

GDI 2k3

Zizek Supplement

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ZAC: ŽIŽEK FRONTLINE

TURN: TRAVERSING THE FANTASY IS NOT CAPABLE OF FOSTERING A PROGRESSIVE POLITICAL CHANGE — THE CRITIQUE RESULTS IN NO CHANGE.

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(Brian, "As If: Traversing the Fantasy in Žižek," Paragraph Vol. 24 Issue 2)

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Žižek occupies a rather paradoxical position for a Marxist. His aim to 're-hysterize' the subject, to return it to its questioning function, has an obvious correlation with his stated commitment to emancipation (in his prefaces to *The Žižek Reader* and *The Ticklish Subject*). But where Marxist 'ideology critique' is, as a rule, geared towards demystifying ideology in order to achieve some kind of greater awareness which can contribute to social change, so deeply rooted in the psychic structure is Žižek's idea of the fantasy that there (can be no change): we cannot deal in any other way with the void at the heart of ourselves. Ideology, in other words, is not just inevitable, but valuable, because without it we would lapse into neurosis or even psychosis. The implication of his analysis of contemporary culture is that exposing the fantasies which glue our being together might enable us to traverse them. But this is problematic, and not only because it brings us up against the familiar difficulty with psychoanalytic attempts to transpose the personal onto the collective — who would be the equivalent of the analyst? Žižek's notion of the ideological fantasy does not suggest it is a pathological symptom in the psyche of the subject: it is perfectly normal. Time and again he explains how our experience of social reality depends upon 'a certain as if': 'we act as if we believe in the almightiness of bureaucracy, as if the President incarnates the Will of the People, as if the Party expresses the objective interest of the working class'. But he also reminds us that if we do not act in this way 'the very texture of the social field disintegrates' (Žižek, 1989, 36) — and this is an outcome of a quite different order to political revolution.

151-2

ZAC: ŽIŽEK FRONTLINE

TURN: ŽIŽEK'S CONCEPT OF TRAVERSING THE FANTASY IS POLITICALLY BANKRUPT AND REINFORCES THE POWER OF THE DOMINANT IDEOLOGICAL SYSTEM.

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(Brian, "As If: Traversing the Fantasy in Zizek," Paragraph Vol. 24 Issue 2)

Perhaps there is a note of anxiety in all the compulsive energy of Žižek's project: he brilliantly unmasks the workings of ideology as if we can overthrow them, but is only too aware that this is impossible. Alternatively, this might well be the source of a certain critical jouissance we can detect in his continual affirmation of the unassailable quality of the big Other. In this respect Žižek himself shifts between the hysterical and the perverse positions in his theory: exposing the fragile status of the big Other by questioning it, while also investing in its ultimate status as the Law. Žižek's very method of exposing the ideological mechanism, in other words (reinforces its inevitability.) The paradox bears a strong similarity to Baudrillard's critique of Marxism in *The Mirror of Production*, that it depends upon precisely the same ideology (the idea of self-production) as the late-capitalist political economy it claims to deconstruct.¹⁶ Žižek's ubiquitous interpretative mechanism functions as the mirror of the transcendent processes he identifies at the heart of culture. We might even see its status in Žižek's work as the equivalent of the fundamental fantasy at the core of the individual, supporting his very identity as a theorist. Like Clarice Starling, who thinks she need only rescue one more victim and the lambs will stop crying, it is as if Žižek imagines he need give us just one more example of the traumatic encounter with the real and the dominance of the Big Other will be exposed and overthrown.¹⁷ This, as Hannibal Lecter might say, is no more than a fantasy. 7/8-3

ZAC: ŽIŽEK FRONTLINE.

TURN:

FANTASY AND IDEOLOGY ARE INTERCONNECTED — THEY ARE VITAL TO THE WAY WE COPE WITH 'TRUTH' AND SOCIAL REALITY — THE ALTERNATIVE IS FANTASAL WISH-FULFILLMENT

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(Brian, "As If: Traversing the Fantasy in Žizek," Paragraph Vol. 24 Issue 2)

