Žižek finally wants to treat. Insofar as he teaches us that the job of critical discourse is not to offer ideological solutions but “to reject the way the problems are formulated,” I offer this question in the spirit of Žižek’s own monumental and important work (282).

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Works Cited


Passing on Popular Culture:
“Art for Lacan’s Sake”

Robert Miklitsch

Ya gotta love Žižek.
Who else would wax enthusiastic—his idea of the “ultimate dream”—about wanting to write a volume of Cliffs Notes to a nonexistent text? (Forget about Bix. Borges lives.)

Or would brag in print, on record, that he has not seen a lot of the films he has written about? Rossellini? “I haven’t seen the films. I tried to, but they are so boring” (270).

The above sallies are from Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham’s interview with Žižek featured in the last issue of JAC, and they confirm what a lot of us have suspected for some time: that Žižek is not only an intellectual provocateur of the first order but a performance artist, a cross between Kant and Kafka as filtered through the sensibility of Monty Python or, better yet, Firesign Theatre (where the latter “obscure” American inflection is entirely apropos, given Žižek’s deep affection for all things American).

Žižek, unlike Rossellini, is never boring. On the contrary (to borrow one of his favorite turns of phrase), whether he’s discoursing about
excrement or jouissance, postmodernism or cyber-communism, the “false elevation of the Other” or the everyday psychopathology of the fetish, Žižek is endlessly interesting and, as such, always readable (which, in this case, is a good thing, since it seems he’s always writing; the man is not so much a “thinking” as a “writing” machine!).

It’s not a little ironic, then, at least for this reader, that Žižek cares so little about his writing, about how his prose is “formulated.” So, talking about how much he enjoys writing “abstract theory,” Žižek remarks that all the examples that lode his work like so many gold nuggets are merely “frosting on the wedding cake” (255). Although one imagines that this claim, like the ones with which I began, are carefully calculated hyperboles, it’s not insignificant that his examples frequently derive from popular culture and, more generally, art. Indeed, I would argue that there is an intimate relation in Žižek’s work between style and aesthetics, and that it’s worth thinking seriously—albeit not without some irony—about the self-critical assertion with which the interview concludes: that his “fundamental interest is and has always been a philosophical one” (284).

In their introduction to “Slavoj Žižek: Philosopher, Cultural Critic, and Cyber-Communist,” Olson and Worsham—no doubt just a little anxious, like a lot of Žižek’s readers, about some of his more outrageous claims—write that it is “impossible to determine to what degree the expansive and loquacious Žižek is being purposely provocative” (253). Now, I have no intention of accusing Žižek of intellectual “laziness” or even of not grasping those texts which he has in fact read, but I would suggest that his extempore comments about, among other things, not having seen the Rossellini films he discusses in Enjoy Your Symptom betray a fundamental fantasy, one where art or (rather more to the point) “low” popular culture is the “interpassive” site of Žižekian “high theory.”

In what follows, I therefore propose not only to take Žižek at his sometimes outré word but, true to the spirit of his work, to endeavor to ensure that the following “wild” (psycho-)analysis remains, as he counsels, “at the surface”—at, in other words, the level not so much of ideas or content but of form and style, example and illustration or, to invoke Žižek’s own culinary figure, in terms of the “frosting,” not the “cake.”

Since I have already dealt at length and in detail elsewhere with the issue of politics in Žižek’s work, I want instead to broach—via a number of remarks made, however off-handedly, in the interview—another issue or problematic: the question of the “aesthetic.” My working hypothesis here is that the sort of problems that beset Žižek’s politics also plague his
theory of aesthetics and that part of this problem, a very big part, is a direct result—as in his critique of ideology—of his chronically negative, restricted conception of fantasy.

Right at the outset, it’s important to observe that this is not simply a conceptual but a rhetorical issue. Take, for instance, the following representative passage from *The Sublime Object of Ideology*: “Fantasy is basically a scenario filling out the empty space of a fundamental impossibility, a screen masking a void. . . . As such, fantasy is not to be interpreted, only ‘traversed’: all we have to do is experience how there is nothing ‘behind’ it” (126). The symptomatic moment in this passage is the locution “all we have to do,” the rhetoric of which implies that, contra experience, “going through the fantasy” is in the final analysis not an especially hard thing to do. The fact is, of course, that “assuming” or “subjectifying” the foreign object-cause of one’s desire (to speak only of the clinical scenario) is an extraordinarily difficult, well-nigh impossible, process.

