real is '*the abyssal vortex of the Thing, the mathematized consistent structure of reality, the purely formal limit of every objectivity*' – the imaginary-real, symbolic-real, and real-real (Žižek, 2006c, p. 195). This is the definition I apply in this paper, as it is the last instance where Žižek defines the real in terms of topology and where the contradictory definitions are removed.³

More concretely, the imaginary-real can be seen as something so 'raw thingness' that the image doesn't fit into a framework where the ordinary reality is seen. For example, natural disasters or corporeal experiences, such as blood and flesh, could be seen as representing the imaginary-real. As stated, the definition of symbolic-real doesn't clearly

change during Žižek's *oeuvre*, and the real in its context can, for example, be interpreted as the capital's turbulent circulation (cf. Žižek., 2000, p. 276), to give a more empirical and societal example to quantum mechanics. The symbolic-real is located in the processes that are fundamental to existence but, at some level, work beyond conscious experience. Lastly, the real-real is the most abstract experience, since it is purely a formal limit of every objectivity. One can still think of Miller's definition of a crisis as one example in which society's debility is faced. The abstract experience of crisis points out that society isn't perfectly structured and that it has a fundamental lack. During ruptures, this can be something that isn't grasped, but sensed.

Three modalities of the COVID-19 experience

In Lacanian parlance, a rupture can be regarded as an 'encounter with the real,' and many social-scientific studies connect this dynamic to societal ruptures, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, the social-scientific studies nearly completely disregard the topological reading of the real, and thus don't analyse the encounter holistically. Since COVID-19 is already interpreted as the Lacanian notion of 'encounter with the real', it is especially fruitful to review the disruptive experience of COVID-19 through the topological reading of the real. The experiences of COVID-19 from the perspective of imaginary-real, symbolic-real, and real-real generate a variety of different experiences, but these experiences are connected since they all demonstrate the notion of 'encounter with real', a disruptive effect of a rupture.

In this chapter, I categorise the phenomena of imaginary-real, symbolic-real, and real-real of COVID-19. Through the topic research of different experiences of the rupture, I demonstrate how these experiences are connected to the different topological nodes of the Lacanian real.

Imaginary-real

Since Žižek defines 'imaginary-real' as '*abyssal vortex of the Thing*', it is clear that Žižek is stating that in the experience of the imaginary-real, one is facing an image of something preliminary, raw, and thing-like. Therefore, the image that arises is almost mysterious, an excluded entity, which is a revelation of something more real than the socio-symbolic day-to-day experience. The Žižekian definition relates to Lacan's commentary on the 'Thing'. The Thing, for Lacan (1997, pp. 54–55), is an entity that resists symbolisation, and Lacan connects it to 'dumb reality'. Nonetheless, the Thing really doesn't represent 'more real reality' since it resists symbolisation and thus is inaccessible. Lacan states that the subject circles around it and never achieves it and that it is a lost object that must be continually refounded (1997, pp. 53, 93). Therefore, the imaginary-real can be understood as images that arise from rupture and are experienced as something primordial and concrete, even as they still operate within the topological node of the imaginary, alongside the real. I locate examples of rupturing experiences of the imaginary-real during COVID-19 in the pandemic's (political) imaginary. I examine how the infected and the virus itself were seen as an excess of society, in which the infected and the virus represented an excluded pre-symbolic thingness.

The pandemic created a political imaginary of the infected as an excluded entity. In this regard, the imaginary-real can be connected to the discussion of abjection and its cultural interpretation. Abjection refers to Julia Kristeva's book *Powers of Horror* (Kristeva, 1982), in which she states that the abject is an entity that is radically excluded and draws one towards a state where meaning collapses since it disturbs identities and orders. In relation to Lacan, Kristeva's notion can be read as visceral experience, where the real surfaces (Hook, 2003, p. 44). Kristeva's notion is very culturally embedded, and it has been used to analyse tropes of horror literature and film (e.g. Arya, 2014; Creed, 1986). For example, the body is an ultimate abjection since it is the corporeal exteriority, a 'body without soul'. Thus, many horror tropes illustrate the notion of 'bodies without souls' (e.g. vampires, zombies, and ghouls) (Creed, 1986, 70). Similar to Kristeva's abjection, Noys (2010, p. 6) connects horror tropes to Žižek's imaginary-real and its tendency to construct a 'monstrous Thing'. In other words, horror literature and films tend to construct an image of a primordial, 'more real' thing, as most notably the film *The Thing* (1982) demonstrates. Thus, if Kristeva's notion of abjection is interpreted as the eruption of the real, and if it's homologous to Noys' interpretation of horror tropes, one can read it through the imaginary-real register.