For Žizek ideology is nothing less than the way we cope with the truth that subjectivity and social reality are each constructed around a traumatic void. Ideology is thus much more complex than Marxist critique has hitherto realized. When we take into account the real, Žizek says, 'it is no longer sufficient to denounce the "artificial" character of the ideological experience, to demonstrate the way the object experienced by ideology as "natural" and "given" is effectively a discursive construction, a result of a network of symbolic overdetermination' (Žizek, 1991a, 129). Žizek thus complicates two key tenets of ideology critique, the notion that ideology is a particular kind of discourse, and the idea that there is an alternative 'reality' behind the false one maintained by ideology. Ideology does preserve a false version of reality, but behind it is the *real*, a realm beyond signification, not another symbolic order. The key to Žizek's argument is the Lacanian conception of *fantasy*, defined by Lacan as the relation of the barred subject to the *objet a* (\$*oa*). The function of fantasy is to fill the void created by the real. It creates a space, a kind of blank screen on which the subject's desires can be projected. In this way, fantasy realizes desire—not in the sense of satisfying it, but by bringing it out in the open, giving it a shape. And this is precisely what ideology does. One of the most striking aspects of Žizek's theory of ideology is his insistence that, though it might seem otherwise, fantasy serves to support ideology rather than challenge it. It is natural to think of fantasy as an escape into a realm of wish-fulfilment, divorced from reality, but Žizek emphasizes that reality actually depends upon subscribing to the fantasy. This accounts for another revision of Althusser's theory. Many readers of his work have pointed out that Althusser does not satisfactorily explain *why* the subject is so willing to be interpellated. Žizek suggests that it is because there is something fundamentally attractive about ideology which goes beyond its content. We sense the symbolic order is a purely bureaucratic mechanism designed to keep us in our subject positions. We also intuitively apprehend the real is beneath it all the while. Fantasy is what enables us to cover up this knowledge and continue to function as normal subjects, to continue to make life 'meaningful' in the symbolic.

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ZAC: ŽIŽEK FRONTLINE

PSYCHOANALYSIS RESULTS IN A CANNIBALISTIC FETISH, THAT CONSUMES BASE (HUMAN EXISTENCE).

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(Brian, "As If: Traversing the Fantasy in Zizek," Paragraph Vol. 24 Issue 2)

Take his reading of *The Silence of the Lambs*, for example.² The film was a success worldwide owing to its shocking depiction of the serial killer Hannibal (the "Cannibal") Lecter, a supremely intelligent former psychiatrist who is also capable of extreme depravity, eating the flesh of those he murders. But for Žižek the horrific events depicted in the film are there only as a pretext for what lies at its core, which is nothing other than an accurate portrayal of a Lacanian analytic session. Starling comes to Lecter so that he might help her catch another serial killer currently on the loose, Buffalo Bill, who has just abducted another victim. Lecter agrees to help, on one condition — that she tell him about herself. Immediately she is reconstituted as psychoanalytic patient, Lecter her therapist. He swiftly gets her to speak of the key event in her personal history, when her father's murder made her an orphan at the age of 10. In the next short session (he is a Lacanian analyst, after all) he extracts from her a primal scene as beautifully nightmarish and resonant as any in Freud. Forced to live with relatives on a sheep and horse ranch, the newly orphaned Clarice wakes up one night hearing a terrifying noise: the screaming of lambs as they are slaughtered. She rescues one and runs away, only to be caught soon after, her lamb killed with the rest. Lecter's diagnosis is devastating:

'You still wake up sometimes, don't you? You hear the screaming of the lambs, and you think that if you could save poor Catherine [Buffalo Bill's victim] you could make them stop, don't you? You think if Catherine lives, you won't wake up in the dark ever again, to that awful screaming of the lambs'. Clarice murmurs, unconvincingly, that she doesn't know. Lecter does. His diagnosis has propelled him to a state of epistemophilic bliss: 'Thank you, Clarice. Thank you'.

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ZAC: ŽIŽEK FRONTLINE

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Our fascination with Lecter, Žižek argues, lies in his combination of unimaginable horror and boundless reason. As such he is the product of our simultaneous deep longing for a Lacanian analyst and inability to apprehend the powerful way Lacanian analysis will tear into our flimsy sense of individuality. Lecter's real cannibalism is his devouring of the very stuff of Clarice's being. Her primal scene is the 'fundamental fantasy,' that which holds subjectivity together, covering up the real; her desire to stop the lambs from crying supports her symbolic identity, determining the course of her life, driving her on in her ambition to transcend her humble origins and become an FBI agent. Lecter's exposure of this fact, says Žižek, is in keeping with the ultimate function of Lacanian analysis: to enable the subject to 'traverse the fantasy' by disclosing the *objet a*, revealing what is in the subject more than the subject. There is one crucial difference, though: Lecter is not cruel enough to be a Lacanian analyst. He helps her track down Buffalo Bill, but 'in psychoanalysis, we must pay the analyst so that he or she will allow us to offer him or her our *Dasein* on a plate' (Žižek, 1994, 53).