Indeed, “going through the fantasy” is arguably as traumatic as that primordial moment of alienation/separation out of which the subject constitutes itself and, as such, involves nothing less than a fundamental reorientation of one’s “whole” being. And if Freud’s lifework teaches us anything, it is that people will hold onto their neurosis and misery, and the fundamental fantasy that drives the various symptoms that embody this neurotic misery, as if their very life depended on it. Consider the Titanic: the boat is always already capsized and, post-iceberg, all you have in the freezing, green, body-littered water around you is a lifesaver. Your choice is either to actively allow yourself to drown (and, less literally, suffer “subjective destitution”) or hold onto the lifesaver for dear life. Now (and this is what “going through the fantasy” entails on an experiential level) *throw away the lifesaver*!

In this existential context, it’s clear that Žižek’s work persistently dramatizes the “hysterical,” ever-striving modalities of desire and the perversely circular, repetitive movement of the drive (Žižek’s prose is nothing if not a closed loop), it is also constitutively unable to capture the recalcitrant, intractable aspects of the real. Accordingly, one frequently has the feeling reading Žižek that everything—including and especially the real—is mere grist for his so-called “turbo-charged” mind, or what he himself calls “pure, cruel self-instrumentalization” (254).

Žižek is not, to be sure, unaware of this manic, incorporative tendency. So, in the preface to *The Žižek Reader*, he comments that the “excessively and compulsively ‘witty’ texture” that distinguishes his
work—all the illustrations from film and popular culture, not to mention all the politically incorrect anecdotes—is a mere “envelope” for a “‘machinic’ deployment” of the main lines of argumentation (viii). Žižek has even gone so far as to say, on a somewhat plaintive note, that his popularity depends not on his philosophical acumen (as he would prefer) but on “dirty jokes, popular culture, and a little bit of politics”—on, as he himself puts it, “cheap, obscene tricks” (Olson and Worsham 284, 285; emphasis added).

Now, given the blatant reinscription here of the conventional subordination of style to ideas—or, to cite Žižek himself, “texture” to “themes”—this admission is, to say the least, striking. But what, or where, would Žižek be without his postmodern style? It would be like Lacan without Hollywood—or, an even grimmer prospect, Hegel without the jokes.

The problematic status of style in Žižek manifests itself most obviously, as the above disclaimer hints, in the role or place that popular culture has assumed—or, perhaps one should say, has been assigned—in Žižek’s work. In the very first essay collected in The Žižek Reader, titled “The Undergrowth of Enjoyment” and published in New Formations in 1989, Žižek insisted that despite the essay’s subtitle, “How Popular Culture Can Serve As an Introduction to Lacan,” what he was proposing was not “some kind of ‘applied psychoanalysis’” but, via popular-cultural illustration, an “articulation of some of the fundamental concepts of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory” (14). Žižek went on to pursue this populist project in Looking Awry, where he offered his own wryly awry seminar on what he called “Lacanian ‘dogmatics,’” a seminar whose serial modus operandi was derived from the Lacan of “Kant avec Sade” but with a pop-cultural twist: Lacan with Hitchcock, Lacan with Lang, and so on. This theoretical appropriation of American popular culture was not, significantly, without a substantial subjective element. Hence, in the preface to Looking Awry, Žižek acknowledged that Lacanian psychoanalysis not only served as an excuse for indulging in the “idiotic enjoyment of popular culture,” it simultaneously offered him a way to “legitimize” the frantic “race” in the book from—to mention only the first and last filmic examples—Lang’s The Woman in the Window to Sydney Pollack’s The Yakuza (viii).

If the allusion in Looking Awry to the latter film testifies to Žižek’s impressively omnivorous appetite for American popular culture, his theoretical “enterprise” as laid out in the preface to the very same book also betrays a less amusing side: which is, as he put it, to “mercilessly
exploit" popular culture as "convenient material" to explain the "Lacanian theoretical edifice" and (this was the populist slant) the "predominantly academic reception of Lacan" (vii). Žižek clarified this pop-Lacanian approach in the "Self-Interview" appended to The Metastases of Enjoyment. There, referencing the psychoanalytic notion of the "pass," Žižek submitted that he was convinced of the "proper grasp" of some Lacanian concept only when he could "translate it successfully into the inherent imbecility of popular culture" (175).

Lest one misunderstand Žižek's "imbecilic" invocation of popular culture in this passage, I hasten to add that popular culture stands in here, like the two passeurs in the Lacanian pass, for the "imbecility of the big Other" (Metastases 175). In other words, the point of Žižek's pop-cultural program is to achieve the "greatest possible clarity" not simply for his readers but for that "idiot" which is the author.

