ŽIŽEK and MEDIA STUDIES
A READER

Edited by
MATTHEW FLISFEDER & LOUIS-PAUL WILLIS

Žižek and Media Studies

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List of Previous Publications

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Matthew Flisfeder would like to dedicate this book to his parents, Janice and Avrum, for their continued love and support

Louis-Paul Willis would like to dedicate this book to the memory of his father, Stephen C. Willis, who has provided academic inspiration

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Acknowledgments

Introduction

Žižek and Media Studies, Beyond Lacan

By Matthew Flisfeder and Louis-Paul Willis

At the beginning of *The Metastases of Enjoyment* (1994), Slavoj Žižek recounts a story of presenting a lecture on Hitchcock at an American university in 1992. At the end of his lecture, an outraged member of the audience stood up and asked: "How can you talk about such a trifling subject when your ex-country [Yugoslavia] is dying in flames?" To this indignant admonishment, Žižek responded with the following: "How is it that you in the USA *can* talk about Hitchcock?" His point, of course, was that there would be nothing "traumatic" for him to have behaved in a manner that was more befitting of a victim of violence, "testifying to the horrible events in [his] own country." However, for his interlocutor, it was, according to Žižek, almost as if he had violated some kind of invisible prohibition simply by behaving like an average American cultural studies intellectual who wants to do nothing more than simply talk about Hitchcock and popular culture. Nevertheless, perhaps there is something significant about Žižek's presentation on Hitchcock: in a way, doesn't the interest in Hitchcock—a master of the image—touch upon the very ground of the Real in a world that gathers its sense of "reality" by way of mass mediated images?

Žižek's experience with this reproach demonstrates, for him, something about the way in which the Western gaze operates in its global approach to the reality of political conflict: "reporters compete with each other on who will find a more repulsive scene—lacerated child bodies, raped women, starved prisoners: all this is good fodder for hungry Western eyes. However, the media are far more sparing of words apropos of how the residents of Sarajevo desperately endeavor to maintain the appearance of normal life." What is truly unbearable for the Western gaze, according to Žižek, is the fact that everyday lived reality is still operative, functional, even (or especially) in war torn parts of the

world—as the only way to really cope with the trauma. Perhaps, in this sense, talking about Hitchcock is a political act that takes force by penetrating the Symbolic structures that actually inform the life world of the subject coping with a traumatic rupture. Rather than address the media image of the war "out there," addressing a media image that admits itself as such is the only way to truly bring dignity to the Real behind the veil of Symbolic, mediated "reality."[1]

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

More recently, in an online video, *Living in the End Times*, based on his book of the same title (2010), Žižek is seen commenting on some of the key political, social, and cultural questions that plague us today, following the first decade of the twenty-first century. In the video, Žižek is surrounded by video screens that are presenting images relating to the topics being addressed: the global financial crisis, war, ecological catastrophe, the "crisis" of democracy, and so on. What Žižek is responding to here are, in many ways, *the* problems that are more appropriately labeled as "media events." That is, the entire framework in which these topics are broached has to do, primarily, with the way that they have been framed in the context of the mainstream media in Europe and the United States. In this sense, too, the "images" with which Žižek is dealing traverse a line between "reality" and ideology.

Throughout the video, Žižek is followed by a camera, and at times it is his own image that is presented on the video screens that surround him. In the opening moments of the video, Žižek, declares (echoing the thoughts of Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard) that he likes "this idea that you will bombard me with images of reality; images *are* the true reality, today, I claim. We cannot simply say 'discard the images and you see reality.' If we discard the images, nothing remains, just some pure abstraction. Images *are* reality for us, today." What, then, can we say about the way in which Žižek, himself, has been elevated to the level of "image?" On the one hand, there is something about Žižek—something about the style through which he makes palpable the engagement of critical theory with popular culture; however, on the other hand, labels such as "the Elvis of cultural theory" or "the Marx brother," in many ways operate as a way of obfuscating his true impact upon critical thought, today. Turning Žižek into an image is, perhaps, the best way to avoid taking him seriously. Nevertheless, some might still turn back towards Žižek, complicating matters with the question, "Why do you continue to make yourself into an image for popular culture? Why not simply resist this tendency?" There is something about this kind of claim that pertains to the liberal democratic version of ideology critique—that demystification is the best way to debunk a claim in ideology. For the latter, ideology is simply a matter of a false truth. For Žižek, however, truth itself has the structure of a fiction.