As Larissa Pfaller (2020, pp. 825–826) argues, during COVID-19, the infected were constructed as an abject entity. For example, in the U.S.A., people of presumed Asian origin were stigmatised and discriminated against as the zero patient was connected to Wuhan (Park, 2020). Likewise, in Canada and the U.S.A., healthcare workers reported discrimination when it became known that they worked with COVID-19 patients (e.g. Taylor et al., 2020). In her study on Australian pandemic imaginary on infectious bodies, Lisa Wynn (2021, p. 350) describes how '[f]ear of unknown sickness and death drives representations of infectious disease as an invisible monster.' Ato Onoma (2020) highlights how outbreaks of epidemics can be related to 'outbreaks' of xenophobia. The infected become a visible fear for the invisible pathogen (Strong, 2021). This imaginary naturally demonstrates the cultural status of hygiene and purity as an important factor of social order (Pfaller, 2020, 826; cf. Douglas, 1984), but it also links it to the notion of imaginary-real, where the infected are seen as the 'monstrous Thing' as something raw, natural excess of society that threatens the social order.

The imaginary of the virus itself could also be seen as a construct of the imaginary-real. This relates to Lacan's and Žižek's notion of nature, in which nature is seen as 'impotent' in itself, which is to say it is to become 'more-than-natural' (Johnston, 2008, pp. 30–32; cf. Knight, 2023). In other words, nature in its purity isn't an existing realm, but it only comes into being through socio-symbolic coordinates, i.e., the symbolic register, which already makes a realm of 'more-than-natural'. Thus, nature is seen as the real that can only manifest itself as a remainder of the 'pure nature,' the mythical 'world-egg', which Žižek sees as '[standing] for the Real in its most terrifying imaginary dimension, as the primordial abyss which swallows everything, dissolves all identities' (Knight, 2023, pp. 86–87; Žižek, 2006a, p. 72).⁴ The primordial nature is just a range of eruptions that endanger the socio-symbolic reality, which can be connected to the register of imaginary-real. Through this understanding, Knight (2023, pp. 83, 87) connects the eruption of nature to the notion of a virus, which stands for the 'immortal,' 'monistic,' and 'amoeba-like' life. A life that isn't affected by the historical-cultural progress and is represented in its 'atavistic' form. A virus is a construction of a mystical pure nature that resists the experienced socio-symbolic

reality. Thus, a virus such as COVID-19 can be interpreted as a phenomenon of the imaginary-real that represents the definition of imaginary-real as '*abyss of the primordial Life-Thing*.' COVID-19, as a virus, is constructed as an antediluvian, 'more real' entity that intrudes into our daily lives.

This kind of imagination of the virus could be seen in interpretations that cast the virus as a 'message from nature,' as Inger Andersen, the Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme, stated in her speech (CarbonBrief, 2020). Many researchers have also argued similarly, by focusing, for example, on the loss of animal habitats, making it easier for the virus to spread (Diprose & Neal, 2020) and deforestation linked to the reduction of biodiversity, increasing the zoological effects of the virus (Vidal, 2020). These remarks have prompted even an ethical study on the topic of 'nature sending a message' (cf. Weckert, 2020). This narrative aligns with the imaginary-real interpretation of the virus, since it conceives it as 'pure nature' arising from the outside of cultural-historical development. Although not explicitly focused on the virus imagination, Jennifer Boivin's (2023) study on the COVID-19 media narratives, arguing that the wildlife was reclaiming the urban spaces of society during lockdowns, follows similar logic: the virus opened a space for 'real' nature to appear.