The last self-deprecating gesture is certainly disarming (How can one not love an author who refers to himself as an "idiot"?), but a closer look at the passage in question also suggests that something besides clarity is at stake in Žižek's "translation" of Lacan into popular culture. For example, if one takes Žižek's homology at its "proper word," the terminus of the "message" is not his readers or even the author but the comité de la passe (which refers to the group of trained analysts who receive the "story" of the analysand's treatment as translated by two other "passing" analysands). Put another, more cinematic way: popular culture—say, "Hollywood" film—functions in Žižek's work as a screen or blank surface on which to project the "fundamental concepts" of psychoanalysis, Lacanian psychoanalysis (Metastases 175).

This valorization of theory—Lacanian theory as itself the ultimate value, the surplus object that always remains after one has subtracted popular culture—over what I will simply call the "work of art" is explicitly thematized in The Metastases of Enjoyment, where Žižek contends that "only theory" can teach us how to enjoy film noir and Hitchcock: "if we approach them directly, they necessarily strike us as naive, ridiculous, "inedible"" (176). This characterization of noir/Hitchcock is doubtlessly driven by certain postmodern theses (primarily, it appears, Fredric Jameson's take on the neo-noir in Postmodernism), but who, one wonders, is this "royal we" whose enjoyment of noir/Hitchcock is strictly a matter of nostalgia? While it seems to me that it's possible, even necessary, to claim that the reception of Hitchcock is discursively mediated (this would be one of the very basic lessons of structuralism), it's another thing to assert that it is "always-already theoretically mediated"
and, moreover, that the theoretical medium or frame is Lacanian psychoanalysis (176). In short, to say that Hitchcock and/or noir owes something to, say, Freudian psychoanalysis does not reduce to the “idea” that Hitchcock or noir without Lacan is “naive, ridiculous, ‘inedible.’”

Žižek’s own particular, gargantuan appetite for noir/Hitchcock aside (Why not, say, Sirkian melodrama, which is quite a tasty entrée in its own right?), it’s instructive that the very last question on popular culture in the “Self-Interview” is also the most telling. Engaging yet “another worn-out reproach” (the prefatory questions here are nothing if not leading), Žižek tackles the “alleged incapacity” of psychoanalysis to explain the specificity of works of art: “Even if Dostoevsky was really an epileptic with an unresolved paternal authority complex, not every epileptic with an unresolved paternal authority complex was Dostoevsky” (176). Žižek’s response to this familiar problematic—Why, precisely, was Dostoevsky and not some other epileptic a “great artist”?—is that the answer is to be found not inside, in Dostoevsky’s “unique psyche,” but outside, “in the radically non-psychological symbolic network that formed the space of inscription for his activity” (176). Žižek’s post-Sartrean conclusion: “This network decided that Dostoevsky’s way of articulating his psychic traumas should function as great art—it is easy to imagine how, in a different symbolic space, this same Dostoevsky would be considered a confused, foolish scribbler” (176).

Caveat emptor: do not be misled by the rhetorical lure (“it is easy to imagine . . .”). Although I hate to spoil the “postmodern” fun, I’m compelled to say that this particular argument is idiotic in the pejorative sense—which is to say, nonsense—since in this case at least (and pace Foucault), what distinguishes the author of The Idiot from whatever other confused, foolish epileptics with an unresolved paternal authority complex who were scribbling in Russia at the time is, precisely, Dostoevsky’s “art” (as even the most cursory glance at the formal-textual elements of The Idiot will attest). Indeed, to reappropriate the sort of post-poststructuralist position associated with Žižek himself, one is tempted to say that this artifice was, like Dostoevsky’s fundamental fantasy, absolutely specific to him, so that the question should not be what distinguishes, say, Nabokov from other lepidopterists but what differentiates him from Joyce, Conrad, Woolf, and so on. The issue of craft is, to substantially understate the matter, a rather different “trap” or “net” than the radically non-psychological space of the symbolic order and therefore demands a rather different, more nuanced—say, writerly—conception of the scene of inscription than Žižek proffers here.
This brings us to an especially “ticklish subject”: Žižek’s “subjective position” with respect to the work of art. An exemplary instance with respect to the fantasmatic is the opening chapter of *The Plague of Fantasies*, where Žižek commences his excursus on the sixth veil with this provocative proposition: “In order to be operative, fantasy . . . has to maintain a distance towards the explicit symbolic texture sustained by it, and to function as its inherent transgression” (18). In the seventh and final “veil,” Žižek complicates this “formula,” observing that even as fantasy works to constrict the “actual span of choices” (consider, for example, the famous Hegelian-Lacanian forced choice, “Your money or your life!”), it also always works to maintain the “false opening.” So, to continue with the previous example, you imagine that confronted with the same forced choice in other, less “unhappy” circumstances, you would somehow be able to keep your money and your life!