Žižek is confronted with this very question in a recent interview on BBC's *The Culture Show*: has he, himself, not produced the very image that works

counter to his serious "message?" Žižek responds by pointing out that, within the existing coordinates of ideology today—what Debord referred to as the "society of the spectacle"—images are, in fact, needed in order to counter the dominant ideology. Images of a certain variety are needed in order to "awaken people," as Žižek puts it. There is a price to be paid, he claims, by the requirement of being "taken seriously": to be taken seriously often means being integrated, in some way, into the elitist academic discourse that rarely enters the everyday terrain of the popular classes. It is, in this sense, that we can start to think about Žižek's own media image as the star of two popular documentaries on cinema, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006) and its sequel, *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2012), directed by Sophie Fiennes; he is also the star of a documentary, *Žižek!* (2005), directed by Astra Taylor, of which he is the object under the microscope, and he has also appeared in another documentary directed by Taylor, *Examined Life* (2009).

Throughout the film, *Living in the End Times*, Žižek is "attacked" with a barrage of troubling questions from an invisible voice that protrudes from some absent space, in the darkness behind the video screens (perhaps). How might we conceive the setting in which Žižek is speaking here? Those well-versed in psychoanalytic theory might recognize this voice as that of the analyst, who remains out of sight during the psychoanalytic session, sitting behind the analysand, bombarding him with difficult, perhaps traumatic questions. Here, the tables are turned on Žižek, for it is he who often assumes the role of analyst, troubling his readers to undermine their own supplemental fantasies—the frame through which we all engage with the everyday life world of mass-mediated "reality."

*   *   *

There is an ambiguous relationship, then, between Žižek and the media. On the one hand, Žižek's object of inquiry is less the media, film, or culture—his work pertains more to questions about ideology and subjectivity, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Hegelian dialectics, and German Idealism more generally. However, on the other hand, questions about film, media, and culture always manage to find their way into Žižek's voluminous writings, lectures, and films. Perhaps it is possible to claim that Žižek approaches media and culture in order to make the complex questions that he asks apropos ideology and subjectivity more tangible; but, in a world that is constituted primarily by images, media, and ideology form the front and back of the same arena of the Symbolic order that informs our daily lives. It becomes impossible, in this context, to deal with questions about ideology and subjectivity without taking the media into consideration. The media and ideology are two versions of the same problematic. It is in this sense that this book seeks to address the relationship between Žižek and media studies.

It is not surprising that media scholars have taken up much of Žižek's work in recent years. Although Žižek does often address questions about popular

culture, cinema, and cyberspace, he does not address the media quite as specifically in his own texts as do many contemporary critical media scholars who take up his thought. Nevertheless, since Žižek's primary field of address is grounded in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and since there is already a tradition of Lacanian film, media, and cultural scholarship, it is easy to understand why media scholars, today, have taken an interest in Žižek's work.

Early Lacanian Film Theory

The use of Lacanian psychoanalysis in the fields of contemporary cultural and media studies results from its initial influence within 1970s film theory—often referred to as Screen theory due to the many ground-breaking reflections published in the British Film Studies journal of the same name. During the early to mid-1970s, many film scholars were drawn in by the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan, whose annual seminar aimed at rereading Freud through various influences, mostly related to structuralism (Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, etc.). The ensuing Lacanian "trend" within film studies produced a wide range of theorization, aiming to conceptualize the spectator's relationship with the film as well as with the screen. Film was conceived as an "ideological apparatus" that produced an "imaginary signifier"; the spectator was consequently conceived as submitting to two levels of identification ("primary" and "secondary") through which s/he was posed as an "all-perceiving" subject; this same theoretical spectator was concurrently considered, by emerging feminist film scholars, as possessing a "male gaze," driven by a blatant voyeurism that in turn provided an objectifying "visual pleasure." In sum, Lacanian psychoanalysis played a central role within film—and eventually cultural/media—studies for two decades.

In Lacanian terms, Screen theorists were mostly preoccupied with the Imaginary dimension of film spectatorship; they viewed the cinematic apparatus as a visual snare operating in order to render invisible the Symbolic (and ideological) structure that underlies social and cultural existence. At the heart of Screen theory's conceptual structure we find Lacan's theorization of the mirror stage, which dates from an early period in his career. Lacan's mirror-stage essay suggests that in perceiving itself in the mirror, the child *imagines* a mastery it does not yet possess over itself; Screen theorists relied heavily on this Imaginary dimension of looking in order to formulate their various analyses of film—and eventually media—spectatorship. This led them to conceive the "filmic gaze" as analogous to the child's appropriation of the specular image, based on an illusion of mastery. Certain pivotal texts, such as Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and narrative cinema," or Christian Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier*, became the cornerstones of entire theoretical edifices built around the notion of an imaginary gaze and its ideological implications.