Symbolic-real

Since the symbolic-real is, according to Žižek, '*the mathematized consistent structure of reality*,' and '*meaningless letter/formula*,' it relates to phenomena that are, on some level, excluded from the ordinary experience of reality, but still clearly are constitutive forces of it. In the context of societal rupture, the discussion of the symbolic-real is strictly connected to the logic of capital – as Crosthwaite underlines. Crosthwaite quotes Žižek, who argues that capital is the real of our age, and describes how it, as an abstract process, shapes our lifeworld disruptively, by stating that

The problem is that this 'abstraction' is not only in our (financial speculator's) misperception of social reality – it is 'real' in the precise sense of determining the structure of the material social processes themselves: the fate of whole strata of populations, and sometimes of whole countries, can be decided by the 'solipsistic' speculative dance of Capital. (Žižek, 2000, p. 276; cf.; Crosthwaite, 2012, pp. 42–43)

As stated, Crosthwaite's interpretation of the financial crisis as an experience of symbolic-real connects the capital as symbolic-real to the event of a crisis where it is experienced. Crosthwaite (2012, p. 47) illustrates how, in the event of economic crisis, such as the financial crisis, people face the underlying chaotic process of capital, which is not structured only by smooth transactions of the market but also by its warps and distortions. He argues through Jean-François Lyotard that due to mere '*economic signs – even the most abstract, and, it seems, the most innocent in the economist's eyes – the social body ... can fall apart*' (Crosthwaite 2012, p. 60; Lyotard 1993, 229). According to Harvey (2013), this is one of the main takeaways from Marx's (1992) *Capital*, vol. II, since the coded crisis tendency of capitalism is located also in the circulation process of capital, in addition to the production. This is to say that the capital's circulation isn't untroubled in its 'pure' form, but the tendency of crisis is located in it.

By the concept of a '*planetary crisis multiplicity*,' Albert (2022) connects the financial crisis and COVID-19 as similar crises structured by socio-ecological assemblages that unify different social, ecological, and economic processes and 'flows,' creating a complex network of crisis causality. Albert states that the financial crisis linked financial, food, and energy assemblages since the financial system triggered rising energy and food prices. These economic and ecological processes of rising costs could even be linked to protests in the Global South and the Arab Spring of 2010–2011 (Albert 2002, p. 348).

Similar to the financial crisis, Albert (2002, p. 350) illustrates that '*The COVID-19 crisis is the socio-ecological assemblage crisis par excellence, emerging from the microbial creativity made possible by the intersections between globalized finance, agro-industrial expansion, habitat destruction, and wildlife markets before setting off a still-unfolding cascade of shocks across global public health, political-economic, financial, energy, food, and supply-chain assemblages.*' Lemos (2020) highlights how the virus is primarily a relational phenomenon, arguing that '*from a neomaterialist analysis, we can say that the virus is far from being just an isolated biological entity, causing diseases in humans and spreading at the speed of world exchanges. Before being a natural object, it is the result of the intertwining of multiple instances and agencies*' (trans. Scolari, 2020). COVID-19, as a global pandemic, was precisely an outcome of a highly networked global infrastructure that, as a complex architecture, is capable of creating systemic ruptures (Clark-Ginsberg et al., 2021; Le Coze, 2023, p. 8).

Albert's analysis shows how COVID-19, as an event, illustrates interconnected disruptive processes shaping our world. These processes, or at least their disruptive functioning, are disregarded in international politics, governance, and trade – or more generally, in our day-to-day experience. Thus, Albert (2022, p. 351) adds, '*previously unknown vulnerabilities emerging from the dizzyingly complex material entanglements of our global economy have come to light.*'

The '*planetary crisis multiplicity*' notion demonstrates how the topological experience of COVID-19, within the node of symbolic-real, is to be seen as a constellation of different chaotic, turbulent, and uncontrollable connections, processes, and flows. Similar to the '*solipsistic mad dance of Capital*' of the financial crisis, the global social rupture of COVID-19 was characterised by disruptive flows and connections of planetary crisis multiplicity that were encountered during the societal rupture of the pandemic. As in Žižek's definition of symbolic-real, these processes are '*meaningless letter/formula,*' but at the same time part of '*the mathematized consistent structure of reality.*' In the context of the financial crisis, Crosthwaite (2012, p. 49) argues that representation of crisis doesn't succeed by presenting the pre-existing and appearing symbolic register, but it also needs to present the symbolic without signification, '*a field of inscrutable, indecipherable code.*' In other words, COVID-19 as a global rupture was an experience that depicted how the global order is a fragile body structured by bifurcative and chaotic processes that are only regarded when these processes constitute a rupture – an eruption of the real.