ŽIZEK @ FL

1st EXT: ZAC #3

THE SUBJECT IS ALWAYS-ALREADY CONSTITUTED BY VARIOUS APPARATUS
OF THE STATE —

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(Brian, "As If: Traversing the Fantasy in Žizek," Paragraph Vol. 24 Issue 2)

At the end of the 1950s Lacan began to 'move away from the relation between the symbolic and the imaginary in favour of a sustained interrogation of the interplay between the symbolic and the real.⁶ This Lacan is Žizek's Lacan — the 'real' Lacan, we might say — and he expounds his ideas faithfully and imaginatively. But Žizek's own individual slant means that there are subtle but telling shifts of emphasis in his reading.⁷ His starting-point is the powerful narrative of loss and trauma that is the Lacanian account of subjectivization. The

child passes from a period of satisfying, nourishing bodily contact with the mother's body, experienced as a state of excess and plenitude, to a position as speaking subject in the symbolic order. Žizek's understanding of the symbolic order is true to its Lacanian (which is to say its Saussurean) sense as the arbitrary system of meanings into which we divide our world, an entity which pre-exists us, and into which we are born, learning and abiding by its rules. The symbolic is, in short, our 'everyday reality' or culture. More than Lacan, though, Žizek emphasizes how it feels to live within this conceptual framework. The symbolic figures in his work (not surprisingly, perhaps, given his experiences of totalitarianism in Yugoslavia) as a kind of faceless bureaucratic system made up of inexplicable rules and regulations which we have no option but to follow.⁸ Its anonymity and vaguely sinister air is conveyed by its alternative name, 'the big Other'. One of Žizek's favourite points of reference is Kafka, and his work similarly conveys the sheer absurdity of our relationship with the symbolic order. It reminds us that the symbolic gets its name because it is made up of things which stand in for real things. It is an arbitrary, contingent network built on thin air, but which nevertheless regulates our desires and provides us with our destiny, our history, our very sense of reality. Everyday reality, in other words, is always ideological — subjects are forever trapped in the process of interpellation, coaxed by the various apparatuses of the state into taking their places in the social order (and if they won't be coaxed, the apparatus forces them).

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1A/R EXT: ZAC #3

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Althusser's theory was heavily influenced by Lacan's conception of the imaginary, the realm in which we falsely experience ourselves as whole beings through misrecognising ourselves in external images and in others. We misrecognise ourselves in ideology so that we believe our subject position is natural or perfectly suited to who we take ourselves to be. And like both theorists Žizek holds that our symbolic identity is supported and sustained by the imaginary (though he prefers to focus on just one imaginary mechanism, fantasy). Being a subject is an absurd, though quite necessary, experience of being held in place by two kinds of illusory force: the big Other and the distorting, falsifying framework of the imaginary. 7/42-3

(ZIZEK FL)
 ARE EXT: ZAC#3 FANTASY/
 ideology

IDEOLOGY AND FANTASY ARE CO-CONSTITUTIVE OF ONE ANOTHER,
 AND SERVE AS COMPONENTS OF OUR EXISTENCE.

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Žižek's theory of the ideological fantasy suggests how complex and powerful our relationship with ideology is. Ideology isn't something that cleverly tricks us, making us believe in something we don't. Rather it is effective precisely because it acknowledges what it cannot explain, and because it appeals to precisely the same sense of 'enjoyment' which threatens to blow it apart. Generally speaking, the theory of ideology before Žižek suggested that we conformed because we didn't know what we were really doing. Žižek — influenced here by the work of the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk¹² — argues that ideology is more a matter of knowing what we do is false but still doing it anyway, just as we know that the lagoon scenario acted out by stewardesses is unlikely to save us in a plane crash but still go along with it. Ideology is something that itself yields enjoyment; we adhere to the Law because it appeals to our enjoyment. This is also why Žižek thinks any theory of contemporary politics or society needs to take account of 'enjoyment as a political factor'. In a number of books (*For They Know Not What They Do*, *The Metastases of Enjoyment* and *The Sublime Object of Ideology*) Žižek explores the role played by enjoyment and the fantasy in oppressive elements of our culture, like totalitarian régimes and racist and homophobic groups. Such communities are held together, he suggests, by the fact that the Law promises a kind of enjoyment as much as it prohibits it. This relationship is secured through the fantasies they share (about, say, the figure of the Jew) which serve both sides of the Law: order and transgression. Žižek's writings on culture and ideology demonstrate how late capitalism — always supported by its 'familiar,' 'liberal democracy' — sustains its dominant position by ensuring that the subject colludes in his/her own subjugation. The idea of knowing what we're doing but still doing it anyway can explain what Sloterdijk calls the 'cynical reasoning' evident in postmodern culture. Nowadays, we all know that presidents lie, yet we still support them. We know that advertisers exaggerate the value of their products, yet we still buy them. More than previous forms, postmodern ideology continually flaunts its own ideological operations: post-ironic advertising draws attention to the whole sham of advertising and its own hyperbole, TV generates endless programs based on the out-take, or what goes on behind the scenes.¹³