However, this approach eventually became limiting. After David Bordwell's introduction of cognitivist film theory as the empirical alternative

to Lacanian-influenced approaches, Bordwell and Noël Carroll's anthology, *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, published in the mid-1990s, struck what many consider to be the final blow to Screen theory. But most importantly, as it is well known today, this early version of psychoanalytic film theory drew on certain misconceptions of Lacanian notions such as the gaze, desire, fantasy, and subjectivity; it also did not consider the third realm of existence in Lacan's model—the Real, that is, the traumatic point at which Symbolic reality fails. In this context, Žižek's early English writings played a central role in identifying these misconceptions, spawning a new wave of Lacanian-influenced film, cultural, and media studies—all despite the fact that this specific approach had been declared deceased by "post-Theorists" in the mid-90s.[2]

Not only did 1970s psychoanalytic film theory neglect the importance of the Real, it also articulated a problematical interpretation of Lacan's R.S.I. topology. For instance, Lacan's three registers were often conceived as "stages" or "phases" that the subject must "traverse"—as such, the Imaginary is described as a "moment" defined by the mirror-stage, instead of a realm defined by the individual's relation to image and ideal. This, of course, leads to a Lacanian model that not only left the Real aside, but ignored the radicalness inherent to its coexistence with the Imaginary and—especially—the Symbolic.

In a 1989 article, "The Undergrowth of Enjoyment," Žižek engages with the Lacanian misconceptions that founded 1970s psychoanalytic and feminist film theory, arguing that "[t]he Lacan that served as a point of reference for these theories . . . was the Lacan before the break."[3] The "break" Žižek is referring to here is the increased focus on the Real and the correlated conceptual shifts "from the dialectics of desire to the inertia of enjoyment (*jouissance*), from the symptom as coded message to the *sinthome* as a letter permeated with enjoyment, from the 'unconscious structured like a language' to the Thing in its heart."[4] With the publication of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* that same year, in which he further deploys his re-examination of Lacanian concepts as well as their implications on the analysis of film, media, and various cultural/ideological phenomena, Žižek laid much of the groundwork on which contemporary theorists have developed a properly Lacanian approach to cultural manifestations. Considering these early English writings by Žižek at the end of the 1980s, as well as a 1989 article by Joan Copjec, "The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan"—and its subsequent inclusion in her book, *Read My Desire* (1994)—that also examines Lacanian misconceptions within 1970s screen theory, it appears somewhat surprising how the *Post-Theory* charge against Lacanian film theory perpetuated the misconceptions that had been previously identified.[5] As Todd McGowan puts it, "the *Post-Theory* critique of Lacanian Film Theory has not really addressed a properly *Lacanian* film theory."[6] While Žižek remains first and foremost a cultural philosopher, it is no overstatement to claim that he played a pivotal role in rearticulating a truly Lacanian paradigm within film and media studies.

Overall, by centering his theoretical contributions around the Real and its related concepts—such as the gaze, desire and its impossible object/cause (*objet a*), fantasy, and *jouissance*—Žižek has played a pivotal role in defining contemporary issues in film, media, cultural, and even political studies. While psychoanalysis is often dismissed as nonempirical and inductive within mainstream and formalist film scholarship, and while film and media psychoanalysis is frequently deemed a "perversion" of the writings of Freud and Lacan, Žižek pertinently reminds us that "[f]or Lacan, psychoanalysis at its most fundamental is not a theory and technique of treating psychic disturbances, but a theory and practice that confronts individuals with the most radical dimension of human existence"[7]—this radical dimension being linked to the Lacanian Real and its emergence in socially and culturally mediated discourses. With this rereading of Lacan in mind, Žižek opens the door to the rethinking of many theoretical paradigms that built upon Screen theory's initial use of psychoanalysis.

Žižek and Film/Media Studies

Žižek's reliance on Lacanian psychoanalysis, in conjunction with his use of Marxism and Hegelian dialectics, allows him to produce an incredibly polyvalent and highly radical cultural and political theory. Because the texts included in this book focus mostly on his reinterpretation of crucial Lacanian concepts, it appears appropriate to summarize the central notions that Žižek relies on in his philosophical project. Of course, when it comes to film and media studies, one of Žižek's main insights is his use of Lacan's *objet a*, the evanescent object-cause of desire that the subject imaginarily gives up in order to integrate into the Symbolic network of intersubjectivity. Indeed, *objet a* occupies a preponderant role in Žižek's oeuvre, as he provides countless descriptions and definitions of the object-cause, notably defining it as "the pure lack, the void around which desire turns and which, as such, causes the desire, *and* the imaginary element which conceals this void, renders it visible by filling it out."[8]

As early as 1989, Žižek uses *objet a* to articulate his Marxist critique of ideology, wondering if "the paradoxical topology of the movement of capital [is not] precisely that of the Lacanian *objet petit a*, of the leftover which embodies the fundamental, constitutive lack."[9] In the study of visual media, this surplus is most evidently embodied in the gaze, a Lacanian concept that was, as we have already surmised, decidedly misconceived in Screen theory. When considering the "complete" Lacanian topology, the *objet a* represents a nonsymbolizable surplus that holds the potential for the traumatic encounter with the Real. As such, Copjec's aforementioned emphasis on Lacan's Seminar XI is crucial, as it is within this seminar that Lacan describes the gaze as the *objet a* with the visual field.