Real-real

The topological node of real-real is the most abstract phenomenological category of experience in Žižek's notion of the real. The real-real has only a node within itself, meaning it isn't structured in the context of the imaginary or symbolic registers that are

integrated into the experience of reality. Thus, the real-real could be said to be the 'real in itself', and in many instances when Žižek writes generally (without highlighting the topological reading) on the real, he refers to real-real. The real-real still affects socio-symbolic reality, meaning the symbolic and imaginary registers, as Black sums the Žižekian definition of the real as 'a "void" or "gap" within the socio-symbolic orders', in line with Žižek's own definition of the real-real, 'the purely formal limit of every objectivity.' The real-real is the formal shape of the real; it has no positive-substantial consistency, and it is only represented as a gap between a multitude of perspectives on it (Žižek, 2006b, p. 7). It is defined as a 'topological twist' and a curvature of space and time itself (Žižek, 2003, p. 73; Žižek & Daly, 2004, p. 78). Thus, the real-real is more the effect that it causes than a concrete thing. The real-real isn't the hard kernel of reality, a pure 'Thing', as it represents the imaginary-real, but actually the impossibility of having it – a coded limit in reality and the effects of this limit.

The concrete experience of real-real is hard to pinpoint since it can be regarded as an abstract experience of the rupture's disruptive effects that the encounter with the reality's limit generates. This could be viewed as an experience of disorientation or feeling out of place. As in Miller's definition of a crisis, the eruption of the real is a demonstration of society's debility. In the event of a rupture, the fundamental precarity of society is encountered. The rupture is a demonstration that the experienced socio-symbolic reality lacks an essential background to rely on, and thus, the socio-symbolic order always fails to create holistic meaning in the world.

Many phenomenological studies have approached COVID-19 from the perspective of disorientation and disruption. Pablo Velasco et al. (2021) argue that the pandemic illustrated a range of different disorientations, from political, social, and temporal to generalised disorientation. The authors state that their concept of non-spatial disorientation defines disorientation as losing the interpretative grid on the world and coordinates how to go on (Velasco et al. 2021, 5; cf. Earnshaw, 2019, p. 181; Saunders, 2016, p. 92). Similarly, Tarquinio (2020, p. 3) depicts that the pandemic deconstructed self-identity by 'the breakdown of established frames of reference through which we construct ourselves in a social context.' In a different article, Velasco et al. (2022, p. 1140) illustrate, following Ratcliffe's (2021) distinction between a limited experience of disorientation and an existential disorientation, that the pandemic generated an experience of existential disorientation in which one can't easily reorient oneself with the help of others since the pandemic disrupted the interpersonal relations that could have helped in the reorienting process. In Žižekian parlance, these experiences can be interpreted as limit phenomena, affected by the effect of the real-real. The pandemic demonstrated how the established patterns and coordinates aren't complete structures and how existential experiences, such as a pandemic, can illustrate this limitation.

Crystallising the phenomenological account of the pandemic, Judith Butler wrote a monograph, *What World is This: A Pandemic Phenomenology* (2022), during COVID-19, focusing on the overall experience of the pandemic world. Butler examines the disruptive feeling of the pandemic through Max Scheler's (1954) concept of the tragic. Butler cites Scheler, who describes how the tragic is 'above all a property [ein Merkmal] which we observe in events, fortunes, characters, and the like, and which actually exists in them. We might say that it is given off by them like a heavy breath [ein schwerer, kuehler Hauch, der von die sen Dingen selbst ausgeht], or seems like an obscure glimmering that

surrounds them' (Scheler, 1954, p. 178; cf. Butler, 2022, p. 22). First, the tragic is 'beyond the horizon of the world', an outside force permeating the lifeworld. Due to the tragic event, the tragic becomes the overall 'mood' in which the world exhibits itself, the 'heavy breath' inhabiting it (Butler, 2022, pp. 22–23). In the context of the pandemic, the tragic was the overall feeling of disorientation and feeling out of place that occurred because of the 'outside force' of the virus, and it set an overall tragic mood for the pandemic times.