148-49

8

POSTMODERN SUBJECT FAILS (S)

POST-MODERN / POST-STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE SUBJECT
FAILS TO RECOGNIZE THE EXTERNAL DISCURSIVE FORCE
WHICH CONSTITUTES THE SUBJECT. PSYCHOANALYSIS
ENSURES LIBERATION OF THE SUBJECT

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The point of departure for his project is his conviction that we are witnessing, in postmodernity, a shift in the notion of subjectivity. This is most visible in cinema, which he has described as his equivalent of Freud's 'royal road' to the unconscious, for in 'ordinary commercial films [like *The Silence of the Lambs*] ... you can detect what goes on at the profoundest, most radical level of our symbolic identities and how we experience ourselves' (Lovink, 1995). But it is also central to postmodernist and poststructuralist theory (representatives of which, for Žižek, are Derrida, Butler, Deleuze and Foucault, among others). Postmodern practice and theory both assume a decline in the function of a monolithic paternal authority which dictates fixed subject positions and social practices. The result is that subjectivity is now envisaged as a liberating process of 'performativity,' of continually reshaping and choosing alternative subject positions.⁴ For Žižek this is too simplistic theoretically, for it fails to recognize — unlike Lacan, or the German Idealists whom he sees as anticipating Lacan — the extent to which the subject is formed and continues to be motivated by a powerful extradiscursive force, which he calls 'the truly traumatic core of the modern subject'.⁵ The perceived decline of the big Other figures, in other words, as postmodern theory's 'fundamental fantasy'. Throughout his work Žižek effectively plays Hannibal Lecter to postmodernism's Clarice Starling, taking it 'through the fantasy' by reminding it that its version of the liberated subject is an illusion — one which, moreover, effectively plays into the hands of global capitalism and its rhetoric about our freedom to choose different identities and ways of life through consumption. Žižek aims to achieve this by countering the fantasmatic postmodern conception of the subject with a properly Lacanian version, married to a Marxist critique of political economy. Ultimately, his willingness to blend Marxism with Lacan means that Žižek is as generous as Hannibal Lecter, too, offering in return for exposing the postmodern fantasy of subjectivity an idea of how his alternative Lacanian version of the subject might service a Marxist commitment to emancipation.

ZNC: PERMUTATION F/L

THE LAW SPONSORS OUR ACTS OF TRANSGRESSION, ITS REPRESSIVE ELEMENT IS OVERSHADOWED BY DESIRE/ENJOYMENT! — THIS SUSTAINS THE DOMINANT STRUCTURE

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✓ All this suggests why it is problematic to equate this knowingness with liberation. In 'You May!', an article recently published in the *London Review of Books* (particularly interesting because it is a more deliberately accessible statement of the aims of his project), Žižek surveys what he sees as evidence of the dominant attitude of 'reflexiveness' in the postmodern permissive society. In the apparent absence of the symbolic order to instruct us in our social behaviour, 'all our impulses, from sexual orientation to ethnic belonging, are more and more experienced as matters of choice' (Žižek, 1999a, 1): one can choose how to be seduced, how to rewrite one's psychological history, how to be racist. Even psychoanalytic symptoms have 'lost their innocence,' and are shaped according to the subject's knowledge of psychoanalytic theory (Žižek, 1999a, 2). This means that the law no longer operates via repression and the imposition of a strict social hierarchy, but effectively sponsors our acts of transgression, demanding that we 'Enjoy!'. Žižek's argument is to emphasize, firstly, that although on the face of it something has changed in the nature of our relation to the big Other, beneath the surface things are still the same. The apparent endorsement of our transgressive acts by the Other only creates new guilts and anxieties: 'Our postmodern reflexive society which seems hedonistic and permissive is actually saturated with rules and regulations which are intended to serve our well-being (restrictions on smoking and eating, rules against sexual harassment)' (Žižek, 1999a, 5). With the demise of one kind of adherence to the law comes another in its place. The second aspect of his argument is to wonder: if the law regulates our enjoyment, where is the potential for subversion? 7/49-50

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