Many film scholars have followed Žižek's and Copjec's initial insights regarding the cinematic gaze in its truly Lacanian conception. Elizabeth Cowie has aptly noted how the positing of the gaze as an *objet a* radically changes the way psychoanalytic and feminist film theory must approach the

notion of a Lacanian spectator. By reminding us how "[t]he gaze is not the look, for to look is merely to see whereas the gaze is to be posed by oneself in a field of vision,"[10] Cowie also emphasizes the importance of looking beyond Lacan's early writings and teachings.[11] In this regard, any visual pleasure resulting from film spectatorship cannot be linked to the positioning of the spectator as an all-perceiving subject; because "[t]he gaze is the inverse of the omnipotent look, which is the empirical function of the eye,"[12] a redefining of desire within film spectatorship has been deployed following Žižek's insights on the importance of the *objet a*.

Steering away from the traditional Foucauldian idea of the desire for mastery, the post-Žižek approach to Lacanian film theory, in considering the gaze as *objet a*, necessarily encompasses the idea of *jouissance*. As Todd McGowan notes, "[t]he gaze triggers the subject's desire because it appears to hold the key not to the achievement of self-completion or wholeness but to the disappearance of self in the experience of enjoyment."[13] While the desire for mastery is not a notion that is entirely rejected, McGowan argues that this specific desire is an "attempt to short-circuit the path of desire in order to derive satisfaction from the *objet petit a* without experiencing the trauma that accompanies that satisfaction."[14] With this redefinition in mind, one might ask how contemporary film and media studies relate to the idea of visual pleasure in this post-Žižek account of Lacanian cultural psychoanalysis.[15]

The answer, of course, resides within fantasy and its significant role in any given ideological discourse. One can hardly overemphasize the capital role fantasy plays both within social and media discourses, and their analysis through a Lacanian approach. French Lacanian psychoanalyst Didier Castanet goes so far as to assert that although neither Freud nor Lacan considered fantasy as a fundamental psychoanalytic concept, it nevertheless should be viewed as such given the role it plays within the cure.[16] One could easily transpose this logic into Žižekian terms, as he relies on fantasy's pivotal role within psychoanalysis to deploy his own—albeit highly Lacanian—approach to questions pertaining to ideology and its persistent resorting to cultural and media discourses. While the subject is defined through its desire, the object-cause of the subject's desire (the *objet a*) remains "the reef, the obstacle which interrupts the closed circuit of the 'pleasure principle' and derails its balanced movement."[17] Fantasy covers up the void left by the evanescence of the *objet a*; it stages an Imaginary relation between subject and object. Lacan illustrates this relation between subject and object, as it is mediated by fantasy, through the formula $\$ \lozenge a$ where $\$$ represents the split subject of the Symbolic, *a* represents the *objet a*, and $\lozenge$ represents the "tying of Symbolic ($\$$), Imaginary (*a*) and Real as it is operated by fantasy."[18] In Žižek's words, "[f]antasy conceals the fact that the Other, the Symbolic order, is structured around some traumatic impossibility, around something which cannot be symbolized—i.e. the Real of *jouissance*: through fantasy, *jouissance* is domesticated, gentrified."[19] The psychoanalytic notion of fantasy therefore plays a crucial role within Žižek's theoretical framework; through it, he deploys

a complex network of philosophical approaches to cultural, political, and media phenomena. While psychoanalysis is traditionally aimed at providing the subject with a better understanding of a given symptom, "[f]or Žižek, psychoanalysis is a form of understanding significance not just for individuals, but for the mediascape at large."[20]

Among his many recourses to the Lacanian notion of fantasy, Žižek puts forward the central idea that our symbolically mediated reality is structured by fantasmatic scenarios that are relayed both intersubjectively and through ideologically oriented mass media. Let us be reminded that, as it is articulated through Lacan by Žižek, fantasy serves as a lure, a narrative structure that leads the subject to believe he has access to the object-cause of desire. Hence, the tying function of fantasy (◊) serves as a protective mechanism, shielding the subject from the traumatic Real of an actual encounter with the impossible *objet a*. But as Žižek points out, "the relationship between fantasy and the horror of the Real it conceals is much more ambiguous than it may seem: fantasy conceals this horror, yet at the same time it creates what it purports to conceal, its 'repressed' point of reference."[21] This ambiguous connection between fantasy, *objet a,* and the Real is indeed potentially misleading, as it could be tempting to view fantasy as the staging of the realization of a given desire.