In addition to other phenomenological studies on the pandemic's disorienting effects, Butler highlights how, for Scheler, the tragic manifests through tragic events, but it also exhibits something more: the tragic illustrates the 'very makeup of the world', meaning the elements that 'make such a thing possible' (Butler, 2002; Scheler, 1954, p. 182). The shock of the tragic event can therefore be understood as arising from the feeling of the world's incompetence in the face of the pandemic. Through a Žižekian reading,⁵ this could be interpreted as facing the gap in the socio-symbolic order – the fundamental limit that manifests only as effects (like disorientation and disruption) on the experience of reality. The experience of COVID-19, from the perspective of the real-real, was an encounter with the essential debility and precarity of society since, as a social totality, society is capable of producing a rupturing event like the pandemic.

The most developed understanding of the disorientation experienced during COVID-19 and its connection to the Lacanian real can be traced from the ontological security approach, which argues that various ruptures can disrupt the identity of the 'self,' i.e. the subject, or at the collective level, even nations and societies. Kinnvall and Svensson (2023) argue that COVID-19 worked as a traumatic encounter with the real and demonstrated how the ontological security, meaning in their case the patterns that characterise the nation, was shattered. This, as a theoretical argument, goes against the mainstream sociological account of ontological security, articulated by R. D. Laing (1960) and Anthony Giddens (1991), who wanted to see ontological security as complete and attainable, whereas the Lacanian account underlines the incompleteness of ontological (in)security. This fundamental incompleteness is manifested during crises such as COVID-19, which raised many insecurities (personal, health, economic, and social) (Kinnvall & Svensson, 2023, pp. 4, 7–8; cf.; Thomas, 2020). In another article, Kinnvall describes how, through COVID-19, one can see how '*ontological insecurity refers to such a state of disruption, where subjects have lost their stabilizing anchor, their ability to sustain a linear narrative through which they can answer questions about doing, acting, and being*' (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, p. 246). Along these lines, Florentina C. Andreescu (2021, pp. 220, 224–225) argues that COVID-19 was an eruption of the real, where the ontological security as a 'delusory shield' was fractured and the pandemic was '*a liminal situation that confronts humanity with, not solely one, but all four givens of existence: death, freedom, isolation, and meaningless*' and in which '*parts of the social fabric were torn apart.*'

Ontological security studies, similarly to the phenomenological account of disorientation, illustrate the real-real in a situation of rupture, such as COVID-19. Unlike the phenomenology of disorientation, Lacanian ontological (in)security studies even underscore that the self is ontologically incomplete⁶, and different ruptures are merely demonstrations of this fundamental precarity and debility. This can be seen as relating to Žižek's

definition of the real-real as '*the purely formal limit of every objectivity*' – the 'gap', 'void', or 'limit' that is essentially an insubstantial register which can only have effects in the form of disorientations to reality.

Discussion

The analysis depicted how a variety of different disruptive effects characterised the societal experience of COVID-19. The imaginary-real is defined as an '*abyssal vortex of the Thing*,' demonstrating how the imaginary-real was associated with experiences of (political) imaginary where something 'raw' and concrete imaginary of thingness was faced. As a topological knot, the imaginary-real sheds light on the disruptive experience of the infected and the virus itself. The research literature describes how the infected were constructed as 'monstrous things,' natural excess threatening the social order, and the virus was precisely the Žižekian '*Life-Thing*,' an image of pure nature intruding on society.

The symbolic-real depicted more of the overall experience of turbulent times during the pandemic. The symbolic-real, defined as '*the mathematized consistent structure of reality*' and '*meaningless letter/formula*,' constitutes a topological knot in which one can experience chaotic constitutive forces that are still excluded from the day-to-day experience. COVID-19, as a part of 'planetary crisis multiplicity,' illustrated how the pandemic was a constellation full of different political, social, natural, and cultural developments, bifurcations, and flows that intersected, thus creating an experience of the Žižekian symbolic-real.

The real-real, according to Žižek, is '*the purely formal limit of every objectivity*,' and therefore points out how the real-real generates the fundamental experience of disorientation, since, as a topological knot, it isn't integrated into registers that appear, but it is only an insubstantial effect of a limit or gap affecting reality. Phenomenological research on disorientation proves how this knot manifested in COVID-19, as it created social, political, and general disorientation. In addition, the ontological security research underlines how COVID-19 demonstrated the fundamental precarity and debility of humankind. The Lacanian ontological security literature focuses on the incompleteness of the security apparatus, meaning that there isn't a fully secured state of affairs. This incompleteness surfaces in events of ruptures, depicting how the experience of disorientation is caused by the fundamental gap located in the real-real.