Despite the emphasis in this part of “The Seven Veils of Fantasy” on the functionality of the fantasmatic, Žižek, it is clear (as the word *veil* in the title of his essay insinuates), is not committed to either the radicality or ambiguity of fantasy. It is not simply that he retroactively banalizes his commentary on the immanent, transgressive nature of fantasy by proceeding to declare that this dynamic is “obvious in any work of art,” a declaration that arguably errs on the side of both clarity and generality; worse yet, he resolves the question of the radical ambiguity of fantasy (and, by implication, art) by returning to—surprise! surprise!—our old Freudian friend: the drive (18; emphasis added).

In other words, insofar as the drive for Žižek is simply “another name for the radical ontological closure” (which is, as it were, the other of fantasy’s maintenance of the “false opening”), it follows—as Žižek follows Lacan—that “going through the fantasy” means the “acceptance of a radical ontological closure” (31). But in order to accomplish this transaction—to, in other words, pass over to the other side of the fantasmatic—it is necessary, according to Žižek (and I cannot emphasize this particular passage enough), to bypass the “intermediate role of the screen of fantasy” (31). It is only a small step from this, for me, revelatory proposition about the merely “intermediate role” of the frame or screen of the fantasmatic to the following rather grand pronouncement about “true art”: “The artifice of ‘true art’ is . . . to manipulate the censorship of the underlying fantasy in such a way as to reveal the radical falsity of this fantasy” (20).

Here Žižek—in the midst of a Nietzschean, late Lacanian reading of the drive beyond fantasy (that is, the drive as the “eternal return of the
same")—rehearses the canonical Freud of “Creative Writing and Day-Dreaming” in order to highlight not fantasy’s fundamental ambiguity but its radical falsity. With this systematic and, in fact, totalizing move, Žižek effectively slams the door on other alternative, less circumscribed conceptions of the fantasmatic—including, one might add, those explored elsewhere in his own work (for example, in the concluding chapter of Looking Awry where, in the context of an attempt to think an ethics of fantasy, he recommends respecting the “absolutely particular way” the other person organizes his enjoyment).

Need I add that one could make the very same claim, if one were wont to employ homologies, about particular works of art? Interpretation, psychoanalytic or otherwise, should involve a minimal respect for the formal integrity of the work of art. Žižek has said—with his usual exorbitant counter-expectational brio (“I’m going to say this officially, so you can use it: I don’t care”)—that he hates art: “Visual art and I just do not agree. It’s even worse than cinema” (Olson and Worsham 270). This is, from one perspective, a refreshing, because cheekily scandalous, thing to say. I mean, why can’t Žižek have his cake and eat it too—sans frosting? From another perspective or reverse angle, however, Žižek’s cavalier attitude about art gives one pause, since the aesthetic radically exceeds, or so it seems to me, both the clinical and the ethical-political, the theoretical and the philosophical.

In the conclusion to the interview featured in JAC, Žižek says that his “big dream” (in addition, presumably, to penning a volume of Cliffs Notes) is to write à la Adorno on music—on, for instance, Beethoven’s late string quartets (285). Beethoven, according to Adorno, is the musical analogue of Hegel and thus, it would appear, a perfect subject for Žižek. At the very same time, there’s a good reason—an “aesthetic” one, if you will—why Adorno was never able to finish his book on Beethoven: you may well be able to make poetry, even great poetry, out of the late string quartets (vide Eliot), but Beethoven’s music and, more particularly, the riddle, Sphinx-like character of the work of art ultimately resist, as Adorno also understood, the “universal” blandishments of philosophy, even and especially those of Hegelian philosophy.
Rather than offer a formal point-counterpoint response to Slavoj Žižek’s vertiginous pronouncements (on just about everything, it seems), I’d like to respond to just a few themes touched on in his JAC interview with Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham. In doing so, I’ll pay close attention to Žižek’s overall political project, which he defines as decidedly “anti-capitalist.” In particular, I’ll examine his treatment of concepts such as ideology, capitalism, and class struggle (which betray a lineage that can be traced directly to Marx) in the context of current attempts to rethink Marxist revolutionary praxis. Many of the issues dealing with class struggle and