While fantasy does provide an *imaginary* access to the *objet a*, it is through its imaginary status that fantasy also protects the subject from actually realizing the desire and accessing a traumatic *jouissance*. It is precisely here that the ideological nature of fantasy is revealed. While traditional industrial and modern societies are based on the shared sacrifice of *jouissance* one must accomplish in order to access the social and intersubjective Symbolic structure, these very societies "must provide some way of alleviating the sense of lack without endangering the social structure;"[22] this is where fantasy plays a vital role in perpetuating Symbolic authority. Through fantasy, "one seems not to have to sacrifice the object. One is able to enjoy it, but with the restriction that one can only enjoy *the image of the object*, not the object itself."[23] And although McGowan (2004) aptly argues the undergoing of a radical change from a society of prohibition to one of commanded enjoyment, this change does not in any way diminish the role fantasy plays in the perpetuation of ideology. While it acts as a respite from ideological demands within societies based on prohibition, fantasy also plays a central role within the society of commanded enjoyment, as ideology now demands that we perpetually occupy its terrain.

Therefore, it is no wonder that fantasy holds such a central place within Žižek's re-articulation of the Lacanian paradigm. After all, it is the entry of a given object within the "framework of fantasy" that "gives consistency to the subject's desire."[24] In this regard, film and visual media play a central role in disseminating fantasies within contemporary mediascapes. In the opening lines of *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (Dir. Sophie Fiennes, 2006), Žižek states that "Cinema is the ultimate pervert art. It doesn't give you what you desire; it tells you how to desire"—a statement consistent with his assessment that "through fantasy, we learn 'how to desire.'"[25] Of course, cinema does this by

framing the coordinates of desire through the staging of fantasy. By extending this statement to visual media, particularly advertising, music videos, and television shows of various genres, it seems obvious that the contemporary Lacanian paradigm defined by Žižek remains a promising one, as it goes beyond traditional criticism and considers the radical—Real—underside of ideological mass-mediated discourses.

Because desire does not emanate from the subject but, rather, from the ominous Other who wants something from us, fantasy is necessarily an answer to the unbearable enigma of the desire of the Other—an enigma that Lacan phrases through the Italian question "*Che vuoi*?" By attempting to mediate the void between the subject and its impossible object, fantasy "is the frame co-ordinating our desire, but at the same time [it is also] a defence against '*Che vuoi?*', a screen concealing the gap, the abyss of the desire of the Other."[26] As such, the use of a Žižekian approach within film and media studies allows us not only to go beyond ideology critique and to uncover a form of radical emancipation, such as the traversing of the cultural fantasy; it also allows a rereading of media paradigms developed by thinkers such as Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard.

Hence, through Žižek's integration of the Lacanian notions of desire, *objet a*, and fantasy within the analysis of popular culture, cinema, mass media, as well as various cultural and political phenomena, contemporary theorists can rely on a complex conceptual edifice from which they can offer various vantage points on the very discourses that structure our Symbolic reality. Many have credited Žižek for translating Lacan's difficult writing and seminars into a tangible psychoanalytic framework allowing them to approach media. While it is true that Žižek manipulates the Lacanian paradigm with astute argumentation and exemplification, it remains crucial to note that he first and foremost recuperates Lacan's thought, rendering it amenable to the analysis of contemporary media.

Enjoying the Media: Žižekian Media Studies

This book is divided into four sections—Media, Ideology, and Politics; Popular Culture; Film and Cinema; and, Social Media and the Internet—each of which draws upon key aspects of Žižek's own engagement with the media. Our intention with this book is to introduce readers to new developments in the field of Žižekian media scholarship. The approaches presented here also make significant contributions to this new field and demonstrate ways in which Žižekian media studies differs from the earlier Lacanian variety. While Lacan has long been an influence in film, media, and cultural theory, there is, today, an emerging field of Žižekian media scholarship that addresses questions about the Real, fantasy, the *objet petit a*, and the drive. But Žižekian media scholarship is distinguished, not only by referring to Žižek's version of Lacan, but also for addressing key problems in Žižek's writings that are related to media and ideology critique. These include a significant focus on emancipatory politics and the problematic of the "demise of symbolic efficiency."