These topological knots of Žižek demonstrate a variety of disruptive experiences during the pandemic. This can raise questions about the applicability of the Žižekian topology of the real, since it can combine very different, vaguely related experiences of disruption and thus contest the analytical or empirical value of the framework. Nonetheless, from the perspective of Lacanian topology, psychic life is tied together as a Borromean knot, and it would be more problematic to reduce the psychic experience of a certain phenomenon to a single plane. The abstract notion of disruption characterising COVID-19 functions as a proper Borromean knot that ties together a range of disruptive experiences of the pandemic. This opens a way to the phenomenology of rupture in a cohesive way without reducing its heterogeneity.

The main aim of this paper was to demonstrate how the Žižekian topology of the Lacanian real can be used to examine the disruptive experiences of ruptures in a uniform yet multidimensional manner, since in the social-scientific research of

Lacan, the real is usually associated with societal ruptures, but the topological account is often overlooked. My study stands as the first to utilise all of Žižek's knots of the real derived from Lacan's topology to interpret a societal rupture. Different ruptures can naturally highlight different topological knots of the real. Crosthwaite's (2012) is a clear depiction of this, since the financial crisis was predominantly a disruption in the symbolic-real, and the other topological knots weren't thus highlighted. Thus, the Žižekian interpretation of Lacan's topology can provide a theoretical framework that underlines different psychic experiences or examines them all together.

The 2020s are a decade marked by various societal disruptions, including COVID-19, the climate crisis, the war in Ukraine, and other geopolitical upheavals, each of which produces a range of disruptive experiences, along with potential intersectional impacts. As a result, alternative theoretical frameworks that address these societal ruptures by emphasising both the general experience and the heterogeneity of disruptive experiences are required. Žižek's topological interpretation of the Lacanian real can function as one.

Societal disruptions also pose a question of how to change things and could these disruptions mobilise for better societal conditions? In relation to this, Žižek has argued that the 2020s predicament of entangled crises could pave the way for emancipatory politics of what he calls 'subjective destitution.' The subjective destitution for Žižek means the process where facing the real and the experience of shattering symbolic coordinates won't activate a defence back to 'normal daily life,' but a revolutionary position that embraces the existential lack that the disruption introduces, and thus mobilises for a cause to change the *status quo*. (Žižek, 2022, pp. 327–430.) Although Žižek's emancipatory politics falls outside the scope of this text, the encounter with the real as a mobilising effect also needs to be defined in relation to the topology of the real. For example, the imaginary-real experience can construct the encounter as happening due to some singular non-symbolic thing and foster reactionary politics of scapegoating (as in the case of COVID-19), whereas the real-real could be interpreted as embracing the existential lack and the emancipatory politics. Thus, emancipatory politics of encountering the topological real could be a potential theme for future research.

Notes

1. In this regard, it needs to be stated that Žižek has written a lot on COVID-19 as a socio-political phenomenon, but the perspective has mainly been political, not theoretical – especially the two books on COVID-19 in the midst of the pandemic (Žižek, 2020, 2021), but also the *Surplus Enjoyment* (2022) and the *Freedom: A disease without a cure* (Žižek, 2023). Thus, in addition to this singular point, there has hardly been a theoretical commentary on COVID-19 as a phenomenon and how it relates to the Lacanian real.
2. Here, I strictly follow Flemming's intellectual mapping of Žižek's real, and thus the citations from Žižek are the same that Flemming uses.
3. Flemming (2015, p. 162) still thinks that the definition is 'more or less clear', and thus he supplements it by bringing it into conversation with the Marxian theory of capitalism.

4. Žižek and Lacan see this phenomenon of 'remainder of the pure nature' through the concept of *lamella* (cf. Žižek, 2006a; Lacan, 1998, pp. 196–200)
5. In this context, it is tactful to note that Žižek and Butler fundamentally disagree on the role of the real (cf. Butler et al., 2000), but I here treat Butler's text only as a phenomenological study on COVID-19 (as it is) – not related to theoretical disputes between the two.
6. Butler's account stands here as an exception.

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