The problem of the demise of symbolic efficiency is related to the question: how is it possible to propose a critique of ideology in the (supposedly) post-ideological era? Fredric Jameson addresses this question in his renowned essay from 1984, "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," and later in the subsequent book of the same title. In order to explain the postmodern demise of symbolic efficiency, Jameson refers to the Lacanian conception of psychosis as a "breakdown of the signifying chain," which signals a suspension of the operation of "suture" that ties together the field of floating signifiers in the Symbolic order. The thesis of the demise of symbolic efficiency posits the experience of a post-ideological condition in the sense that the master narratives of modernity are no longer operative. Master narratives such as religious narratives, Enlightenment narratives of progress, and emancipatory narratives, such as Marxism, no longer function as structures of (what Jameson calls) "cognitive mapping." The condition of postmodernity is one in which all such narratives have been deconstructed to the point of losing their entire symbolic weight in the meaning-making practices of subjects in the social world; or, to put it in Lacanian terms: today, everyone seems to already know that the big Other does not exist.

Despite this fact, Žižek argues that ideology is still operative on the obverse side of the demise of symbolic efficiency, but below the surface level of symbolic reality. Postmodernism may signal the suspension of the function of the "Master-Signifier," but there exists a "spectral" underside of ideology (the operation of the *objet a* and fantasy), which more forcefully attaches the subject to the symbolic surface of ideological propositions.

With the demise of symbolic efficiency, and the suspension of the function of the Master-Signifier, enjoyment plays a much stronger role in interpellating ideological subjects. In opposition to the modernist order of prohibition and authority, postmodernism is marked by the superego injunction: "Enjoy!" Today, not only are we supposedly free to enjoy; we are increasingly *obligated* to enjoy. This is something that we continue to see and experience in our media-saturated, consumerist "society of the spectacle," where the constant commandment is: Enjoy! Psychoanalysis, for Žižek, offers emancipatory cognitive mapping for the postmodern subject because it is the only discourse in which the subject is allowed to *not* enjoy (which is qualitatively different from "not allowed to enjoy").

In this sense, Žižek has provided media theorists with a method for thinking both the new, postmodern forms taken by ideological interpellation, which draws upon the concept of the *objet a*, fantasy, and desire, and a language for thinking about emancipation from the hold of ideology—a method that differs significantly from the formalist models of resistance developed by early Screen theory, which drew heavily upon the Brechtian notion of "rupture" and "distancing" in its theories of alternative cinema.[27] Enjoyment, for Žižek, is not only the mode of interpellation; it is also that with which the subject must identify in order to break free of the reigning ideology. It is in this sense that Žižek emphasizes the role of the death drive in emancipatory politics. If with

desire the subject constantly fails to attain its object, then with drive the subject continues to enjoy failure.

A focus on the demise of symbolic efficiency and on drive marks a significant difference between the older Lacanian models of Lacanian film and media theory and a strictly Žižekian approach. This is signaled in the work of Žižekian media scholars such as Jodi Dean and Todd McGowan. While Dean argues through her conception of "communicative capitalism" that, under the conditions of the demise of symbolic efficiency, drive rather than desire integrates the subject further into the matrices of networked society, McGowan follows Žižek in arguing that drive is central to re-imagining a revolutionary aesthetic in the cinema.[28] Paul A. Taylor goes further in arguing that, at a time when most of us acknowledge the non-existence of the big Other, the media increasingly helps to recreate its effects. As he puts it, "[w]e engage with media, like the cinema and cyberspace not to escape from, but rather in order to escape to a social reality that protects (mediates) us more effectively from the truly traumatic issues and concerns that belie our 'normal' lives."[29] Others, such as Fabio Vighi,[30] drawing on Žižek's re-interpretation of the Lacanian logics of sexuation, address the way that film and media allow us to understand something about the way that the Symbolic order is structured around gaps and cleavages that announce the Real and its surplus objects. It is the latter that, as well, provides terrain for thinking the political within the cultural levels of the media.

Ultimately, the scholarship presented in what follows demonstrates precisely how "talking about Hitchcock," and other examples of media, film, and popular culture, can indeed function as a political act. The authors included in this book show that it is perhaps sometimes much more politically effective to speak about the image than trying to articulate some more important "reality," behind the illusion. Since reality is already structured like a fiction, a Žižekian approach to media studies draws our attention to fictions that offer up the Real.

Notes

1. Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (New York: Verso, 1994), 1–2.
2. For a more thorough discussion of the debate between "film Theory" and "post-Theory," and between Žižek and David Bordwell more specifically, see Matthew Flisfeder, *The Symbolic, The Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), especially chapter 3.
3. Žižek, "The Undergrowth of Enjoyment," *New Formations* 9: 7–29, 1989, 7.
4. Ibid.
5. Indeed, Copjec's "The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan" examines a different aspect of Screen theory's conceptual shortcomings. Focusing on the role of the mirror-stage essay within 1970s psychoanalytic film

studies, she states that the notion of a cinematic gaze derived from the analogy between screen and mirror "operates in ignorance of, and at the expense of, Lacan's more radical insight, whereby the mirror is conceived as screen" (Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists,* Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1994, 54). Describing how this initial (mis)conception of the cinematic gaze leads to a "'Foucauldization' of Lacanian theory" (56), Copjec aptly notes how the over-reliance on the mirror-stage essay led to the theorization of a cinematic gaze that shared very little with Lacan's ideas, specifying how the essay in question does not address the concept of the gaze—a concept that is rather deployed in Lacan's Seminar XI (66).

6. Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2007), 28.
7. Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2006), 3.
8. Žižek, 1994, 178.
9. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 53.
10. Elizabeth Cowie, *Representing the Woman*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 288.
11. Indeed, while 1970s psychoanalytic film theory defined its version of the gaze along the lines of Lacan's mirror-stage essay, one must note that this text makes no mention of the gaze as such, but focuses on the child's look, a terminological disambiguation that Cowie (1997) discusses in *Representing the Woman*.
12. Cowie, 1997, 288.
13. McGowan, 11.
14. Ibid.
15. One might even wonder if the idea of "visual pleasure" should not be addressed rather as a "scopic *jouissance.*"
16. Castanet, Didier, "Fantasme et réel," *L'en-Je lacanien*, vol. 2, no. 9 (2007), 102.
17. Žižek, 2001, 55.
18. Chemama, Roland and Bernard Vandermersch, *Dictionnaire de la psychoanalyse*, Paris: Larousse, 1993, 131, our translation.
19. Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 1997), 123.
20. Paul A. Taylor, *Žižek and the Media* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2010), 15.
21. Žižek, 1997, 7.
22. McGowan, *The End of Dissatisfaction? Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2003), 18.
23. Ibid., 19.
24. Žižek, 1989, 119.
25. Ibid., 118.
26. Ibid. André Nusselder recently published two books that deal with fantasy as screen in a technological and media studies perspective: *Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology* (2009) and *The Surface Effect: The Screen of Fantasy in Psychoanalysis* (2013).
27. One of the most notorious examples of such a model of resistance remains Peter Wollen's *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter Strategies* (1982), as well as Wollen's and Laura Mulvey's filmic endeavour *Riddles of the Sphynx* (1977).
28. See Jodi Dean, 2002, 2009, and 2010; and, McGowan, 2011.
29. Taylor, 2010, 78.
30. See Vighi, 2009.

Part I

Media, Ideology, and Politics

Žižek's Reception: Fifty Shades of Gray Ideology

By Paul A. Taylor

Introduction

A self-confessed dogmatic Lacanian-Hegelian, Slavoj Žižek holds the unusual, almost oxymoronic, status of being classed as a celebrity academic. He is routinely hyped by journalists as "the Elvis of Cultural Theory" or "the most dangerous philosopher in the West." Despite, or, perhaps more accurately, because of his widespread popularity in nonacademic circles, his work has also received damning condemnation from some critics and fellow scholars. Occasionally vitriolic in his tone, Žižek appears to get under the skin of reviewers like few other thinkers, and indeed this has led to whole books designed to debunk him, such as the ambiguously titled *The Truth of Žižek*.[1] This chapter explores Žižek's negative reception in terms of both the divided response among intellectuals with a media voice and the still-divided, but much more positive, reception of his thoughts by audiences that are unusually large and enthusiastic considering the relatively esoteric theoretical nature of the material Žižek presents.

An important part of the intellectual context of Žižek's reception is the chasm that exists between those who see themselves as part of an Anglo-Saxon tradition of empirically rooted quasiscientific social inquiry and those who are drawn to the much more openly speculative philosophy that has come to be known as continental thought. One major bone of contention between the two schools relates to the status of facts. While the Anglo-Saxon tradition tends to see them as statements that are verifiable by scientific testing, continental philosophy is known for emphasizing how their status is relative to the context from which they derive. Subsequently, a second difference exists between their chosen methods of conceptualizing those facts, especially in relation to the realm of culture. "Social science" applies rigorous methods to cultural phenomena, while

continental philosophy seeks to understand those aspects of society that exist but which, it argues, cannot be adequately conceptualized via empirical methods. For example, ideology is a widely recognized phenomenon, but one that is observable through its affects/effects rather than any systematically measurable qualities.

In this chapter, forceful criticisms of Žižek's attitude toward facts are illustrated with specific reference to his emblematic approach to the subject of violence. More generally, Žižek's reception is dominated by two opposing, but both essentially uncritical, distortions:

i) Uncritical fixation upon the curiosity and entertainment value of a celebrity thinker.
ii) Hypercritical knee-jerk condemnation (that in its excess avoids actual substantive critique) from dogmatically empiricist commentators for whom Žižek's speculative philosophy acts a "postmodern" plessor.[2]

Both of these types of response involve ignoring the substance of Žižek's thought. The enjoyment of his theoretical pyrotechnics as entertainment requires the suspension of critical faculties for pure enjoyment of the spectacle, and this phenomenon is explored later using specific firsthand experience of giving a talk with Žižek at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London.[3] The hypercritical dismissal of Žižek, dealt with first here, often requires the active application of intelligence to avoid recognition of (as distinct from agreement with) what Žižek is actually saying. This willful conceptual myopia is illustrated using the particularly egregious example of John Gray's *New York Times* review of *Less Than Nothing* and *Living in the End Times*, titled "The Violent Visions of Slavoj Žižek."[4]

Gray's Anatomy of Truth

John Gray's fiercely dismissive *New York Times* review typifies the Anglo-Saxon–continental split, fueled as it is by the charge that Žižek does not engage with objective rational thought. Particularly significant is the precise nature of Gray's questioning of Žižek's notion of truth. When Gray asks, "Why should anyone adopt Žižek's ideas rather than any others?" he proceeds to answer his own question with an accurate and cogent summary of the rationale behind Žižek's method:

> The answer cannot be that Žižek's [ideas] are true in any traditional sense. "The truth we are dealing with here is not 'objective' truth," Žižek writes, "but the self-relating truth about one's own subjective position; as such, it is an engaged truth, measured not by its factual accuracy but by the way it affects the subjective position of enunciation." If this means anything, it is that truth is determined by reference to how an idea accords with the projects to which the speaker is committed—in Žižek's case, a project of revolution.[5]

Apart from the inaccuracy of the objection that Žižek's method eschews "factual accuracy," which we will shortly examine, this is an excellent summary of the reflexive essence of how he does, "in fact," address an inescapable fact about facts themselves—they do not exist in a pure state of objectivity. But, while Gray is fully aware of the substantive answer to his charge that Žižek peddles merely subjective thoughts, in what might be seen as a rhetorical "Trojan mouse," he chooses to proceed as if the mere act of describing an opposing position is equivalent to successfully undermining it.

Any purportedly neutral presentation of the facts requires deconstruction and critique to reveal the various forms of ideological bias that, in fact, pervade that appearance of neutrality—the essence of Heidegger's distinction between what is true and what is merely correct. If Gray's denunciation itself means anything, that meaning rests in its clear, albeit inadvertent, demonstration of a cynical aspect of contemporary culture that is frequently highlighted in the work he is busy scorning. This is Žižek's notion of *fetishistic disavowal*—the phenomenon in which people are able to recognize a truth but proceed as if they hadn't, a situation encapsulated in the psychoanalytical phrase "*Je sais bien, mais quand même*" (I know very well, but nevertheless). Thus, Gray knows that Žižek is explicit about the position from which he makes his subjective enunciations about the world and that this provides the reader with the basis from which to gauge its value. But he proceeds as if he didn't know this and rhetorically caricatures Žižek's method as the generation of ideas from an arbitrary basis. It is with comments like "If this means anything" that we can see the distinctly nonconceptual, strongly emotional energy expended on the widening of the empiricist–continental divide.

At the time of writing, the latest manifestation of knee-jerk emotionality directed at Žižek can be seen in his quarrel with Chomsky, predictably portrayed by the media in fighting terms—"The Slavoj Žižek v. Noam Chomsky spat is worth a ringside seat" and "Chomsky vs. 'Elvis' in a Left-Wing Cage Fight."[6] In a December 2012 online interview, Noam Chomksy's disdain for Žižek's brand of nonempiricist, reflexivity-privileging thought is conveyed unambiguously:

> What you're referring to is what's called "Theory." And when I said I'm not interested in theory, what I meant is, I'm not interested in posturing—using fancy terms like polysyllables and pretending you have a theory when you have no theory whatsoever. So there's no theory in any of this stuff, not in the sense of theory that anyone is familiar with in the sciences or any other serious field. Try to find in all of the work you mentioned some principles from which you can deduce conclusions, empirically testable propositions where it all goes beyond the level of something you can explain in five minutes to a twelve-year-old. See if you can find that when the fancy words are decoded. I can't. So I'm not interested in that kind of posturing. Žižek is an extreme example of it. I don't see anything to what he's saying.[7]